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Across Africa's American Atlantic:

Middle Passages, Imagined Home Spaces and Black Futurities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in English

by

Jessica Christina Lee

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Across Africa's American Atlantic:

Middle Passages, Imagined Home Spaces and Black Futurities

by

Jessica Christina Lee

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Yogita Goyal, Chair

My project broadens the generative and growing field of Middle Passage Studies by prioritizing and conceptualizing literary representations of womanhood alongside Atlantic enslavement through four highly acclaimed novels including Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). All written by black female writers, they align themselves with, are compelled to or inspired by narratives of transatlantic slavery and imagine how Africas (as homelands, sites of origin, spaces of belonging, places of psychic freedom and physical mobility) are activated and performed throughout the diaspora. Every female protagonist across these works undergoes processes of purging and catharsis through modalities of crossing, fight, and flight dependent on their individual moment of rupture, embodiment or becoming. I contend that these meditations and mediations of brutal migratory movements trace social conditions, centuries old yearnings, melancholy and mourning of returning home or to mother-

like lands—unmarked places on a map in the American South, remote islands and enclaves, international locales or imaginary places completely outside the realm of geography and the Americas. By staging an encounter between fictional black post-emancipation subjects, the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas, I construct a triangular cartography of cultural exchange centering black female transatlantic literature as integral to the small, generative and emerging corpus of Middle Passage Studies. Within all four diasporic novels, is the belief that there exists a place in the world that is free of racism, colorism, classism, sexism, and capitalism that maps a new world within the imagination and has the power to transform individual realities whether on land, in the air or at sea.

The dissertation of Jessica Christina Lee is approved.

Robin D.G. Kelley

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2024

My Mother

was the first body of water, a sea in one body.

The sole anchor, an oceanic encounter

and the first place I ever lived.

Thank you for teaching me how to float, swim and fly.

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Introduction

My dissertation examines the centrality of four highly acclaimed works including Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). All written by black female writers, they align themselves with, are compelled to or inspired by narratives of transatlantic slavery and imagine how Africas (as homelands, sites of origin, spaces of belonging, places of psychic freedom and physical mobility) are performed. I am interested in how each text conceives, navigates and negotiates images of slavery at sea in twentieth century American Literature. I assemble a body of Middle Passage literature that interrogates how various versions of the sea, ships, Africans in the Atlantic and culture lost is regained only through a deliberate looking back. Every female protagonist across novels undergoes processes of purging and catharsis through various modes of crossing, fight, and flight dependent on their individual moment of rupture inherited exclusively through maritime slavery. Each character must revisit, either willfully or unintentionally that which once was and still remains in holistically resolving their repression, whether physically, psychically, or fantastically in hopes of existing as fragmented and fractured but fully actualized humans.

I track a diverse body of scholarship among canonical African American novels that propels such writers to confront haunting afterlives of slavery. These projects, both individually and collectively tackle this feat through exposing the largest forced mass migration, ancestral displacement or natal alienation[1], collective memory and traumatic transformations by being shipped to the Americas, exiled from pre-and-post colonial Africa and shaped by the conflation of both. I argue that meditations and mediations of these brutal migratory movements trace social conditions, centuries-old yearnings, melancholy and mourning to return home; whether to unmarked places on a map in

[1] See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

the American South, remote islands and enclaves, internationally or imaginary places completely outside the realm of geography and the Americas. Protagonists are intentionally visited by their past and a reckoning not only haunts but awaits them. By staging an encounter between fictional black post-emancipation subjects, the Atlantic Ocean and the Americas, I construct a triangular cartography of cultural exchange centering black female transatlantic literature as integral to the small, generative and emerging corpus of Middle Passage Studies[2] and its inclusion of vivid articulations of freedom dreams.[3] Within all four black diasporic Atlantic novels, is the belief that there exists a place in the world "free of evil and violence, free of toxins and environmental hazards, free of poverty, racism, and sexism…just free…that the map to a new world is in the imagination" (2) and has the power to transform individual realities whether on land, in the air or at sea.

Philip E. Steinberg's article "Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions" (2013) claims that although the ocean appears blue, flat and unchanging, it must be engaged as a naturally tangible space characterized by constant mobility and continual reformation (Steinberg 156, 159). He asserts that Paul Gilroy's seminal *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousnes*s (1993) is primarily interested in members of the African Diaspora, their geographical and cultural movements, and the trope of the Middle Passage is "far removed from the liquid space across which ships carrying Africans historically traveled [and] venturing into Gilroy's Black Atlantic, one never gets wet" (Steinberg 158). Steinberg challenges Gilroy's interpretation of the Black Atlantic as a culturally occupied human space and establishes that the Middle Passage is fundamentally entrenched if not submerged in the liquid materiality of the sea. However, utilizing Gilroy's theorization of interactions

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[2] Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery At Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 4.

[3] Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 2.

and ruptures "between the local and the global"[4] situates my project on black female writers creating African inspired home spaces throughout the world while simultaneously imagining landscapes and seascapes that are real and those that may not yet exist on earth. It is this doubleness that Gilroy's work proposes in continuing Dr. Du Bois' project that allows me to broaden my perspectives on how my selection of texts theorizes concepts of home and away, travel and tourism, public and private, domestic and international, or African and American not as divergent processes but liminal extensions of the other. These axis of black spatiality and temporality have everything to do with getting wet because seaborne middle passages are always present and unequivocally necessary at each and every juncture, imaginable. There is no blue Atlantic without African people and processes of race-making through imperial and colonial domination unequivocally construct the Black Atlantic.

Scope

Slavery is historically understood through lenses of labor, fields, plantations, rural farms, estates, rape, gendered sexual exploitation and gratuitous violence. I read Middle Passage Studies writers in the context of all these variables by expanding spaces to include ships, vessels or vehicles, prisons built on islands, rivers, swamps, streams, fountains, wells, pools, ponds, lakes, oceans and any small or large bodies of water, whether salt, fresh or sweet waters—all warrant a discussion of Atlantic Slavery. My project situates these writers as participating in what Sowande' M. Mustakeem identifies "has long occupied an enduring focal point of diasporic cultural memory evidenced by nations, poets, historians, and literary scholars who rely heavily on the symbolic nature of the slave trade as a useful departure for discussion of cultural idioms" (6). In *Saltwater Slavery*, Smallwood argues that the direction and relation of the enslaved captive is everywhere all at once. She writes, "The social geography of black life in the Atlantic arena was demarcated with no itinerary and no directional control over their movement, captives had no clear cognitive map to guide them through the transition

[4] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousnes*s (London and New York: Verso Press, 1993), 29.

from land to water, the shift from smaller to larger ships, or the passage from coastal waters to open sea."[5] This attention to ships, coastal waters and open sea is where many of these black authors either begin or end their novels and where protagonists find themselves within the world of the narrative. Consequently, these roots and routes serve as a mechanism of preservation, ritual, death but also life for Africans in the Americas, their African American and diasporic descendants, and successors.

Centering the Black Atlantic as a highway, vehicle, graveyard, origin place or imaginary home space is integral to the constantly shifting ways this particular waterscape is spatialized, consumed and reproduced. My dissertation extends conversations around and within the fields of black geography, genealogical heritage or roots tourism, Middle Passage and American Slavery studies. Due to the transdisciplinary arc and stakes of this project, Atlantic crossings and imagery remains at the center of the discourse as sites of imaginative interpretation in all primary works of literature. These objectives are threefold and include 1. Exposing traumatic individual, familial and communal histories of transatlantic slavery while 2. consistently working through oppressive, liberatory and limbo spaces or places within these narratives based on the protagonist's sense of belonging, either within or outside of an Atlantic world purview and 3. identifying the means, material, and metaphysical beginnings or ends necessary in either becoming whole or living fully by acknowledging their fragmentation. How is the Middle Passage performed through the works and writings of black women writers? Which ways do African descended peoples remember, reproduce and imagine Africa while still in America or abroad? What are the ways in which these interactions and fractures with a Mother–land or seascape activate such exchanges?

Interrogating alternative Africas for the protagonists within the selected novels experiments with various geographies across the Americas in creating or locating origin stories and routes to

[5] Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8.

ancestral, culturally celebratory and spiritual roots. Our Atlantic seascape, which I identify as not only a living or fluid monument but an actual "oceanic motherscape" is haunted with people, shipwrecks, relics, and histories that refuse to be drowned out or overlooked—the largest unmarked graveyard in the world is also the most audible. I am not suggesting that voids, holes, silences and gaps do not exist; they certainly do after any traumatic rupture. Simply because something is fragmented or incomplete does not make it any less real. In reality fragmentation elicits "an inaugural moment from which African diasporic people emerge…it is a timeless space"[6] forever linking black bodies and the birth of the modern world. In contributing within this growing field, my methods gesture towards studying the Atlantic as a now unnamed, unmarked or unidentified United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) global history or world heritage site. Their website's homepage states, "Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration belong[ing] to all peoples of the world irrespective of the territory on which they are located."[7] Where are the Atlantic Ocean's floating memorials atop the water's surface, the underwater parks, seabed sculptures and visible monuments—not landmarks but maritime markers at sea commemorating the people who perished but also survived and thrived along the triangular slave trading routes?

How are black women writers as novelists and experimental artists creating a story to pass on through implementing various mediums?[8] How does the work of conceptualizing aquatic atrocities through painting, sculpture, architecture, music and photography open channels for unresolved individual and collective traumas that continually disrupt the present but also allow psychic

[6] See Jennifer L. Morgan, "Accounting for "The Most Excruciating Torment": Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages." *History of the Present* 6:2 (Fall 2016): 193.

[7] United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage Convention. "World Heritage." https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/ 19 April 2021

[8] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vantage Books, 1987), 324.

reconciliation and historical reckoning, even if not acknowledged by the world on a national or global stage? By allowing the people existing in the world of the text to treat these historical silences, questions, answers, to fill and feel spaces in time encourages everyone as readers, theorists, literary and cultural critics to contemporaneously navigate while negotiating the gravity of how we unpack slavery at sea and its (un)charted waters.

Critical Methods

Rather than looking at the sea as an open container or receptacle of deficit, I am invested in a generative approach requiring recognition that "slavery is seemingly everywhere, in every form, a fit subject for solemn memorials, imaginative reconstruction, an allegory of contemporary racial politics [and] now a site for the reinvention of form."[9] Middle Passage Studies as a discipline and discourse are tasked with unknowability. As Anthony Reed discusses, "I am interested in amplifying the possibilities of literature as literature."[10] Much like Reed, I too am invested in uncovering how these four selected primary texts and visual artistic media encourage unthought across imagination, experimentation and modes of narrating the self through waterscapes, waterways, water travel and water worlds; including mediums that are imagined even if not yet physically produced or lived. How does a descendant of enslaved peoples experience slavery through literature, specifically when engaging with genre bending and breaking vestiges of the neo-slave narrative, historical fiction and fantastical or magical realism? To borrow another of Reeds' terms, how does "black experimental writing" alter our understanding and proximity to blackness while reading about Middle Passage slavery and employing the experiential? I read how texts unknowability is conceived, perceived and lived by the individuals in the novels, namely black female characters directly confronted with various

[9] Yogita Goyal, *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 1.

[10] Anthony Reed. *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

forms of slavery alongside gratuitous violence and the inundation of water within oceanic imagery. In this vein, I engage in "aesthetic and efferent reading"[11] practices which require the residual effects/affects after reading and the circumstances and conditions present throughout reading the texts.

Because of saltwater slavery, the African diaspora was born and the modern industrial world birthed. The interactive Slave Voyages website states that from 1500-1867 more than 40,000 ships sailed from Africa to the Americas, including intra-American travel after slavery was legally abolished (SlaveVoyages.org 2019). Such work draws on genealogies of transportation, transplantation and transformation of Africans in America's New World. Tragically, the inability to trace and fully chart with absolute "certainty the passage of time and the location in space of the passage situates a history of the black Atlantic as already fraught, rendered impossible in the absence of landmarks or sights from which one might obtain beginnings."[12] Derek Walcott contends that the sea drowns the unthinkable hideous violence, destroying the evidence of the past. However, I argue that the sea prompts and preserves histories of heinous atrocity. Because of its expanse and presumed limitlessness, the Atlantic is everything and nothing all at once.

Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) asserts "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. Nobody dies of old age in the ocean."[13] Life cycles for substances and people entering and leaving the sea is demarcated as residence time. Conceptualizing blackness alongside Atlantic enslavement as always already occurring or occupying this contemporary moment, the "wake" is both a private and public ceremonial practice

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[11] Louise Rosenblatt, "The Aesthetic Transaction", *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 20:4. (1986): 124.

[12] Jennifer L. Morgan, "The Most Excruciating Torment": Gender, Slavery, and Trans-Atlantic Passages", *History of the Present* 6:2 (Fall 2016): 184-207.

[13] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 40-41.

before these (once) enslaved beings are laid to rest; this particular process of recognition guides my work. Afterlives of oceanic slavery as never becoming "old" or aging in saltwater is what drives this research project—it's timelessness is timely in that no expiry date exists in our lifetime that expels black life, people and history from the Atlantic. Gardulski concludes that the energies produced in the water continues cycling, thereby sustaining a residence lifetime of 260 million years. This means that enslaved black peoples have been in residency or taken up residence at sea since the first of countless Portuguese ships in the late fifteenth century kidnapped and transported Africans throughout the Americas.

Homecoming

Contemporary homecoming or diasporic tourism rhetoric not only encourages but assumes African Americans have an internal yearning to travel specifically to West Africa in attempting to reclaim their lost, pillaged, and plundered homeland. As such, this lexicon of black psychic recovery declares one's right and obligation to return. A large majority of post-civil rights blacks only travel to Ghana or Senegal as heritage tourists to witness pre-American plantation slavery sites as a sensory recognition of what they can see, touch, and feel, but not individually undergo, experience, or endure. This type of sensory identification offers an invitation in identifying home, where West Africa has become the surrogate motherland and America the paternal fatherland that has bastardized its illegitimate, displaced and dispersed progeny. New World blacks have begun to identify or locate their African Diasporic identity through a voluntary but obligatory process back to Africa or the site of origin; however, Hartman skeptically asks the necessary question, "To what degree can the journey of the native stranger be termed a return?"[14]

[14] See Saidiya Harman, "The Time of Slavery." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101:4 (2002): 759.

Upper middle class black people who are afforded the privilege and opportunity to travel, view their movement as a pledging of allegiance to Africa. In claiming African diasporic unity, movement represents a global vision of blackness, transatlantic histories, resistance to post-colonization and a restructuring of black subjectivity through the sight and site of the African continent. Today, African heritage tours are marketed for contemporary middle-class blacks living in America wishing to revive their global citizenship. There is a cost in accessing black history in Africa which is unavailable to many; in this context heritage roots travel is a luxury that not everyone can afford. Perhaps that is the premise of it all, black people pay for a forgotten past that they yearn for while America pays American black people absolutely nothing for centuries of histories it took. Tourist trips such as these signify the return or privilege the visitation of primordial Africana spaces before the doomed journey and tortuous transatlantic Middle Passage to the New (western) World. Longing to visit or return to an estranged land like Africa represents nostalgia in venturing back in time to a place that exists in the black subconscious imaginary. Such nostalgia produces a diasporic hunger for identity and a unifying sense of solidarity throughout the black world but may simultaneously conjure irreparable feelings of natal loss, captivity, deportation, and eventual social death. Recognizing and feeling such loss manifests itself through excavating history which means determining one's position and reaching an informed self-actualized realization.

In the 1970's, "Back to Africa" tourism emerged in hopes of accommodating one primary group of people while accomplishing two objectives: commercialization and commodification. Images of African tourism target a specific type of black middle-class clientele that both literally and figuratively buy into homecoming or going home tours. Black tourists are motivated by a quest to physically locate and visually identify their roots in an attempt to experience these pre-slavery sites before the massive genocide of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and forced transplantation onto New World soil. African American heritage tourists understand their journey as a reclaiming of identity and

as a sacred pilgrimage to the home of their lost ancestors. Perhaps one of the most prevalent reasons African Americans journey to Ghana and Senegal is because there is a lingering absence of heritage sites in the United States commemorating the lost history and lives of enslaved Africans who labored and died in the Americas. African American heritage tourists hope to re-appropriate the designation of slave forts at Goree Island in Senegal, El Mina, and Cape Coast Castles in Ghana, giving these nationally recognized monuments of slave forts, sites, and symbols new meaning.

Back to Africa discourse and consequently African roots tourism claims transnational affiliation and encourages a sense of belonging and continuity linked to home and lineage with Africa. Salamishah Tillet identifies five major tenets sparking the first big wave of African American tourist travel, but there are four fundamental indicators that are significant when discussing political implications of movement and the discovery of finding home abroad. Returning to the motherland or homecoming, first became an area of interest with the success of Alex Haley's novel, *Roots* (1976) and its subsequent television mini-series (1977). For many African Americans, the desire to trace their genealogy back to Africa and locate their (alienated) ancestors became a goal. Since the United States has no heritage sites specifically paying homage to or commemorating black African life, transatlantic genocide, or the recognition of the dispersed histories of enslaved African Americans, blacks look to Africa as a source of memory and mourning. The fourth reason for this vested preoccupation with traveling to Africa came in 1978 and 1979 when the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) formally designated slave forts at Goree Island in Senegal, El Mina and Cape Coast Castles in Ghana as "world heritage sites". Lastly, the expansion of the black middle class now had the monetary means to participate in international tourist travel and could afford the privilege of informative leisurely diasporic movement that they are already entitled to.

Like Tillet's third reason for booming heritage travel for Africans living in America, these pilgrimages encourage locating sites of origin by visual visitation through physical sight in Senegal or

Ghana. Consequently, the original site, source, and cultural sustenance all derive from the construction of "Africa" as the primary site of dispersal, the slave trade, and historicized loss. However, African Americans risk the possibility of imagining and thus interpreting "Africa" only as a portal of American chattel slavery and post-civil rights freedom. Doing this can severely limit the African diasporic collective consciousness and adopt a western standard of minutia by presenting Africa as the continent of subaltern humanity or the quintessential land of black abjectivity. By returning to slave forts, coffles, dungeons, and living death camps, many are "perceiving this return as a rite of passage, African American heritage tourists supplement the conspicuous absence of symbols of slavery in the United States with the image of the slave fort."[15]

African(ness) as Production and Consumption

Kamari Maxine Clarke describes the invention of Africanness as a revival initiated by black Americans in the United States. She claims through travel, blacks attempt to find their roots and then reinvent themselves as both African (through ancestral ties and roots tourism) and American (through lived experiences). She argues that cultural heritage travel has become globalized and excessively consumed because it claims induction into African membership. Due to globalization, the act of black American back-to-Africa tourist travel, is becoming deterritorialized, increasingly more negotiable, and manipulatable. Like Clarke, Hartman notices and exposes the didactic nature of travel, consumption, and consumerism when blacks visit Ghana and Senegal. Ironically, the term diaspora originates from the Greek word whose literal translation means "through scattered seeds", but what is most interesting about diasporic membership or its scattered seeds is that they have become commodified and are for sale.

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[15] Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 100.

Although Clarke studies the implications of heritage tourism in Nigeria and not Senegal or Ghana, she too is able to recover the hidden transcript[16] regarding why black Americans travel back to Africa, their nationally constructed home. Further, she identifies roots tourism as a for-profit institutional endeavor responsible for tantalizing the most vulnerable psychic senses for New World blacks: the need for a homeland. Tillet also mentions Alex Haley's *Roots* as a vehicle of public broadcast commercialization and Clarke consents that the production of the novel and mini-series activated and thus contributed to a collective memory for blacks living in America. Essentially, the story of *Roots* begins with the birth of the protagonist, Kunta Kinte in a West African village and ends with Alex Haley, who then traces his familial history back to its African origin while living in America. Haley's story begins in Africa (confinement, bondage, and Middle Passage) and ends in America (post emancipation), tracing slavery to freedom. As a narrative, *Roots* should be viewed as both a personal and collective historical account tracing the movements and memories of Africans and their dispersed African American generational successors. *Roots*, then like heritage tourism, functions as a link from past to present, but is also a ticket that can be purchased for admission, access and ownership to one's black history that is only a flight or two away.

The African American tourist voyaging back to Africa is not only privileged, but contributes to the invention of Africa and what it means to reconstruct one's black self in an African cultural landscape. Insertion into Africanness, for the black American is made possible through money, memory, and the performance of purchasing which resuscitates ideas that "black Americans can not draw on the experiential memory of transatlantic slavery…only the remaking of a collective memory

[16] James C. Scott. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 1992).

of subordination, association, and rearticulation."[17] Consumption of the tourist market encourages returning to Africa to claim one's true black diasporic self and heritage through the temporality of territory and locating tangible cultural terrain as the procedure of authenticating oneself through Africanness. Authenticating one's inheritance is believed to take place in Africa, where the African became a slave, the slave is black, and through return, the emancipated black American becomes African, again. At each stage through the journey, the tourist is consuming variations of an identity in hopes of attaining a cohesive black American self, belonging to an African diasporic global network. However, this network is a purchasable product, also affording empowerment and pride when blacks return home to the American fatherland whose national doctrine is premised on anti-black racism. Such links of lineage are forced and forged; totalizing the centrality of travel for upper and middle-class black Americans as cathartic but costly. Cultural belonging for blacks traveling to Africa to conceptualize heritage, home, and memory now do so through their buying power within the tourist market economy, allowing tangible and fungible histories through capitalism.

Hartman brilliantly illustrates that for blacks participating in heritage travel, both longing and loss cost. Her description of the adolescent group of boys at the tourist entrance of Elmina Castle in Ghana is both welcoming and disturbing. Terms and phrases like "sister", "slavery separated us", and "one Africa" lend to the construction of tourism as a market. The young boys are fully aware she is an African American because she is visiting an African slave site, automatically she is perceived as a privileged visitor and outsider. She is initially emotionally moved by the friendly introduction and induction into a diasporic family she has lost. Each boy hands her a scribbled but legible letter informally identifying Africana history, dispersal, and home in hopes of gaining material goods such

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[17] Kamari Clarke. "Mapping Transnationality: Roots Tourism and the Institutionalization of Ethnic Heritage," in *Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 141.

as pencils, paper, and money. Although not dismissive, she realizes the dual detriment caused by the transatlantic slave trade. This dichotomous detour not only affects her as a traveling African American female academic but as a vulnerable tourist in search of home in an away land of lost ancestral ties. She further comprehends the complexity of colonialism and imperialism; both institutions have raped an entire country and stripped her of the virgin idea(l)s she had of mother Africa, causing black Americans to *lose their mother*! There is no redemptive narrative for the young boys who are "stoked by hunger, infected with envy and distrust" (Hartman, "Time" 761). These young African men too, are deprived and so, the black body in Africa and America is doubly separated, doubly violated, and doubly estranged because of slavery's forts or castles, Middle Passages, trade, and plantation slavery. Hartman comes to the realization that both Africans and African Americans suffer from familial fracture and the term "sister" is not so much a recognition of kin and community but translates into accessibility that is exchangeable and negotiable. Capital, especially African American currency affords diasporic foreign exchange, yielding the power to bridge the gap between an authenticated past and a hopeful future.

Sea'ing National Erasure

Slavery, like black heritage travel is built on production and consumption, it is also quantifiable within the scope of reparations owed. The United States has a willful and selective historical amnesia regarding American transatlantic and chattel slavery. This forgetfulness is directly linked to the necessity of economic atonement, land and sea allotments. Such world heritage sites and tours allow black tourists access to reimagine or recreate diasporic identities by traveling back into time during the present to view and re-collect what cannot be experienced or given back. Year after year, blacks travel to slave forts and dungeons attempting to fill the void and individually reconcile the dim reality that there are no public Atlantic spaces paying homage to enslaved African peoples within the United States or throughout the Americas. Sites like the Parallel Lives Memorial in Veracruz, Mexico—a

major slave trading port commemorating one hundred years of Jewish immigration and not African bondage or the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes, France built as un underground passageway between land and sea simply does not exist here; therefore, America is upholding and actively revoking the humanity of the enslaved, denying the institution of slavery altogether and its living multilayered remnants that hauntingly loom among us.

The language of presidential erasure within the context of Africa and the slave trade depends on dismissive past tense rhetoric and exponential racialized disavowal. Previous presidents William Clinton and George W. Bush both used terms such as, "lived", "that history", "persistence" and "African Americans" in constructing a past narrative regarding a wrong that no one person or nation is willing or able to remedy, vehemently denounce or acknowledge. Certainly not apologies, these explanations and excuses "bec[o]me part of a project to delete chattel slavery from the national memory—to forget it in other words."[18] Rather than affirming redress, both presidents focus on moving forward, positing slavery as an almost prehistoric past in order to progress into the future. In no way does either president attempt to assess slavery's global legacies as an indicator of the current or future fate of African descended peoples, nor do they acknowledge transatlantic slavery as the largest holocaust having ever existed on earth. And at no point does Clinton or Bush mention America's role in maintaining and sustaining slavery, race, racism, capitalism, or violence while visiting Goree Island. Former president Bush did, however mention "persistence and courage" in the very same sentence as African American, further ignoring the role America has had and continues to play in perpetuating anti-black sentiment. Phrases like "African American persistence and courage" utilize the mechanisms of meritocracy, liberalism and accommodationist politics. Further, it presents nominal

[18] See Salamishah Tillet, "In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Goree Island." *Research in African Literatures* 40:4 (2009): 123.

liberties and freedoms as feasible outcomes for blacks wanting it or patient enough to possibly wait another five hundred years for it.

In 2009 when the 44th president of the United States visited Cape Coast, Ghana he remarked, "As painful as it is, I think that it helps to teach all of us that we have to do what we can to fight against the kinds of evils that sadly still exist in our world, not just on this continent but in every corner of the globe." Which and whose fight is he referring to, when mentioning these evils? Deflecting Africa's specific past of kidnapping, imprisonment and transatlantic shipping also universalizes American slavery by conflating it with other worldly evils and human rights issues. Obama is unable to discuss the painful "it" without acknowledging that this type of evil exists everywhere and is not unique to Africa—however, it absolutely is. Africa is the determinate locus for New World and American modernity. Why else would our former president be on the coast of Ghana with his entire family at a historicized shipping fortress integral to the transatlantic slave trade? The entire trip and subsequent tour exclusively surround slavery's beginning vestiges with European conquest on the African continent by extracting the most important, powerful, and valuable resource which are its people. Yet Obama is unable to publicly employ the lexicon of systematic oppression, racism, slavery or decry its afterlives and genocide, akin to Clinton and Bush's inability or refusal.

Hartman's skepticism is apparent when criticizing the dubbing of a "reverse Middle Passage". Near the closing of her novel, she begins analyzing roots tourism as a fantasy of origin that is psychically performed rather than physically experienced. She insists that for African Americans, heritage travel is more about honoring African ancestors, our lost kindred through the act of remembrance and subsequent mourning. Feeling and dealing with individualized pain as a response to slave sites is cathartic, but the black tourist should fundamentally be invested in acknowledging the experiences of the unnamed millions and their histories of being captured, held hostage, shipped across the Atlantic as human cargo, arriving in the Americas and becoming socially dead beings.

Therefore, Africa, the Middle Passage, and the American plantation indicate diasporic identification after the break of lineage, language, and land. Traveling back to Africa might mean existing in a fractured present that is infinitely prompted by a torn past but imagines a generative future.

Chapters

Chapter One, "Trans/Versing Liminality in Marshall's *Praisesong*" explores Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), paying particular attention and navigating part three's, "Lavé Tête" which is translated in English as "head wash". This portion of the novel delves into the undoing or releasing of western African American norms, upper-middle class values and lifestyles while incorporating more culturally inclusive diasporic forms, although resistantly. Avey Johnson, the story's black female protagonist, led by impulsivity and instinct, decides to leave the upscale cruise ship hoping to return home to her life of comfort in White Plains, New York and is pulled back to her ancestral lands off the coast while identifying as a "tourist". Voluntarily leaving one large ship for a smaller boat, Avey decides to revisit the island of her kin on an excursion where she previously spent summers with her aunt learning about the local island history and the first Africans delivered as human cargo. On the boat with all the other native Caribbean people and their family members, Avey enters a dream-like state of semi consciousness. Her dream of childhood boat rides on the Hudson center on the expulsion of past traumas result in sickness and purging psychic toxicity that emerge physically from the inside out. A dizzy, nauseous, vomiting Avey suffers spasms and has diarrhea throughout the boat ride from Grenada and it is this middle passage that provides visibility to the open wound. In this postmodern narrative, "The horror which swept her was darker and more powerful than any wave the sea could have thrown up" (Marshall 208). Once awake and resting, she describes being crowded by hot, airless filth and stench. Additionally, Saidiya Harman describes that "for tracking purposes, the officials branded them twice…when captives arrived at Elmina Castle [and] when they arrived in Curaçao, they were again branded with a red-hot iron" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 179). It

is crucial noting that Grenada but specifically Curaçao is an additional homeland for Avey in which she must return to and is only accessible by boat under the direct supervision of a native black man, who serves as a conduit in reuniting Avey with her roots through re-routing her initial plans.

The second chapter "Doors of Rupture: *Kindred*'s Cosmic Cargo Culture" analyzes its prologue and first chapter titled, "The River". Together while sorting books and organizing them according to genre, Dana explains, "I put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him. After a moment, he took the nonfiction to another bookcase and began shelving it" (Butler 13). Dana begins feeling dizzy and experience debilitating nausea, as if at sea, all while her body uncontrollably rocks back and forth, as if on a vessel. As the room darkens and blurs around her, she occupies a space where no light exists or is transmitted. Because this is the first time in the novel Dana is transported, that she re-appears on the edge of an unknown river clearly foreshadows that she is already in the beginning stages for the f(l)ight of her life and first Middle Passage. Dana appears on land while witnessing a drowning of a white boy who is later revealed to be a family member. Her black female body is consistently being recycled by various types of labor through temporal, spatial and historical shifts which is why she cannot return home to California as whole. Her body, abilities and psychic discernment wane and waver throughout her crossing. The scene describes Dana as "dizzy", "nauseated", and "gasp[ing]" (Butler 13) yet she is not the one being submerged. Or is she? By extending the experiential parameters of Middle Passage carceral and corporeal confinement, my reading of Dana is that she is in fact being shipped as cargo from the present back to the past vis-á-vis a vessel fueled by time and history. Dana also undergoes a process of respiratory impairment where she cannot breathe, speak, nor see clearly. Despite not being under water, Dana is wet and this small but crucial detail is not fully explored or theorized alongside Middle Passage Studies to date, only that she is carried by an uncontrollable force pulling her into a reality that precedes the contemporary California moment with her husband. Reading the river as an extension of an oceanic seascape, it is here where Dana experiences and

undergoes an individual middle passage, finally landing on the water's shore. Sowande' Mustakeem's particular archival arguments surrounding captive African bodies with varying abilities labeled as "irregular" or "damaged" will also reveal how Dana's intersectionality is marked by history's gratuitous violence against black bodies and the absence of her forearm attends to this brand of physically racialized disability through limited mobility throughout her trips home and to Maryland.

Chapter three, "*Lose Your* Daughter: Middle Passage Imaginaries in *Beloved*" centers on Beloved's arrival from water and subsequent flooding of the novel. Instead of the characters in *Beloved* (1987) being brought to watery sites or encountering the liquid materiality of the sea, Beloved herself brings transatlantic trauma directly to her biological family and newly emancipated community. As an all-in-one character, trope, ancestor and historically open wound, Beloved forces the formally enslaved within the novel to address while accepting that slavery can and will not be buried unless there is individual, generational and diasporic healing. The entire Sweet Home Community, namely Sethe, Denver, and Paul D must undergo individual middle passages. Beloved as a project invests itself in working through, not overcoming or moving past slavery's atrocity but confronting the past's haunting presence on the present and future. Beloved is ushered or birthed from water and fully able to walk on land as a figure of the transatlantic world and its contemporary afterlife within the present moment. For her, Sethe represents an ideation of the mother and a homeland, or the Motherland. Beloved's body is the vessel which carries her directly to the site of trauma; she docks herself alongside Sethe and more broadly Sweet Home, as her goal is to reunite with another fluid body of water. As Morrison reiterates, water is always in search of its source, so too is Beloved when she arrives to join her surrogate mother figure. Upon seeing Beloved, even at a distance, Sethe's womb and bladder immediately begin to swell as she recalls flooding a boat while giving birth to Denver.

Chapter four "Un/Mapping the Past, Forward" explores Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988) by centering the fictional all-black island of Willow Springs and New York City. Black women and their

progeny map geography and their environmental or spatial legacies. More specifically, black geographies map and mark this text at every monumental turn of events. Black matriarchy and matrilineal bloodlines mark spaces that are otherwise unmappable. In other words, cartographies are made visible and valuable through presence and labor of women. While there are certainly men who contribute to community building in Willow Springs, they pale or fade into oblivion alongside their female counterparts. This section concerns itself with how women, families and generations are birthed—how they make an indelible imprint on the spaces they choose to live and the land they inherit. To create legacy, one must know the depth of their diverse and complex histories while contemporaneously having the access to track and trace their lineage. Ophelia, who is often called "Cocoa" by her family and extended communal kin is well educated on the women from which her existence derives and confident in who she is becoming through details of her ancestry. This privilege is not extended, however to her new husband, George Andrews who grows up as an orphan or ward of the state whose mother was a New York City sex worker and was subsequently murdered. Having had no family members before Ophelia, he struggles with his wife's and divine feminine powers of other black women in her family. His misunderstanding and subsequent rejection of their individual, communal or familial prowess is disguised as fear of the unknown and not having any power as a man on their island. The close of the novel reveals yet again how black women honor ancestors and birth diasporas through their womb while continuing to live fruitful lives whilst leading future generations.

The Coda will end with a reflection on how all four authors prioritize slavery's past as a necessity in living full futures. Each posit the fluid Black Atlantic as an imagined home space, an extension for creating subsets of Africa in America, visualizing alternative sites for a Motherland, and broadening conceptions of diaspora. A peculiar and exceptional brand of blueish blackness exists in accompanying the emerging archive of Middle Passage Studies. The work of black bodies in a blue world is a reality unequivocal steeped in sacred historical relationships in, around and with Atlantic

waters. These four black women writers create other worlds where their characters thrive in environmentally uncertain, culturally occupied black spaces submerged in the liquid materiality of the sea that adds to the small, generative, and significantly undertheorized canon of black or African Diasporic gothic literary studies directly tackling slavery, its haunting afterlife, and terrifying transoceanic aesthetics permeating our current lives through a "dis[re]membered past"[19] whilst activating promising futures worth envisioning.

Conclusion

In all four works, I analyze disparate modes Paule Marshall, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor activate in understanding transatlantic slavery. Each writer addresses the demand in charting deliberate individual journeys that are often unmapped, unplanned and rooted in diasporic flight. These departures and arrivals are about creating safe spaces where seemingly none exist and coming home or returning to sites of slavery where home constitutes spaces that once were, may still exist and are in the process of being under construction. More than ships and plantations, these black women writers use American Slavery and Middle Passage Studies as frameworks in identifying how diverse women forge paths that have yet to be considered or discovered within the novel. Through utilizing ideas surrounding a motherland, not necessarily on the continent of Africa but examining representations or subsets of the African diaspora enable a new and fluid re/imagining of spaces for black women responsible for creating them. Locales like the Caribbean island of Carriacou, Los Angeles and Maryland, a Kentucky plantation that is anything but sweet or on the banks of the Ohio River, and the coastal region of South Carolina are all nuanced spaces of safety and pain. These geographical regions carry historically heavy pasts and bold uncharted futures inherently curated for and articulated through the dynamic negotiations and navigations of 20th century American women

[19] Saidiya Harman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72.

writers. Their relatable, unbelievable or real-life like characters and the arduous labor in continuing tasks of future world building within the novel's cosmos remind us that realities are as imaginative as they are fluid. There are consistent inspirations for leaving and returning whether through turning pages in real time and a persistence to imagine more or expect better in our always unbelievable but very real world.

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Trans/Versing Liminality in Marshall's *Praisesong*

As a condition and not a prescription, diaspora is global, migratory and mobile. Although defined by perils of imperialism, colonialism, and racism it is not geographically stable or fixed. Diaspora is always in flux and cannot be contained, it is ever-expanding, fluid, subterranean, and already in flight. Its global comprehensiveness "exemplifies a lexicon for the complexities of connections between communities, of the unredressed griefs and disarticulated longings from which collectives emerge."[20] These collectives, or modern diasporic black subjects long for historical, cultural, or ancestral homes that may (not) exist within Western constructs of mapping space. At the same time, they also re-create and imagine these places and themselves elsewhere in the world, oftentimes excluding the Americas, Africa or a materially concreate location or destination. Instead, much of the imaginative power of the black subject produces itself within the realm of the mind, the body and projects itself into the future. I argue that black subjects hold the condition of diaspora within them: in their flesh, memory, rituals, losses and extraordinary futures, those imagined and unfathomable by this world at large. It is the black diasporic individual, in their position and condition "which cannot always be articulated and hang[s] at the edge of possibility"[21] wherein it becomes otherworldly.

Colin Palmer asserts, "In many respects, diasporas are not actual but imaginary and symbolic communities; it is often we who call them into being."[22] While individuals do imagine diasporas, they are also actual spaces and places on earth where traveling black bodies are called to and therefore might consider home. Since these diverse homescapes are possible only through forced migratory displacement, exile and estrangement black people have to forge routes in order to reach their roots. Although Africa does not wholly encompass or represent the limitlessness of diaspora, it is the center

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[20] Lily Cho, "The Turn to Diaspora." *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 17 (2007): 13.

[21] See Cho, "The Turn", 15.

[22] Colin Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora." *Journal of Negro History* 85.1-2 (2000): 29.

from which it sprang. All of Africa's transplanted and dispersed seeds must continually be watered by African descended peoples everywhere—this is how the diaspora germinates across space and time. Whether it's an African American woman's white husband in *Kindred* (1979), The Clearing in *Beloved* (1987), or an unmarked island not on a map that is only accessible through memory and filial ties in *Mama Day* (1988), diaspora most certainly exists, whether psychically or physically. It is a connection of past, present and future kinships paired with a spiritual arrival or return marked by the mourning and remembrance of personal experiences stemming from a global rupture. Although this cataclysmic break cannot be remedied, the black mind and spirit, which is an extension of diaspora is already restructuring itself for life beyond this world. Life beyond current confines constitutes the possibility of post-Middle Passages, or a "multidimensional state of being"[23] as a framework in exploring oneself and reuniting with the living, forgotten, dead and unborn. Perhaps this process is not limited to the condition of diaspora but extends itself to untapped articulations of navigating future freedoms while negotiating existing oppressions; if liberation in any form is possible one must seek the diaspora as a guide.

Diaspora as guide, or what Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) details in her slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861) are also "loophole[s] of retreat" specifically created by black women who author and manufacture actual structures were none exist. These spaces, much like the garret or attic do not exist within white imaginary thought or reality and are exclusively engineered by and for the most oppressed and socially abject, either in the form of enslaved or formerly enslaved black women. Such blueprints and infrastructures of retreat make African-centered diasporas tangible, real-life places that we can see, touch, physically visit in real or deep time and experience psychologically. All of these multifunctional and trans-faceted loopholes or retreats are

[23] John Williams, "Return of a Native Daughter: An Interview with Paule Marshall and Maryse Conde." *SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 3.2 (1986): 52-53.

recycled and then reinvented; consequently, "physical space in this paradigm, is endlessly reinscribed in other spheres of life."[24] Recreated inscriptions such as these allow for sites of counter histories, recognized monuments and a potential for alternative black futures or what many cultural critics consider "Afrofuturism."[25] By expanding our inability to define or confine the parameters of Afrofuturism(s), we begin

> defin[ing] Afrofuturism as a concept, practice and movement that requires Africana people to ubiquitously conceptuali[z]e and deduce time from the past, present and future from an African culture cent[e]r. This cultural cent[e]r operates as the technological component of African futures from which African people can architect their agency in memory and in practice.[26]

Afrofuturism then is a symptom and consequence of diaspora as praxis and a condition in flux.

In keeping with understanding "diaspora as a *condition of subjectivity* marked by long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession,"[27] Paule Marshall's third novelistic work is deeply rooted in and dedicated to remembering by honoring her maternal ancestors, the very subjects responsible for creating diasporic spaces. It is the black feminine divine and ancestral spirits continuously guiding the primary character Avey Johnson in *Praiseong for the Widow* (1983). Marshall credits her own Barbadian grandmother "Da-duh", attesting to her life's work being unequivocally informed by African-Caribbean presence. Her goal is clear when commenting, "symbolic for me of the long line of black women and men—African and New World—who made my being possible and whose spirt continues to animate my life and work. I wish to acknowledge and celebrate them."[28] This

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[24] Wai Chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History." *American Literary History* 13.4 (Winter 2001), 755.

[25] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

[26] Melanie McCoy, "Black Futures Matter: Redefining Afrofuturism." *Atlanta Black Star* (May 2015).

[27] Cho, 14.

[28] Paule Marshall, *Reena*. Old Westbury, (New York: Feminist Press, 1983), 95.

commemorative celebration honors the life of the predecessor and the arrival of the successor; however, none is possible without the acknowledgment of the African ancestor. And the ancestral figure is reliant and hopeful that their progeny and those thereafter will institute legacies of orality, lineage and heritage. Without the deliberate avowal in understanding, repeating and passing on of familial stories and communal histories, the past will not only be forgotten by black diasporic and African American descendants, it will be erased.

The possibility of such erasure becomes even more vulnerable through Avey's designer framed lenses of upper mobility and the unstable comfort of Black American middle-class life alongside capitalism's materialistic glare. While the goals of pre-colonized Africans or early Africans in America include collective uplift, regard for humanity, and freedom, historical American mores continue prioritizing the elevation of self, the egregious acquisition of peoples, populations and products. Such a dichotomy lends itself to imperialist projects of natal alienation, a colonial imperative of communal isolation, collective devastation and dehumanization. A deliberate thwarting of ancestral praise and cultural traditions are at the center of Marshall's novel which reads more like a meditation or storytelling session by a female Caribbean descended griot or oral historian. This phonetic quality is persistent throughout the work and aligns itself with the ways in which Marshall perceives, receives and actively participates in the artistic endeavors of orality. This particular praisesong, in the form of a novel is an ode to her grandmother and African foremothers who she had not meet but whom she intimately knows. She recalls, "They didn't know it, nor did I at the time, but they were carrying on a tradition as ancient as Africa."[29] However, the further away Africans in America are from their language, lands, tribes and traditions, the more susceptible they become to forgetting their African-ness, altogether. Avey too, forgets that she is and was first an African long before becoming American and that being American has no cultural currency on the island where she is heading. Ironically, it is

[29] See Paule Marshall, "Shaping the World of my Art." *New Letters* 40.1 (1973): 103.

her upper-class status that affords her leisurely travel on expensive and exclusive cruise ships leading to her tribal transformation. Further, it is also American capital(ism) which allows her the privilege of being lost and eventually found while at sea on the island of Carriacou. This is the exact currency in circulation being recycled that her forefathers and foremothers created through centuries of death-defying labor without compensation. Consequently, a primary reason Avey can be on a cruise ship is because all those before her were held hostage and in bondage aboard a slave ship. Believing herself deserving of this lifestyle independent of her ancestors, Avey fails to correlate her current existence and social position with their lives marred by continental abduction, the largest ever forced migration, terminal enslavement, international terror and everyday violence. Her seeming privilege is temporary and instead predicated on the timing of and transitioning of an individual middle passage. Avey's internalizing of American exceptionalism and merit comes at an astronomical price although her cruise ticket was paid for centuries ago. However, she is now being called to pave a genealogical historiography for her own black female progeny and pays the cost of living a life of willful estrangement from her native Caribbean or African past both before and after the Middle Passage. This "spiritual middle passage back to rediscover as well as pass on the history and stories of her people [create the possibilities of] Avey's jumping ship and finding herself in the Caribbean."[30]

The Caribbean is also a euphemism for the African diaspora or Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, much like Africa and the Americas function. Historically the "Isle of Spice is a three-island nation comprising the larger island of Grenada and two of the Grenadines, Carriacou and Petit Martinique."[31] As Caribbean Studies and postcolonial critical theorist Jenny Sharpe professes without cliché:

> History has a strange way of repeating itself, but not always as farce. In 1652, forty Caribs, the native inhabitants of Grenada, leapt from a cliff into the sea rather than be taken captive by the French soldiers who were pursuing them. The place, known as Le Morne des Sauteurs or

[30] Gay Wilentz, "Towards a Spiritual Middle Passage Back: Paule Marshall's Diasporic Vision in "Praisesong for the Widow," *Obsidian II* 5.3 (Winter 1990): 2.

[31] Jenny Sharpe, "The Original Paradise." *Transition* 62 (1993): 50.

> Leaper's Hill, is one of the few historical sites a tourist can visit on the Caribbean island. In 1996, Julien Fédon, the free colored leader of the Grenadian rebellion, threw himself down a precipice rather than be taken prisoner by the British, the new colonial masters. Fédon was never seen or heard from again, and his body was not recovered[…]planter historian Bryan Edwards records that Fédon's compass was found fastened to the bottom of an overturned canoe (48).

Roughly translated, Le Morne des Sauteurs means "The Dreary Jumpers" in English. According to Oxford dictionary, the term "dreary" equates lifeless and depressing. If we engage being enslaved to living a lifeless existence, then liberation is only feasible by leaping from a cliff—although undertheorized in Slavery and Middle Passage Studies—walking, swimming, jumping, and flying are also modes and methods from which diaspora is created. The African diaspora is a future afterlife that transcends written record and anchors itself, much like Fédon's compass. The cliff, on the sea, by the hill, on the precipice, and the capsized canoe individually and collectively loop the missing holes in the cyclical matrix of diasporic retreat. Like Jacobs and Sharpe illuminate, liberatory spaces and retreats "is evidence of how us[ing] existing landscape and architecture name the complicated geographies of black[ness] and slavery."[32] Many of these architectural landscapes are already monuments, historical nodes or ancestral odes to the African diaspora and those who perished so that their descendants might actually enjoy a different view from the same hill off the coast of Carriacou wherein leaping is not the only viable option. Like the forty Caribs, the memorialization of Leaper's Hill, or Julien Fédon's disappearance, each are an imprinted cultural comment on the will to live freely in the afterlife of slavery through the act of commemoration. Just as the diaspora is a living obelisk to black people, so too is remembering, repeating and honoring histories of catastrophic events and extraordinary peoples with the will to live, either in their lifetime or through death by any and all means necessary.

As early as the seventeenth century, the Caribbean remains an idyllic destination as untainted island paradise. But for whom and what makes the Grenadines, specifically Carriacou an origin space,

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[32] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 41.

an alternative to or an extension of an African homeland and a consecrated sea island? Carriacou, or "isle of reefs" is named by Caribs, the indigenous inhabitants of Grenada and not by oppressive powers or their explorers. Cited as the first white European tourist, Christopher Columbus landed on these island shores and they have since been narrativized as playgrounds ripe for western consumption. By distorting and omitting historical events, this particular "tourist literature addresses the island cultures as frozen in time, as unspoiled Edens[…]Grenada is currently being remade as 'the Original Caribbean' for tourists who want to avoid the overdevelopment of the other islands [thereby] urging visitors to indulge in a Robinson Crusoe fantasy of being alone on a deserted island."[33] Unspoiled Edens intentionally refers to being unscathed by tourism, colonialism and enslavement. However, the representation of such spaces as frozen, deserted and unspoiled declares an imaginary past wherein there was no contact between Indigenous populations, Europeans and Africans. Without contact and subsequent centuries of violence, there would be no diaspora or "Edens". Marketing Grenada, Petite Martinique and Carriacou as gardens of paradise eclipses realities of imperial conquest and focuses on the natural and lush environmental resources rather than cultural practices and native origins. Like the fictional character Avey Johnson and others aboard the luxury cruise, this type of allure is created with a specific consumer class in mind. More importantly, such cluster island excursions are curated by the tourism industry to attract patrons to participate in an already skewed reality. In this regard, tourists have less agency because they are being guided to strategic locations that intentionally ignore the traditional practices of its communities. What is at stake when "it is with *some* sense of irony that Grenadians refer to Columbus as their first cruise visitor[?]"[34] Understanding the iconography of the ship is crucial to the ways in which tourism is not always offered nor allowed by African descended peoples. The cultural stakes are too high for black bodies to bask in the leisure that

[33] Sharpe, "The Original Paradise," 54-55.

[34] Ibid., 54.

tourism both requires and commands. Therefore, what might we call Avey Johnson, a wealthy Afro-Caribbean descended woman who wants to be identified as a "tourist" but bears markers of indigeneity or enslavement on her very flesh?

Heavily influenced by precolonial African cultures, "Grenada is one of few microstates in the Caribbean with minimal presence of 'plantation tourism.'"[35] Ruth C. Young refers to "plantation tourism" as a collection of how the influence of music, dance and other characteristics reference and therefore relegate "traditionally lower caste[s] and segregate black culture."[36] This idea of differentiating plantation societies from black Caribbean cultures dispels ideas that all black people are descendants of the enslaved and that enslavement was or is the primary experience within the Caribbean. Both Sharpe and Searle also note that because of intentional choices like these, outside corporations oftentimes classified Grenada as being militant due to strong histories of organizing and aligning themselves with the United States Black Power Movement[37]. Consequently, one of Grenada's tourist goals is to illuminate black island culture both prior to European contact and post-emancipation.

Located in the southernmost Winward Islands of the eastern Caribbean, the population of Carriacou "is primarily composed of descendants of slaves from West Africa; there are also descendants of the intermarriage between French, English and Scottish settlers and [those they enslaved]."[38] In Carriacou, the earliest census dates to 1700 and enslaved populations nearly doubled that of whites. Their enslaved majority status solidifies the Grenadines, but specifically Carriacou as a

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[35] Montero, "Tourism, cultural heritage and regional identities," 3.

[36] Ruth C. Young, "The structural context of the Caribbean tourism industry: A comparative study," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 24.4 (1977): 664.

[37] See Chris Searle, Carriacou and Petite Martinique: In the mainstream of the revolution. (St. George's: Fedon, 1982).

[38] Ronald F. Kephart, "Creole English on Carriacou: A sketch and some implications," *Contact Englishes of the Eastern Caribbean* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2003)

black Caribbean nation despite it being heavily dominated by European outsiders. However, the idea that it somehow remains trapped in the past is commonly attractive for international tourists. The erasure of slavery provides a whitewashed view of the island and the people. Tourism brochures tout the pride of its inhabitants without mentioning their hard earned, tumultuous fight for independence, the spread of colonization and therefore European migration, or how their plantation economies, specifically export sugar production, boosted global market systems. Since Carriacou 'emerged from an anticolonial rebellion'[39], it is no wonder why and how Carriacouans are able to maintain their well sustained pan-Caribbean and pan-African worlds amidst new waves of hyper-tourism, or neocolonialism. This diaspora manifests itself in the fact that throughout Grenada's sister islands, both Carriacou and Petite Martinique are predominantly racially and ethnically homogenous. Unified in their African lineage, The Big Drum Festival or The African Nation Dance is a celebration of ethnic and linguistic heritage wherein one of the primary nation dances represents the Igbo.[40] The Big Drum is "as old as slavery[…]Because the drum is a symbol of time and timelessness, relating not only to present day but going back to the slave era, going through time."[41] Traveling through time culturally vis-á-vis rituals like The African Nation Dance is done in private and is not a part of the various tourist attractions and inclusive festival gatherings on the mainstream island itinerary. Originally, this dance was created to establish unity and maintain bonds among diverse African nations upon arrival on Carriacou's shores. Remembering Africa was and is always at the center of Carriacouan personhood, identity and community. Exclusivity regarding customs is precisely why the island remains self-sufficient and reliant on its internal networks of native peoples.

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[39] See Sharpe, 54.

[40] Throughout this chapter, I consistently employ the term and spelling of "Ibo" as author Paul Marshall does. However, both are meant to identify individuals predominantly from northeastern Nigeria and the enslaved Africans in the novel at "Ibo Landing" who walked back to Africa chained together.

[41] Christine David, *Folk Traditions: Carriacou and Petite Martinique.* (Port of Spain: Horsham's Print, 2004).

Carriacouans commonly refer to themselves as Kayaks and are also called this by Grenadians. Although there is no research supporting this claim, I contend that although the origins of the term, Kayak may not necessarily be found in the Caribbean that it is useful to acknowledge and employ the various meanings of the word to its inhabitants. Thinking of the Kayak populations as human vehicles amid other existing technological modes of transport (like canoes, boats, cargo and cruise ships) in transplanting ritualistic African customs is important when understanding various roles on their diasporic citizenship on native islands. The Kayaks are then both conduits for the transmission of tradition and represent premier arrivals on shores in early primitive cruise ships called slavers packed with human commodities. Further, Kayak is also one of the most widely recognized online travel agencies and search engines—I doubt this is coincidental, especially given that "Carriacou is sold as a place where there is not much to do but go fishing or maintain strong boating traditions."[42] Long traditions of water sports entrenched within Carriacou identify the Kayaks as a boating people very familiar with sailing and cruise travel while being situated between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. If all water is trans because it finds you, runs through and washes over you—then the sea itself is inherently a diaspora all its own, comparable to an island of thought wherein the mind and body transform into space ships. Shipping therefore, enables one to get from the 'here' to the 'there' in preserving one's humanity.[43]

<u>The Impossibility of Free Shipping</u>

Among the primary themes in this novel or "central myth/legend of *Praisesong for the Widow* is that of the Africans who escaped slavery through supernatural powers…not about "flying Africans"—

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[42] Simply Carriacou, "Discovering Carriacou," October 10, 2021, http://www.simplycarriacou.com/discover.html

[43] Erna Brodber, "Beyond the Boundary: Magical Realism in the Jamaican Frame of Reference," *Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002), 20. I borrow her idea of enslaved Africans flying "from the 'here' into the 'there'" in preserving humanity and transforming a world of hate into one that you create.

but about the Ibos who walked on water and back to Africa."[44] Ships and schooners are heavily referenced in the text, however the Ibos chained together retreat to the sea by foot as if being guided by a path on a highway. Being transported by vessels (transatlantic enslavement) or choosing to utilize the body as mobility (Ibo Landing) manifests itself differently for Avey the moment she leaves her "home" and steps on consecrated land indigenous to her ancestors. Rather than walk on water, Avey must first fly from New York, take residence abroad a crise ship and then firmly walk on the homeland of her people; this cultural footing is complete through practicing and experiencing such traditions of the past like the "Beg Pardon" and "Big Drum" ceremonies while there. Grenada and more specifically, Carriacou acts as a closer, more accessible Africa in the form of a native island or motherland for Avey. Her experiences are initiated by air, enacted on land, and then water whereas water for her Ibo forebears was cyclical wherein the beginning began again. Although not enslaved, Johnson must decide what liberation looks like and how she will independently secure it to become a part of the collective.

As a collective, the Ibos decide their futures are in Africa, choosing to walk back to their former lives and lands, "they realized there wasn't nothing between them and home but some water and that wasn't giving em' no trouble."[45] They never forgot their origins and equally, where they wanted to live and be in the world, Africa was and is always at the center of imagining and being. However, Avey is far removed from anything immediately outside of her stark North White Plains, New York purview and therefore the historical ports, waters, languages and lands of her ancestors have been forgotten. Even as a small girl, Avey recalls a conversation in which she questions the validity of her ancestral beginnings outside of a United States and more African centered context. Continuing the narrative of the walking Africans, Aunt Cuney insists:

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[44] Wilentz, "Towards a Spiritual Middle Passage Back," 5.

[45] Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow* (New York: Plume and Penguin Books, 1983), 38-39.

> "Those Ibos! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here!"
> "But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney…?"
> "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday school book your momma always sends with you?"
> "No, ma'am."
> I di[dn't] think so. You got any more questions?" (40)

This dialogue between the youth and an elder represents several dichotomies that Avey is forced to confront throughout the novel. Her curiosity is wrapped in skepticism surrounding a group like the Ibos being able to participate in the realm of the supernatural. Even as a child, Avey thinks that the magic Aunt Cuney discusses seems foreign like the Ibos. Without knowing or asking how deep or shallow the water they treaded, drowning or sinking is Avey's sole frame of reference since Aunt Cuney does not mention they swam. Aunt Cuney prioritizes Jesus, his holy strengths and accomplishments alongside the agonizing endurance of divine-like African men and women who survived the Middle Passage and yet, mustered up the energy to walk back from which they came. Through both literature and orality, the unbelievable stories of Christ are told and the masses receive them, even if not fully accepting them. However, the African Ibos too, are discussed as holy spiritual beings that also possess incredible God-given gifts that are not understood nor accepted by most or decipherable within the realm of Western reason and logic. Avey's initial question decades prior regarding the improbability of walking Africans supports Eurocentric views of blackness equating lack and impossibility rather than folklore or transatlantic legends rooted in actual super/supranatural occurrences. Further, Aunt Cuney questions the accuracy of written word in the form of books in the same ways Avey is doubtful of the Ibo myth. Neither Aunt Cuney or Avey were present when either Jesus or the Ibos walked on water, however they are equally invested in either believing or disbelieving the histories presented. Aunt Cuney instills the veracity of both written arguments and verbally articulated narratives as being equally important and "through her impeccable logic, Marshall reminds

us that certain legends are privileged while others are not…bring[ing] to the reader the necessity of valuing the non-western traditions of the New World—in this case, those of African origin."[46]

While the magical Ibos readily left the slave ship behind, Avey's "spiritual Middle Passage back to the African Caribbean occurs in the form of the most mainstream of American leisure activities—a Caribbean cruise"[47] and solidifies her position into the upper echelon of both American and black culture. Like the Ibo's, the altering of Avey's plans primarily center on leaving the ship and flying, not walking home—her Middle Passage almost identically mimics that of the ancestors and their voyage from the boat back home. Not intended as a mecca back to an ancient or native land, Avey is enjoying the privilege of briefly escaping her home and life in New York with two of her close black female friends. Instead of exclusively reading North White Plains as an actual place and an inner New York suburb in the novel, I read the name alone as indicative of a stifling environment representative of a plain white existence wherein Avey's willingness to whitewashing is localized and solidified in this space. White Plains is a metaphor for a mediocre white life lived by a black widow and is also a metonymy wherein the name of the city denotes an enclave of whiteness from the city's early historical inception, including the people who purchased it, and its blinding blizzard blurring effects of winter. Located in Westchester County, White Plains was purchased from Native and Indigenous Americans during the late seventeenth-century and translated means "white marshes." More specifically, the idea that Avey's home and lifestyle are in the North suggest a type of illusory safe space because it is not in the south. Moving to the North does not safeguard the black female body although it suggests a nominal or legal freedom. As readers, we believe that Jacobs has *made it* in post-enslavement life and is free. For Avey, reading that she is an upper-middle-class black woman, we are also equally confident that she, too has *arrived* financially and therefore must be happy or, at the very least content post-

[46] Wilentz, 5.

[47] Ibid., 6.

emancipation. After all, Avey is vacationing on a luxury cruise and is not immediately or necessarily easy to pity or empathize with depending on the reader. Although both women are privileged in various regards, reading their texts alongside each other (one a historical memoir and the other historical fiction or neo slave narrative), somehow Jacobs and not Johnson seemingly deserves to be in the North or is worthy of in/external liberation. However, Jacobs warns that comparing or negotiating one's mobility in the North as a woman and mother is futile. Jacobs notes on the final pages of her slave narrative, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way[.] We are as free from the power of the slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and that, is not saying a great deal."[48] Neither Harriet Jacobs nor Avey Johnson are white, yet they both seek and flee the North to emancipate themselves. As black women, they find that the north may seem like a dream with its "light, fleecy clouds [but that they are still] floating over a troubled sea."[49]

White Pride and Perfection

Much like the troubled sea of whiteness she has temporarily left behind, Avey readily exchanges one white place for another white space. The name of her cruise ship is the *Bianca Pride*. Like White Plains, the "Bianca Pride" is also a translation for "white pride" in Italian. Neither the city nor cruise are inherently American; rather, they are whitened over time. This process of whitewashing through translation echoes the power of naming by defining the demarcation of spaces through early colonization of stolen or purchased lands throughout the Americas. This renaming is effective in creating racial climates without explicitly identifying the exclusion of other non-white groups. She and her two black friends are on an exclusive, majority white passenger cruise liner named, "white pride" and this bitter irony is intentional. Although the name of the ship is never revealed until after Avey departs and sees the name clearly, there are various markers of her colonized tongue and palette

[48] Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life,* 302.

[49] Ibid., 303.

throughout the floating vessel. The first time Avey experiences sickness is one night while being served in one of the ship's most formal dining rooms. On the menu that evening, there is a "peach parfait à la Versailles"[50] in which she attempts to consume. Translated, "peach perfect in Versailles" this dessert option offers sliced peaches, syrup, whipped cream, and peach sherbet, all in a fluted glass. Its presentation and meticulously crafted layers both impress and excite a hungry Avey. Despite being in the Caribbean, the standard on the ship is curated from a European perspective and is highlighted based on the menu. Carla Guerrón Montero reminds that "Colonial control changed hands several times between the French and British between 1609 and 1783 when it was awarded to Britain under the Treaty of Versailles."[51] Further, I hypothesize that Paule Marshall's text is deliberately writing back to the European captors of the Afri/o-Caribbean peoples and regions by confronting these historicized events or ruptures through publishing her novel exactly a century after the Treaty of Versailles is finalized. *Praisesong*, as a project and type of diasporic treaty in itself implicates not only Great Britain and France but also includes the United States, Spain and the Netherlands—all equally guilty colonial institutional entities ensuring that cultures of tourism, racism and slavery are terminal. Alluding to transitional stages of French and British rule in the Caribbean emphasizes that the parfait or perfection is only attainable on either a British or French ship; thereby illuminating the impossibility of perfection without colonial dominion, especially among black majority populations on islands like Carriacou. Not only are the menu options in another language, they are in French and France colonized Grenada among many other black nations. And what is particularly interesting is that the cruise liner, or the White Pride is serving parfait, or perfection on board, however access to this

[50] Murray, Praisesong, 49.

[51] Carla Guerrón Montero, "Tourism, cultural heritage and regional identities in the Isle of Spice," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 13.1 (2015): 2.

branding of idealism is exclusive because it assumes that patrons are European, multilingual or well-traveled Americans that know how to translate peach perfect in English, French and know Italian.

Like the triangular trade, the Caribbean, Americas and France all exist contemporaneously aboard the ship, however Avey contemplates if and how she will justify consuming such perfection.

> She had eaten sparingly earlier in the meal in order to treat herself to at least part of the dessert tonight, a few sinful spoonfuls. Eagerly she started to nudge aside the cream topping to get at the first layer of peaches, only to have her hand, as if stricken with a sudden paralysis, come to a stop. With the appearance of the parfait, the usually muted talk and laughter had risen sharply, spurred by the comments and exclamations over the dessert and the clinking of hundreds of spoons against the glasses. Her heart was beating quickly. Her stomach, her entire midsection felt odd (49-50).

Before even knowing what will be served for dessert, Avey attempts to plan for it. She even suppresses her appetite in preparing to partake in the few sinful spoonful's. Although decadent, the term "sin" here references a long line of French imperialism and subsequent colonization on the island of Grenada and domination of its black Caribbean inhabitants, former enslaved peoples and Ibo's. In an attempt to shift the layers of her parfait, Avey first removes the thick white cloud of cream to get to the first sign of color, the peaches. However, after reaching actual color beneath the whiteness, is when she becomes immobilized. As if the layers of this perfection are too thick for her to consume, she notices the frantic buzz surrounding her. It appears that she is the only one not partaking of perfection but is rather an outsider whose able to notice the fervent mood that is encapsulating, yet that she is not a part of. Although wanting to be included in this intoxicating atmosphere, her body will not allow her participation in the parfait festivities. Everyone around her is excitable, loud and sociable yet she is on the outside or straddling the margins of perfection not because she wants to reject it and all because her muscle memory and reflexes will not allow it. Avey is not in control of her sudden paralysis and there is nothing she can do to regain control over her body. As noted, her heart, stomach and midsection are all affected. Everything below the brain is not functioning in ways she deems proper or appropriate. Her body refuses to listen to the brain for guidance, rather the lower

midsection is controlling all emotions, motions and movements. Avey's body forbids that she consume colonized cuisine in the form of the final course—a deliciously sweet dessert aboard an Italian ship titled, White Pride while being a black American in the Caribbean.

In the midst of Avey's paralysis, she and her friends, Clarise and Thomasina discuss the parfait:

> "What's wrong, Avey? Don't you like it?"
> "Not like it! How could anybody in their right mind not like it? This thing's delicious. The desserts this year are better than ever."
> "What is it, Avey?"
> "I don't know. Seems I have a little indigestion, although I don't see how, I hardly ate anything. I'd better skip the dessert though, as tempting as it looks. You're welcome to it." (50-51)

Most striking in this exchange is the absence of the word "parfait". Since parfait is French for perfect, we can deduce that they are all contemplating the taste(s) and costs of sublimity aboard the ship. Clarise's first inclination is to ask what's wrong with her friend, not the dessert being served. Before Avey can respond, Clarise again puts the onus on her friend without considering whether or not there is something wrong with the dessert, read perfection that disagrees with her friend. Chiming in, Thomasina exclaims that anyone that dislikes this particular dessert is crazy because there is nothing to dislike, completely ignoring preference but also the personal capacity of one's palate. Both Clarise and Thomasina assume that the only taste that matters, at least on this particular journey is acclimating to and digesting decadent French confection. For Avey's friends, they associate having class, etiquette, and equate aesthetic taste to proudly consuming the food of the colonizer. The deliciousness referenced comes from having access to partake in the same fare as your oppressors and alongside them. Assimilating, or what Clarise identifies as "delicious" is either about acquiring certain tastes regarded as culturally superior or advanced and blending in with masses of individuals on the ship (a microcosm of the world) and not sticking out. Un/fortunately for Avey, her body rebels and will not allow her to undergo further processes of whitewashing on the whitest ship in Grenada. Her indigestion but more importantly, her blackness and histories of violence cannot be digested, only

purged. As temping as the French colonial gaze with its accoutrement or accoutré appears on the ship, it is not worth the excruciating pain it breeds once consumed or internalized.

Introspective Tourist Gaze

According to Joseph Roach, tourism is a process of "sustained contact and exchange among the peoples of the Atlantic world."[52] These interactions are especially familiar within the Caribbean and "Caribbean peoples have long dealt with the arrival, departure, and visits of travelers and tourists and tourists have long enjoyed privileges of moving through the Caribbean both by land and by sea."[53] Avey, an African American tourist on the island and also a daughter of the diaspora, initially embarks on a floating watercraft, experiences land, sea and her heritage tourist travels conclude with her finally being rooted and grounded in a Caribbean home space. While Avey views herself as a tourist, she is treated like an insider island inhabitant and immediately ingratiated into local culture and tradition simply based on external appearances. Avey's blackness affords her the access and privilege of blending in. Unlike aboard the "White Pride" or living in White Plains, her skin color in Grenada and Carriacou serves as membership for belonging. In this place, the color of diaspora are myriad shades of blackness and she fits into these spaces without any effort. However, her conundrum is self-imposed and centers around her wanting to be different and needing to stand out from the local Caribbean crowds. Her pride is wholly reliant on the fact that she is an American tourist. Therefore, Avey aspires to exist in this world of exchange and privilege wherein she is identifiable through her class and in a constant state of control through modes of accessibility and mobility.

Exercising her mobility now off of the ship, Avey begins her consistent search for stark markers of class juxtapositions between her and the native islanders in the area. Immediately in this new environment on land, she wonders:

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[52] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 29.

[53] Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 210.

> Where were the little ragtag boys who served as unofficial guides, who the minute you stepped ashore seemed to spring from the cracks of the pavement around you? Where for that matter—she gave another puzzled look around—were all the other types she was used to seeing on the wharves in other places she had been—the noisy, sweating stevedores, the souvenir vendors peddling their cocoa bean necklaces and Zulu balancing dolls, the women hawkers with their trays of fruit, the droves of idlers and hangers-on you had to guard your pocketbook against, and, in some of the poorer places, the beggars who could be so persistent at times she would regret having come ashore. None of them were in sight. (64-65)

Her all-encompassing gaze is not reciprocal, rather it is classist and therefore, hierarchal. By mentioning the image of ragtag boys emerging from the cracked pavement, Johnson choreographs a scene for the reader (whom is probably also a tourist or an outsider within the scope of the novel) akin to vermin encircling her and other wealthy cruise patrons. Cracks in the pavement suggest that this island is older, dilapidated and primitive. The ways in which she describes infrastructure "construct local people as rooted to the place and natural scenery as an unchanging tropical backdrop."[54] The need for Avey to assign people to nature and the landscape dehumanizes residents by compounding the natural environment of the island and projecting it onto its populace. By identifying Caribbean individuals as a cluster of "types", she is employing the language of tourism, or what Sheller argues are myriad "grammars of difference"[55] that are audible through relations of looking, watching and are fundamental to the power dynamics of consumer tourism. Rather than describe what people look like or the ways they engage with others (including herself), exert energy or conduct business, as readers we are given unfavorable snapshots of how the native Grenadians are othered, or clearly not American. Instead of trying to adjust to the environment, Avey expects the Caribbean to rearrange its customs and way of life to exclusively suit her. This unrealistic expectation derives from a privileged mindset through series of embodied encounters in constructing "the tourist gaze."[56]

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[54] Mimi Sheller, *Natural Hedonism: The Invention of the Caribbean as Tropical Playground* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23-38.

[55] Ibid., Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 211.

[56] John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990)

Both Avey's judgement, vivid perceptions and projections of how the market functions align with her privilege both on and off the seacraft. Accordingly, the ship functions as a microcosm of the world in which Avey believes herself a part of. Rather than analyzing the Caribbean based on the history Aunt Cuney imparts on her as a young girl, Avey instantaneously associates it through a deficit lens. Instead of analyzing this particular scene as a consequence of conquest and capitalism contained throughout enslavement, the local marketplace exists as an indicator of positionality for Avey as a black passenger (not yet a steward) and American tourist. The white pride vessel in which she emerges is the same type of vehicle that the Ibo's were trying to flee immediately after their arrival in Grenada. Avey is paying an actual monetary price to take up space and residency on the same types of vessels her ancestors were forced on, whom already paid the price as human cargo. She is attempting to pay for a type of access that is both on and off of the ship due to her African American tourist status. No matter the actual cost of Avey's fare, she is overpaying; her ticket has been paid four centuries over. The Bianca Pride is not only a white supremacist machine masked as an exclusive luxury liner but also symbolizes an unflinching paradigmatic reality that is inescapable from which Avey is entangled through histories of European empire, enslavement in the Americas, the Caribbean and Africa.

The conjoining of the Caribbean and Africa is evident as soon as Avey is alone at the wharf. While the atmosphere on the ship is selling a brand of white perfection, off the ship is bustling and colorful. She immediately notices how well-dressed everyone around her is and that they are speaking Patois exclusively because "she had been so busy examining them she had failed to take in their speech[…]and it had called to mind the way people spoke in Tatem[…]the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words."[57] Aside from everyone being black like Avey, the language is familiar, almost familial. Although she is unsure of what precisely is being said and feels like an outside islander,

[57] Marshall, *Praisesong*, 67.

the fact she is able to differentiate and name the language is imperative. Being able to instantly draw connections between her hometown of Tatem and Grenada places her outside of an exclusive tourist gaze purview. More specifically, by recognizing the linguistic modes of their speech, Avey is further gaining access to her West African roots through sonic memory. She immediately notices the similarities of speech patterns in Tatem, South Caroline where her Aunt Cuney lived and how the islanders pronounce things, thereby demonstrating that all of the senses are not colonized, particularly her hearing. The cadence in which Avey identifies with speaks volumes to the strength of precolonial African languages and how both the Southern and Caribbean fusions are intensely audible in the States, particularly the Carolinas and in Carriacou. Here the diaspora speaks directly to Avey, comparable to a guide assuring that she is in the right place. This experience would be uncharacteristic for a tourist, especially since she is alone and blends in; consequently, there are no markers of her foreignness, although initially she attempts to categorically exoticize the citizens through grouping them by "types". Ironically, these are her "types" of people through dialect, intonation, forced migrations and global dispersal. There is no group of people more kindred to Avey Johnson than the folx among her at the port amidst the "floating city"[58] who sound like the community of Tatem, the precise location of Ibo Landing—where Avey and Aunt Cuney have one of their earliest, most influential conversations about diasporic power and ancestral inheritance. Understanding this power "requires of us that we have a knowledge of 'diaspora literacy,' an ability to read a variety of cultural signs of the lives of Africa's children at home and in the New World."[59] Not just Tatem's progeny but equally Africa's child, Avey becomes more alert through this diasporic literacy by allowing herself the

[58] Ibid., 66.
[59] Abena Busia, "'What's Your Nation?' Reconnecting Africa and Her Diaspora through Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow." In *Changing our own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 196-211.

autonomy to rely less on what she thinks and to feel various culturally significant signs not necessarily limited to speech but reading ques and nuances.

Conclusion: Dancing Diaspora/s

As many articles and books note, *Praisesong* "is rightly celebrated by a number of critics for protagonist Avey Johnson's journey toward self-expression and wholeness."[60] However, equally meaningful is her fragmentation, confusion, longing, wandering, wonder and confronting multiple layers of her forgotten but never lost African cultural practices. These customs are as far reaching as her birthplace in Tatem, her current home in North White Plains, the mainland of Grenada and finally the homeland sea island of Carriacou. All of the drama, trauma, bodily purging and cleansing should all be lauded as leading Avey Johnson to self-actualization. She is only whole when she reunites with others who share different individual experiences but diverse and collective diasporic histories. The final two sections of the novel, "Lavé Tête" or washed head and "The Beg Pardon" asks ancestors to forgive the transgressions of the dancing descendants at the ceremony. This act of moving individually while joining a collective, tribe or community becomes the actual praisesong not just for the widow, Avey but for everyone reading the novel and therefore bearing witness to such extraordinary transitional transformations. Everyone present is representing their respective nation and thus praising Africa, the islands, and their crossing from Grenada to Carriacou. The praise song becomes more than a metaphor and is analogous to scripture. Additionally, it is literature (body of written and oral works), lyric (a poem and a chorus sung by a group or, a collective diasporic chorus), meter (patterns measured by sound) and most importantly is metonymy or a figure of speech replacing the name of something else. Actively participating in praise via song sustains the diaspora because its form of recognition and reverence coalesce a collective composition of vocal resonances. Without individuals coming together to form and articulate a collective, there is no praisesong nor is diaspora possible. One must first recall

[60] Courtney Thorsson, "Dancing up a Nation." *Callaloo* 30.2 (2007): 644.

their past in order to celebrate it. Memory creates the real, imagined, unmapped, uncharted and the conceivable unthought for black people regarding what is happening and will be/come of the African diaspora's dynamism.

In order to engage with such diasporic synergies, experience Carriacou and the ritual dance, Avey must first survive the journeys at sea as an individual or lone black woman. And although she travels by herself, Avey is not alone; she is protected and intimately cared for by a community of other black women on the boat and when lodging. This communal effort to get Avey back to the very real but forgotten spaces of language, love and lineage is what renders her no longer a parentless daughter of the diaspora. Consequently, at the novel's start, Avey is culturally homeless and these series of water crossings exceed national boundaries, geographical barriers and extend the parameters of home. It is the sea islands, the boats and the water that are the sacred birth places, home spaces and Avey Johnson is one of the vessels responsible for transporting such floating diasporas. Barbara Christian writes, "The recurrent motif throughout the novel, [is] that the body might be in one place and the mind in another."[61] Just like the resolute men and women walking back to Africa at Ibo Landing in Tatem, their bodies were chained together but their minds were already back home in Africa. Disappearing underneath the Atlantic's waters centers on "the belief that it is possible to defy the body's limitations, and in doing so, to escape the bonds of enslavement"[62] thereby asserting that the act of walking back to Africa while contemporaneously drowning is possible. Black possibility despite current positionality is what propels Avey Johnson at each stage and thrusts her individual diaspora forward, upward and onward like the tides that brought her to the Caribbean. Waves of calamity also dispersed Africans globally and unequivocally sustain the Middle Passage as the focal catalyst for modernity and all its

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[61] Barbara Christian, "Ritualistic Process and the Structure of Paule Marshall's Praisesong for the Widow," *Callaloo* 18 (Spring-Summer, 1983): 75.
[62] Susan Rogers, "Embodying Cultural Memory and the Language of Place in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People and Praisesong for the Widow*," *African American Review* 34.1 (Spring 2000): 80.

advances. Without the sheer will to live freely, neither the Africans at Ibo Landing who walked to their motherland nor Avey could survive her spiritual multi-island Middle Passage journey. For Avey, wholeness derives from attempting to reach back for that which was forgotten and to praise it back to life. In this sense, she is able to birth herself back to life and become a carrier and storyteller of her black Caribbean history. Avey is the vessel that will transport this story from Carriacou, to North White Plains, New York and back to Tatem, South Carolina where she was first told the story of the ancestors by her Aunt Cuney. In reclaiming individual truths about herself and familial origin story, Avey becomes the griot in preparation for her becoming an ancestor. By re-telling the story of Ibo Landing and her trip through the Caribbean diaspora, she cements her name and maintains her position as matriarch. No longer solely a widow, Marshall magnifies the similarities between Avey Johnson and her own Barbadian grandmother "Da-duh" while solidifying that black women birth creations and interpretations of African diaspora everywhere they journey. Although not exclusively feminine, these inherent divine-like energies manifest through black women. Their labor and productivity in reproducing and restructuring narratives functions as both a sacred and shared archive. Such expansive archives extend the reach of home lands or origin spaces and function as exo-Africas. Diaspora—and therefore the Black Atlantic, the Americas, Africa or the Caribbean is impossible without the presence, labor and diligent reimagining of futurities outside of this world and one's own body without the singular black woman and her tribe.

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Doors of Rupture: *Kindred*'s Cosmic Cargo Culture

Octavia Estelle Butler's presence, transdisciplinary scholarship and multimodal creative works reverberate in life and literature despite her final transition in 2006. As black female literary ancestor, storyteller and truth seeker, her oeuvre's diversity bespeaks the characters and alternative worlds she constructs. Too fluid to contain, Butler's genre of future world making transcends space, time, boundaries, earth and galaxies—she encourages and inspires readers to actively imagine new ways, forms and frameworks of being thereby extending beyond the monotony of existing here, now and every day. By centering global futures, Butler allows black people, particularly black women to expand their minds and relocate their physical bodies. By thrusting lone black female bodies throughout time and ultimately into future spaces exclusively curated by and for them, African American women prioritize their right to live and exist everywhere in the world, all at once. In *Kindred* (1979), Butler wonders like Calvin L. Warren questions, "If literal black bodies sustain modernity and metaphysics—through various forms of captivity, terror, and subjection—then what would emancipation entail for blacks?"[63] As an option not an answer, Kristin Lillvis considers that "posthumanism allows the black subject to conceive of a future in which blackness destroys rather than facilitates black objectification [by] projecting non-apocalyptic possibilities for the future as well as the past and present."[64]

Reminiscent of primary stages within Middle Passage experiences, Dana is literally abducted and taken by forces outside of her control. The weight of unresolved familial atrocities and unacknowledged genealogical traumas plucks Dana from the present wherein her body becomes a vessel across space and time. Dana's fluid positionality as a black woman allows her body to be read in myriad places, spaces and periods because she represents, "Black Atlantic subjectivities: from slave

[63] Calvin L. Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope." *The New Centennial Review* 15.1 (Spring 2015): 239.

[64] Kristen Lillvis, "Posthuman Multiple Consciousness in Octavia E. Butler's Science Fiction," in *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, ed. Kristen Lillvis (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 85.

to negro to coloured to evolué to black to African to African American."[65] Specifically, Dana's triangulation of past, present and future renders her both spatially and geographically unstable but her body remains a reliable conduit to other worlds. She is constantly traveling between the locales of Maryland and California, but it is this third space I am most interested in. More interesting than deciphering where home is for Dana and what Los Angeles and Maryland represent, one of the central questions guiding this work is: Where is Dana when she is neither at the Weylin Plantation or in Alta Dena? How is this triangular spatial dynamic actualized and what does this third metric symbolize? While antebellum Maryland or the Weylin Plantation represent her ancestral past, she initially identifies Los Angeles as a stable home space. Every time Dana travels back and forth, she too undergoes an individual Middle Passage because her bodily existence exceeds Western or New World boundaries of how time moves in the present while giving glimpses of what future temporalities look and feel like for some black women. Rather than Dana being shipped like cargo from a precolonial Africa to the capitalistic Americas, she is transported from post-emancipation 1974 back to antebellum plantation slavery; this seeming reversal becomes "the Middle Passage journey signal[ing]her conversion to self-possessed subject to object."[66] Since Dana's bodily existence is now conceived through the colonial lens of conquest, property and ownership, she is constantly open and vulnerable to "the literal destruction of [her] black bod[y]…the psychic, economic, and philosophical resources for modernity to objectify, forget, and ultimately obliterate Being"[67] in any temporal sphere and among all places. And a part of Dana is obliterated in the past and present which carries her into the future. It is this destruction which parallels that of her ancestors that continues pushing and pulling her forward into

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[65] Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *The New Centennial Review* 3:2 (Summer 2003): 298-299.

[66] Lillvis, 89.

[67] Warren, "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope", 237.

this contemporary moment—when she is already traumatized through experiencing the spectacle of slavery, has already lost her forearm, and visits Maryland, the site of her ancestry and proof of her transatlantic membership, existence and survival.

How does Dana maneuver misogynoir, antiblackness, periods of enslavement or objectification, sexual assaults and what must feel like the end of the world in her waking past, present and future realities? And equally critical, what does liberation look like to and for her post-slavery life; does first-hand experiential trauma position her as barely surviving, on the fringes of life, or margins of death and how is she able to live intentionally after her unthinkable encounters? Dana's final trip and scene in the novel validates this exact omnipresent antiblack machine necessitating recyclable black death that is gratuitously reliant on her vulnerable female reproductive body, experiencing excruciating pain and enduring inexplicable loss. This chapter argues for the imaginative inclusion of diverse methods of liminality and black futurism as productive modes of surviving, escaping, thriving, loving, living and being a black woman in an increasingly unbearable American landscape.

Transatlantic colonization and therefore slavery at sea anchors blackness in America. One objective of the Middle Passage and American Slavery is to destroy the new African in America and create the hyper-abject construct of the black slave, to deconstruct the human being and their many valences of subjectivity—to sever all roots and memory. A wandering native body with no home, family, language, love or willful capacity to regain their liberty is the project of imperial transatlantic voyages and subsequent anti-black slavery and racism. Such diasporic fragmentation and ancestral alienation precede inevitable amputation. Valérie Loichot asserts, "The slave family is marked by a series of amputations: an immense and abrupt severing from original African roots and memory, a dismemberment of family units by practices of kidnapping or selling; literal amputations of limbs; splits between bodies turned into economic tools of production and mind."[68] Dana is already

disconnected from her black United States History not because she marries Kevin, a white man but due to neglectful ignorance surrounding Atlantic memory and American plantation slavery. After momentarily disappearing and returning home from her first trip, she shares with Kevin, "It's becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand."[69] How Dana interprets history through popular culture is distant and memetic. She has no historiographic or personal reference points of her own to pull from, or so she believes.

However, if Dana were to look within herself and her experiences, perhaps she would draw parallels and recognize particular behaviors. Dana is also a writer whose creativity is overshadowed by her husband's writerly pursuits since he is the only authorial figure in the household. However, Dana is also expected to produce alongside her husband who is getting paid to work while her time is directed towards menial, mindless and mundane labor for which she is not paid. In Chapter Three, "The Fall", Dana references a "slave market" on three occasions. She shares, "I was working out of a casual labor agency—we regulars called it a slave market…what would a writer be doing working out of a slave market…typical slave-market candor."[70] That Dana conflates and equates warehouse work to the economic enterprises of American slavery's exploitative global impact exposes her sarcastic ignorance in "see[ing] past and present as discrete, closed off, or even formal categories."[71] Her inability to accurately articulate connections between her low-paying wage work and historical linkages to the extraction of free black female labor during slavery supports the second-hand reference she shares with Kevin. Dana identifies history as a universal past rather than an evolving deeply personal process of becoming, that ushers you into the present. This second-hand sight that is centuries in the

[68] Valérie Loichot, 41.

[69] Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 17.

[70] Butler, *Kindred*, 52, 54, 57.

[71] Lillvis, "Posthuman Multiple Consciousness" (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 89.

making experienced by Dana is for now, external—she sees but does not yet believe or fully feel what is unfolding.

At this stage in the text, Dana does not understand the visceral implications and physical pain of enslavement nor how it activates all of the senses. However, she does comprehend the gravity of life and death and this confrontation literally stares her in the face: "I turned, startled, and found myself looking down the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and froze, thinking I was going to be shot…I was going to die."[72] It is the fear of death that brings Dana closer to history, self-awareness and multi-temporal actualization. For both Dana and Kevin, this first experience is a "dream" or "hallucination" (Butler 17) and not yet an indicator of black American reality or an afterlife of slavery. Whether in denial regarding what is occurring, shame because it is happening, or historical ignorance about slavery, Dana is intent on washing the perpetual stain of bondage off of her physical body. Earlier in the text, she tells herself:

I tried.
I showered, washed away the mud and the brackish water, put on clean clothes, combed my hair…
"That's a lot better," Kevin said when he saw me.
But it wasn't. (18)

Dana's compulsive self-cleansing ritual acts as an erasure for both unacknowledging and disapproval of her body being the primary text in the narrative. While focusing on her outer appearance like clean clothing and combed hair, she misses reading and comprehending the severity of internal processes unfolding. Dana does not grasp the gravity of her time traveling journey, its historical hold over her body or its capacity to transform her reality and posit her blackness as a portal into past lives that dictate her current future. She is both the riddle and the answer to questions that she poses for herself until the novel's final scenes. Dana is unpacking texts in her home during her first transport to

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[72] Butler, *Kindred*, 17.

Maryland, however this task is more laborious than leisurely. As a woman and wife inside the confines of home, "she is stuck with housework while her husband Kevin gets to write…her hands on her books and her emotions revolving around indignation, is momentarily suspended between her chosen life as writer and her unchosen role as a domestic."[73] Dana's progress and productivity is both halted and stunted because of gender norms inextricably linking her race to physical labor wherein she becomes a domestic in her own home. Further, Dana's race and gender situate her California home space as an entrapment wherein she is tied to roles of domesticity, regardless of her willingness or disapproval. Unbeknownst to Dana, her home is yet another marker of danger, instability and vulnerability. It can neither save nor protect her from the historical expectations of racial and gender dynamics that bound black women to labor, specifically in the Americas and within United States contexts. The California home like the Weylin Plantation is a box, a set of white walls that transfers and transforms black female bodies. Whether on antebellum plantations in 1815 or homes built through interracial unions in 1976, both spaces are institutions with the intense propensity to destroy. Inside of these institutional structures are formidable walls that forcibly thrust Dana back and forth, eventually severing her arm in a war over self-possession.

Post-Civil Rights Literary Representations

Cohorts of Black authors and those invested in the then new discipline of African American Studies selflessly labored in creating and reconceptualizing literary projects devoted to American slavery specifically from 1975 to 1980. Post-civil rights rhetoric and historiography projects the belief that full racial equality was a reality with the fall of the Jim Crow regime and the rise in voting legislation. Following the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement, literary artists, critics and theorists began discussing the social and communal devastation necessitated by enslavement in

[73] Marisa Parham, *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009), 79.

the Americas through deliberate aesthetic shifts. This turn from physical conflict and combat to putting power to the pen or politicizing prose prompted a new age wherein "black authors who write about the slave past in the latter half of the 1970s engaged in a form of advocacy, revision, and black empowerment."[74] The 1976 inaugural edition of the National Urban League's "State of Black America" argued that no other year in recent history "has been more destructive to the progress of blacks than 1975."[75] National Urban League Director, Vernon E. Jordan Jr. crafted the report by citing statistical research suggesting that "many of the gains blacks made over the past decade were either wiped out or badly eroded in 1975, and the portents for the future are not encouraging."[76] Rejecting the possibility of a bleak and dismal black future, works published during this decade focus particularly on American Slavery to recorrect the contemporary moment to a historical past where futures are brighter if centuries old atrocities are exposed on the American and world stages. Texts during this time reposition the black subject and individual at the center to exhibit complexities in character, interiority, multivalences and variabilities of blackness and its vast diaspora. Rather than focus exclusively on the institution of slavery, these books were imaginatively written extensively about the enslaved by prioritizing the person and the impact of the institution on the individual. These individuals were much like the real life post-civil rights era subjects whose realities inspired this strategic looking back in order to push forward. Both groups at a crossroads, these new narratives of enslavement reminded American blacks that their ancestors had survived far worse to ensure that they were able to live freely in this moment. Narrativizing and focalizing the black experience in and through slavery allows for a more nuanced approach to diasporic life itself by portraying bondage

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[74] Lisa Woolfork, "Generations: Slavery and the Post-Civil Rights Literary Imagination," in *Black Cultural Production after Civil Rights*, ed. Robert K. Patterson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 68.

[75] Vernon Jordan Jr., *The State of Black America* (New York: The National Urban League, 1976), 1.

[76] Ibid., 1

through generations and how the enslaved view American history, its sociopolitical landscape, and the fundamentally flawed infrastructure of this country. Finally, stories of the oppressed were being told by their successors, real or imagined—black people were now writing about and for and about themselves. The centuries where master narratives were actually written by white plantation and people-owning individuals were gone; this reclamation of black ownership flourished beyond a movement, genre or discipline and is a continuation of a long history known as Black Letters. Post-civil rights literary artists deemed themselves responsible for retelling and reimagining the lives of their ancestors, doing so unapologetically.

Post-civil rights black authors writing about American Slavery deliberately sought to illuminate the nostalgic myths, strategic storytelling and flagrant omissions constructed by historical and literary narratives employing active erasure regarding experiences of the enslaved. These new narratives placed bifocal lenses on the nations original sin that clarified, magnified and intensified the severity of black enslavement while simultaneously correcting centuries long falsehoods and omissions misconstrued as historical facts. Such corrective retelling lent itself to texts that negotiated historical, experiential and experimental balances between representations of America for black people since the Middle Passage. It also sought to expose how the United States (US) acknowledges or disavows its slave past and imagines what freedom tastes, smells, looks, sounds and feels like for enslaved peoples, diasporic citizens and twenty-first century black Americans whether in the US, abroad or on another planet in a different world. Lisa Woolfork argues that "if a single word could encapsulate the defining message African American literary works about slavery in the post-civil rights years of 1975 to 1980, that word might well be *generations*".[77] African American authors like Lucille Clifton, Alex Haley and Octavia Butler wrote on the slave past and its direct impact on contemporary and future generations. Their literature integrated familial or ancestral lineage, racial inheritance, accompanying traumas and

[77] Woolfork, "Generations", 52.

historical legacies replete with physical, psychic, material and cultural powers bestowed to them. Researching and writing about generations requires the real, imagined and unknown which meant black authors found and are still arriving at the intersections of doing "more than archiving the past…[t]hey narratively reanimated the slave past, textually reinhabited it, and imaginatively pulled forward elements of its overlooked significance."[78]

An earlier repository for inquiry, memory and counter archival information, these works became a "site of slavery"[79] as coined by Salamishah Tillet. Such sites of slavery align themselves with those of Toni Morrison's 1988 Melcher Book Award acceptance speech wherein she directly correlates her award-winning novel, *Beloved* (1987) as a textual space in confronting the slave past. For Morrison and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*:

> There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence, or better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to (The World, 1989).[80]

Such absence and erasure births historical and speculative literatures as forms of restorative retelling for an America suffering from self-imposed memory loss and selective amnesia. Writers before Morrison like Clifton, Haley and Butler also employed projects that carve out and cultivate spaces where sites of slavery are about mourning and healing, acknowledging the past while celebrating current moments, and looking beyond to unknown futures. Similarly, this literature prioritizes the past and the present, hoisting both on pedestals. In accepting inevitable convergences, these bodies of texts

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Salamishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

[80] Toni Morrison and Robert Richardson, "A Bench by the Road: Beloved," *World 3* (January-February 1989): 4.

argue that atrocities occur and that perils of slavery's past haunt us, while also revealing glimpses of a different if not more egalitarian future arriving. This holistic approach is what Monica White Ndounou characterizes as a "focus on black experiences of slavery, to foreground black agency in liberation struggles, and to reject the white savior formula and racial reconciliation narrative."[81] Because white Americans were the ruling class during the Antebellum Era, American letters exclusively focuses on the white master's lifespan, viewpoint and archival work they produced while explicitly ignoring black interiority as if nonexistent. Post-civil rights texts pay close attention to human beings who were either conspicuously absent, perpetually silenced or depicted as aesthetic props "in the larger drama of America's Civil War dissolution and reconciliation."[82] No longer in minor supporting roles, authors began penning lives of the enslaved through fiction based on the circulation of nonfiction autobiographical narratives from writers like William Wells Brown, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey Douglass, and Harriet Ann Jacobs. These once-enslaved and self-emancipated black individuals meted spaces that were taking center page, creating spatial autonomy on a polarizing white page known as American letters, specifically between 1975 to 1980.

Journeying through Generations

Poet Lucille Clifton received a request to write a commemorative poem celebrating the colonial era, in response "I wrote a poem which goes, 'They ask me to remember, but they want me to remember their memories, and I keep on remembering mine.'"[83] Here the "they" becomes synonymous with the retrospection of the other; everyone other than her and/or us. Are "they" the archives, canon, gatekeepers, other faculty or her non-black and non-female lyrical colleagues? Their

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[81] Monica White Ndounou, "Slavery Now: 1970s Influence Post–20th-Century Films on American Slavery" in *Black Cultural Production after Civil Rights*, ed. Robert K. Patterson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 72-93.

[82] Woolfork, 52.

[83] Charles Rowell, "An Interview with Lucille Clifton," *Callaloo* 22.1 (Winter 1999): 58-71

memories are not her own and so Clifton's declarative statement, "I keep on remembering mine" is definitive and non-negotiable. Her memories are her own and the only that will remain in spite of the pressure and insistence that theirs are most worthy of recollection. Her memories are the only that matter. Clifton's ideas regarding incompatible and disparate memories are integral in her memoir *Generations* (1976). The slim compressed volume is intentional, highlighting a rich family history that has been condensed and historically abridged. This deliberate aesthetic style and stance is centered around black women as the epigraph reads, "The woman called Caroline Donald Sale/born free in Afrika in 1822/died free in America in 1910" (1). For Clifton, Africa in 1822 is the place and year of her origin story. As the ancestor, Caroline Donald Sale begins this journey by crossing the Atlantic Ocean and enduring the Middle Passage. Sale's black American female descendant, Lucille Clifton completes the familial circle as their origin story is now secure through the labor of African women and their black female progeny. Born in Dahomey, a precolonial West African kingdom located in what is now Benin is where Caroline Donald Sale was born and also is the native home to the all-female Agooji/Agojie warrior forces during the1840s as seen in *The Woman King* (2022). As readers, Clifton elevates our position as outsiders and allows us intimate details into her family's archive. We are now privy to the privilege of knowing the birthplace and origin story of an ancestor responsible for Clifton's birth:

> [t]hough Caroline is long dead, Clifton humanizes her ancestor's plight so that readers cannot help but empathizing with the African child who became an American [and] [en]slave[d] and finally evolved into a freed African-American matriarch. Much more than a one-dimensional victim of her times, Caroline is a living presence in the minds of her descendants.[84]

The echo of "I keep on remembering mine" becomes personal, as we uncover a family tree with actual birthplaces, names and years—as we read, the work becomes more personal as Clifton

[84] Hillary Holliday, "Our Lives Are Our Line and We Go On": Concentric Circles of History in Lucille Clifton's Generations," *Xavier Review* 19.2 (1999): 18-29.

commemorates the active presence of her ancestor. This ancestral matriarch lives through Clifton in the present moment, both on the page and within the memories of her beloved. The enslaved female ancestor is Clifton's foundation for writing *Generations* and a counternarrative to them asking her to remember their memories. Refusing to coopt a space for the white male master, her familial life and world begins on two distinct continents with an African female child who is born and eventually dies a free individual. By tracing the movements and circumstances of Caroline Donald Sale, Clifton shares, "What I'm writing is also history. And some of it is the history of the inside of us; and some of it is the history of the outside."[85] This is the tension she describes between the "they" and "I"; one lives within her while the other memories, or histories remains on the outside. Clifton will not let their memories colonize, police or silence her and although they are always inside, she releases these historical memories out into the world so that they too become primary sources of archival material. In this vein, *Generations* is an intervention and corrective of her family's recorded history as we learn that Caroline Sale is not simply a slave as history teaches but an abducted child from Dahomey, West Africa who survives the Middle Passage and is enslaved in New Orleans. Erasures contained within the historical record do not mention birthdates, names or death certificates of the enslaved, as most are treated as expendable property from birth to death. Caroline Donald Sale's bondage is not terminal as we find out that she dies a free woman on American soil as an African matriarch. Clifton resists the tendency to keep her knowledge of lineage and legacy on the "inside" and instead continues retelling Sale's story and keeps her ancestor alive through active memory and oral traditions so that Caroline's story becomes Clifton's legacy. And although both women have physically transitioned, neither story ends with death but begins with life.

Acknowledging that people were free and autonomous before slavery is a commitment that both Clifton and Haley recognize as fundamental to African American lineage and heritage. Octavia

[85] Rowell, "Interview," 58.

Butler fully understood the necessity of paying homage to generations and *Kindred* is possible primarily because of Alex Haley's opus, most notably *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and later *Queen: The Story of an American Family* (1993). Butler's *Kindred* was published just three years after *Roots* massive literary success and two years after the miniseries aired. In both titles, the word "family" acts as reinforcement by reclaiming one's family genealogy and acknowledging that in pre-colonial Africa, birth names were given, attesting that African bloodlines are real. Like family, the social construction of the term, "American" also appears. Haley's insistence that his roots are equally American as they are African is firm. He traces his familial line from Tennessee back to eighteen-century Gambia. Both Clifton and Haley begin tracking their origins back to West Africa despite being black Americans. Inspired by his work as Malcolm X's amanuensis, Haley began researching and writing about his own family. Arnold Rampersad references that Haley considers the autobiography is "almost by definition a project in fiction."[86] Consequently, he describes *Roots* as "faction" or a narrative balance between "fact" and "fiction". This neologism participates in and interprets effective methods of hybridizing genre in reviving broader African American literary traditions while concurrently revising what constitutes pervasive perspectives of precolonial individuality, the slave past and its afterlives.

Alex Haley's *Roots* tells the story of Gambian forefather, Kunta Kinte who was born in 1760. Like numerous canonical slave narratives written by either formally or fugitive enslaved peoples, his full name, birthplace and year of birth frame Kunta Kinte's personhood and humanity. Seventeen years later, Kinte is forced aboard the ship, *Lord Ligonier* [87] as human cargo with 140 other captive souls by white slavers bound for Annapolis, Maryland. This is also the state where *Kindred*'s heroine heir is transported to in Easton located in Talbot County and a direct reference to Douglass's

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[86] Arnold Rampersad, "The Color of His Eyes," in Joe Wood, ed. *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image* (1st ed.) (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 119.

[87] See Fig. 1 in Chapter 2, p. 49

birthplace.[88] Kunta Kinte survives hell on the Atlantic, enduring the traumatic Middle Passage and is bought by John Waller in Annapolis, Maryland where he is assigned the pseudonym of "Toby." Kinte flees the Waller's possession on the plantation a total of four times wherein all attempts result in recapture. After his final flight for physical freedom, they ask Kinte to choose between his genitalia or leg, specifically his foot. The culmination of this punishment is his foot mutilation, which terminally disfigures, maims and disables him for the duration of his life and creates the inability to physically escape ever, again. Kinte's foot amputation is similar to Dana Franklin in *Kindred*, as she too has her forearm severed during antebellum slavery on her last and final trip home in Maryland. Most striking are the correlations between Kunte Kinte and Dana Franklin being captured and transported from their respective homes either in West Africa or Los Angeles County to colonial Maryland plantations against their volition. Both experience having their bodies violated and body parts maimed and deformed by, or in self-defense of white people, their power and supremacy. Their disabilities are ultimately reliant on their insistence on living freely and persistence in attempting to escape Maryland specifically but American enslavement more broadly. Equally interesting is that Rufus Weylin falls from a tree, breaking his leg and his father's only concerns is how much money his treatment will cost.

These two plantation and people-owning men are obsessed with the acquisition of wealth, monetary deficit and financial loss. Like Rufus' father Tom Weylin, John Waller is equally concerned with how much Kinte is worth as a fugitive, enslaved property and as a free black man. Waller decides

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[88] In Frederick Douglass' seminal work, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself.* (1845), he proudly proclaims: "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me." This narrative nod to Douglass by Octavia Butler is striking as she places her fictional protagonist Dana, a post-emancipation black woman in 1976 alongside the once-enslaved preeminent black American hero during the early 19th-century. Both occupy the same geographical region, however their narrative approaches while similar do converge and are gendered. While Douglass' first words are based around his birth and declaring his own subjectivity, Dana's center on loss and disability, or the death of her left arm when returning from a plantation in the same county as Douglass' autobiography is set. As a man, Douglass establishes his personhood at the onset while Dana's physical marker of objectification is revealed through battered black womanhood.

that Kinte's successful escape would be money lost and will threaten his reputation as a slaveowner but also directly impact his familial legacy. Too valuable a possession to lose, Waller decides to non-medically amputate Kinte's foot rather than risk losing him. Waller's maiming of Kinte, an individual who produces significant wealth for the livelihood of his antebellum plantation, the impossibility of freedom for an enslaved man takes precedence over future profit. Trapping and bounding Kinte on his property becomes Waller's investment in his human property and despite Kinte's terminal disability, his deformity marks his mobility. Through Kinte's fleeing and subsequent amputation, he is seen as a person with a visible, physical impairment and this loss informs his humanity. Later, Kinte marries Bell and they have a daughter he names "Kizzy" which translates to "stay put" in Mandinka, his native tongue. Kizzy later forges a pass proclaiming freedom for her enslaved lover and is sold to Tom Lea, who is notorious for being brutally violent and is also a pedophile, raping the sixteen-year-old Kizzy repeatedly. These brutal sexual assaults are responsible for the birth of Kizzy's one and only son whereas when Rufus Weylin attempts to rape Dana for the first time, she has to rebirth herself back to life in present day. I read Tom Lea in *Roots*, both Tom Weylin and Rufus Weylin in *Kindred* as a triad or a triangular nexus of power, violence and destruction.

Haley's grandmother, Cynthia told him numerous stories about the African named "Kin-tay" and these fragments of information began to illuminate his imagination and ignite curiosities eventually leading to a decades-long genealogical research project, resulting in the epic tale, *Roots*. More than Haley's origin story, *Roots* as a text and film work in tandem as a collaborative and collective endeavor rather than an individual enterprise. The massive undertaking that is *Roots* recounts historical details in Africa subject to loss and erasure on American soil. It's narrative also confirms black individuals and families as global citizens a part of an expansive diasporic whole that is greater than themselves, larger than any singular state, nation, country or continent and vast as the Atlantic Ocean. As readers absorb Kinte's text, we too become inculcated in the metaverse of slavery's past, or the

ability to virtually or psychically connect with other worlds—in the story of *Roots*, one is able to tap into precolonial African life, The Middle Passage, antebellum enslavement, fugitivity, mutilation and a host of other experiences made possible by Alex Haley, who also lived in another time period. Posthumously, Haley cinematically constructs a "narrative of captivity, torment, survival, and finally legacy metonymically stood in for millions of unnamed (and renamed) African captives who would ultimately comprise black America. The book project [is] a megaphone, amplifying the larger history of black America."[89]

The cultural impact of *Roots* in 1976 is monumental because it counteracts previous mythologies of black antebellum life while testifying to the humanity and interiority of the very people history's objective was/is to omit. As noted in his dedication, "it wasn't the plan that *Roots'* researching and writing finally would take twelve years. Just by chance it is being published in the Bicentennial Year of the United States. So I dedicate Roots as a birthday offering to my country within which most of *Roots* happened."[90] Haley's literary feats unapologetically positions Africa as the site of origin for most black Americans who are indigenous to the United States and celebrates the presence of Africans in America. For America and its New Worls, going to Africa and enforcing centuries of free African labor markets is undoubtedly the best thing that happened to and for this country, but what of the enslaved captive perspective. For James Baldwin, Haley's

"birthday present to us [is a] study of continuities, of consequences, of how people perpetuate themselves, how each generation helps to doom, or to liberate, the coming one—the action of love, or the effect of the absence of love, in time. It suggests, with great power, how each of us, however unconsciously, can't but be the vehicle of the history which has produced us."[91]

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[89] Woolfork, 57.

[90] Ibid., 58.

[91] James Baldwin, "How One Black Man Came to Be an American: A Review of 'Roots'" *New York Times*, September 1976. https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-roots-html.

Vehicles of history are constructs and therefore manmade, suggesting that they can be used as machines of mass destruction or progressive tools of transporting valuable information and modes of reeducating ourselves while unlearning misinformation. Ultimately, these modes of transmission inform the historical annals, which will either combust and crash or be a mechanism for curiosity, truth seeking, and liberation. Baldwin's assessment and hypothetical treatise comes to fruition with Haley's saga presenting white America with inevitable questions of how it will proceed and atone for the doomed and damned America it so valiantly created. Octavia Butler also posits Dana's experiences as a cautionary tale not exclusively for black people and women, but for subscribers of Old World whiteness writ large who possess the myriad capabilities to alter America's contemporary trajectory.

Debuting on the *New York Times* bestseller list at number five, *Roots* quickly became a phenomenon and climbed to the top spot, eventually selling millions of copies following it's serialization by the *New York Post*. At all levels, educators began incorporating various elements of the text in their classrooms and into their course curriculum. Students watched the episodes of the film in class, were given lesson plans and packets. Some were even fortunate to listen to instructional recordings or interviews by Haley during his media circuit book tours. Haley's popularity from the publication already inspired a renewed investment in African American genealogy; he was then awarded both a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award in 1977 for *Roots*. His scholarship and book project are the impetus for the market known as heritage or "roots" tourism for Black Americans interested in tracing their lineage in West Africa but also visiting the continent of Africa from which their ancestors came and were violently taken away from. On Sunday evening, January 23, 1977 the television miniseries on ABC aired and like the book it too, broke records. Having attracted a viewership of over 100 million people, to date its record remains unbroken and is a testament to a national if not global fascination around American slavery. Initially, the ABC network thought that the twelve-hour series would evoke emotionally charged reactions that would threaten audience

retention outcomes. Rather than air the series once a week for eight weeks, the network chose a consecutive eight-night viewing period and "this arrangement fostered a virtually collective viewing experience across a typically diverse television audience"[92] exposing those that read the book and familiarized themselves with characters, people and generations and those that did not. More recently, the Hulu miniseries, *Kindred* debuted on December 13, 2022. Released less than two weeks before Christmas Day, it too used the eight-episode formula like its filmic predecessor and released them all the same day for binge viewing.

Yet again, *Kindred* like *Roots* was being seen on the screen and now readers saw the visual manifestation of the saga play before their eyes as they brought an African and American origin story into their homes. More importantly, this established Haley, his book and his family, namely Kunta Kinte as household names throughout America and among various demographics. Instead of families reading the book or watching the show independently, everyone was watching Roots at the same time every night for eight consecutive days, "[i]t's like millions of people reading the same book simultaneously."[93] Even more promising than a dedicated and loyal readership is the fact that Haley was further expanding his audiences because people who would not necessarily read the book were watching, analyzing and unpacking the series even after airing. This continuous dialogue spanning nonstop from its 1976 publication and 1977 ABC special miniseries put Africa, the Atlantic Ocean and America on a national center stage. These committed readers and viewers fostered a collaborative community who were all watching esteemed actors portray a dynamic American family who was also black, cognizant of recognizing and paying homage to Africa and their African ancestors. This series magnified the importance of being both African and American for black diasporic people, specifically

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[92] Woolfork, 59.

[93] Les Brown, "ABC Took a Gamble with Roots and Is Hitting Paydirt," New York Times, January 28, 1977. https://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/28/archives/long-island-opinion-abc-took-a-gamble-with-roots-and-is-hitting.html

those living in the United States who are descendants of enslaved Africans. For everyone tuning in, the historical stakes were high and no one was exempt from rage, depression, pride, anger, sadness or any other hosts of emotions and visceral reactions. Award winning journalist, Emmy Award recipient and previous National Public Radio (NPR) and Cable News Network (CNN) bureau chief, Charlayne Hunter-Gault was reporting on 1977 viewer reception by recognizing "doubters and enthusiasts, whites as well as blacks, young and old, wealthy and poor had reactions they wanted to share."[94] As referenced earlier in this chapter, *Roots* is a literary work that informs public perceptions. Visualizing the cinematic iconography of slavery further informs more vivid writerly pursuits. Butler, Clifton, Haley, and Hayden assertively take America to task on its fundamentalist Enlightenment ideals by vehemently "refut[ing] the story of America's birth as a wholesome, universally applicable tale about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This corrective series both revises and revitalizes the story natal America seeks to tell itself and ushers in a new and fuller understanding of America's other origin story."[95]

Such alternative retellings expose the realities of institutional confinement relating to captive black human cargo that were often relegated to lofty or theoretically dense texts housed in ivory towers and inaccessible to many. But *Roots* was one of the first books and film adaptations of its decade that experienced praise and recognition for debuting in-depth depictions of the transatlantic voyage aboard a slave ship bound for the Americas. David Gerber notes "Other than Robert Hayden's chilling poem, I have not read anywhere an account of the cruelty, raw and hideous greed, foulness, death and despair of the Middle Passage more moving and horrifying than that to be found in *Roots*."[96] In Robert

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[94] Charlayne Hunter-Gault, "Roots' Getting a Grip on People Everywhere," New York Times, January 28, 1977. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1977/01/28/75035444.html?pageNumber=38.

[95] Woolfork, 60.

[96] David Gerber, "Haley's Roots and Our Own: An Inquiry into the Nature of a Popular Phenomenon," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5.3 (Fall 1977): 98.

Hayden's *Middle Passage* (1941-1945), he illustrates the multilayered valences of treacherous transatlantic travel endured exclusively and collectively by black people:

I

Jesús, Estrella, Esperanza, Mercy:

Sails flashing to the wind like weapons,
sharks following the moans the fever and the dying;
horror the corposant and compass rose.

Middle Passage:
voyage through death
to life upon these shores.

III

Shuttles in the rocking loom of history,
the dark ships move, the dark ships move…
weave toward New World…
mirage and myth and actual shore.

Voyage through death,
…living death
spreads outward from the hold,
where the living and the dead, the horribly dying,
lie interlocked, lie foul with blood and excrement. (Hayden 1-177)

Although Hayden's prose pertain to actual or historical seaborne vehicles with captives facing death abroad the ship and below its surface waters with the presence of looming sharks, Dana's description of losing her forearm is indicative of transatlantic imagery. Like passengers of oceanic enslavement, Dana is also a traveling protagonist with limited choices regarding the proxemics of self, security and life or death. The sea is similar to the portal Dana involuntarily traverses through the air or supernaturally, also "represent[ing] an open arena of struggle for power and agency as captives jumped to their deaths and sailors flung slaves overboard…in many respects relying upon the presence of sharks and other dangerous sea creatures lurking beneath" (Mustakeem 5). White slave brokers tried

to keep some of their invaluable cargo alive, however if they were visibly ill, publicly resistant, feeble or disabled, dark bodies were flung into the sea like a receptacle for discarded rubbish.

On land, plantation slave owners were the capitalistic equivalent of captains, crewmen and sailors of oceanic transport—these individuals like sharks symbolize other treacherous sea creatures because the objective is to devour the very subjectivity they wish to violate and obliterate. This animalistic ideal is central in both Hayden and Mustakeem's descriptions of foreboding evils above and below. These descriptions of "creatures" gestures toward a realm of inhumanity that anticipates black flesh, whether dead or alive. It also stresses the bleak reality that safe spaces do not exist during intercontinental seaborne shipping routes because the Atlantic Ocean is a microcosm of the Americas and global stage. Therefore, the illusion of demarcations between the private and public spheres become blurred variegated spaces. This interplay between humans and animals is most stark in the final scenes of *Kindred* when Dana must kill Rufus Weylin in self-defense; it is at this moment she asserts her humanity and "He screamed. I had never heard anyone scream that way—an animal sound. He screamed again, a lower ugly gurgle" (Butler 260). Weylin's bestial behaviors are licentious as his attempt to rape Dana is thwarted when she ultimately chooses to save herself rather than falling prey to the savagery of the novel's greatest white shark responsible for her own bloodline. And in killing her kin, Dana too loses a limb like so many unnamed African ancestors and passengers before her.

Dana is the dark ship maneuvering to and through an earlier New World American landscape wherein her realities shift momentarily and there is no shore in sight. However, Dana's corporeality equally represents a port, dock and a horizon as she embodies arrivals and departures. Her body is the vessel between the living and the dead. She too, occupies this exact space because at any time throughout her voyages, Dana realizes that "anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind" (Morrison 251). The "mirage" that Hayden compacts with "myth and shore" attend to Kevin's apprehension about Dana's body as a channel of history, fantasy, truth and fiction.

As an eye witness, Kevin still doubts the extent of Dana's ability to exist between "living death". Believing he may be seeing an optical allusion, Dana shares, "He came over to me, touched me tentatively as though he wasn't sure I was real. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and held me tightly" (Butler 15). Dana's disbelief about her voyage and Kevin's trepidation or denial about his wife being real or imagined is critical. Not understanding the gravity of Dana's interloper status, Kevin has to touch and grab her for further reassurance she does in fact, exist. During this particular scene, seeing does not equate belief, as Kevin must "try to…touch solid evidence that [Dana] exist[s]." (Butler 264). It is on the Weylin Plantation like embarkation on the ship Hayden describes that are undoubtedly defined by loss, and where black bodies contemporaneously serve as sites where memories and histories fatally collide. Since Dana can only control her mobility when on the brink of death, travels through space to one of her ancestral sites is comparable to the rigid hierarchal space aboard the slave ship. In the same ways that enslaved peoples flung themselves overboard to reinforce and prove their inherent freedom, Dana must also launch her personhood and self into the present moment, which is considered the future from an earlier nineteenth century perspective on the Weylin plantation.

Dana successfully propels herself into the future by knowing the nearer she is to death during the Antebellum period, the closer she is to life and liberation. Dana's triple minority status as black, woman, and physically disabled reveals that like the abducted bondspeople at sea, that she too does not have access to pen her historical quest. While it is unknown whether Dana writes with the left or right hand, if she relies on her severed left arm, then her history cannot be written, transcribed or archived. If Dana can no longer physically write, her new life post-rupture will perpetually be defined by the confinement of domesticity and further living with negotiating internal traumas. Butler, Haley, and Hayden all contend that the Middle Passage is unequivocally the most paramount occurrence in the history of black life. This grievous genocide and global enterprise, particularly from Africa to the

Americas comes after being held in slave castles or coffles, before auction blocks or the terminal infliction of New World damnation known as plantation slavery. Scholarship about Dana being a black female subject who is landless and more intimately, homeless is only possible through the Middle Passage or Transatlantic Slavery. Black Atlantic Oceanography is the most comprehensive archive there is because it constructs the networks for African Diasporan travel on land, through time and in space. Alienation or being an alien in any and all nations is what identifies Dana's subjectivity as a landless black woman and signifies her *alien* status within the diaspora's diverse discursive cartographies.

Another huge contributor to post-civil rights era African American letters is Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) as a response and treatment to critical commentary on topics of slave narratives, abolitionism and proslavery ideologies contained specifically within the nineteenth-century literary canon. Reed's imaginary inventions about slavery are not immediately concerned with recovery from erasure or lost ancestors, however he does emphasize generations. For Reed, generations are as versatile as black people and the art they create, therefore his interpretation of generational history is found within literary heritages rather than genealogy. He restructures and revises already established literary forms and norms to create new ones. Fugitivity in Reed's work involves flight on an actual aircraft while being lauded by passengers who support the efforts of a fugitive slave writer by buying him drinks.[97] By taking liberties with early African American literature conventions, Reed unravels the parameters of genre and expands black thought through limitless imaginative depth and complexity. As Reed's intellectual contemporaries emphasize, this artistic strategy is

> engaged in a project of emancipating an artistic heritage from predictable or predetermined forms and norms imposed by those who fail to fully comprehend its folkish inventiveness, hilarious undercurrents, and seasoned extravagances. Reed in short, uses tradition to illuminate

[97] Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada* (New York: Random House, 1976), 4.

> and reinvigorate tradition, combining continuity and improvisation in a cultural dynamic that Amiri Baraka has astutely dubbed 'the changing same'.[98]

Like Reed, Butler too challenges the historical dynamics of change, asking us to look around and within ourselves in assessing and accessing untold stories. As unique and inventive as change can or should be, post-civil rights writers also reveal the absurdity and tragedy of the current and future state or status of America and the United States as a microcosm of the world. The irony that we all have histories and are all living history comes "[f]rom the benefit of hindsight and foresight…time-bending narratives bring two disparate time periods together to emphasize how the past resides in the present and the present might be an example of the future's changing same."[99]

These texts characterize "postmodern slave narrative[s] arguing that they "thematize its simultaneous occupation of two distinct time periods [since] each time period informs the other in a mutual interchange, a mutual commentary."[100] The duality of collapsing past and present in envisioning future possibilities highlights the slave past while disrupting the chronology of the physical, psychological and cyclical brutality of the present, or one's current reality. Such turbulence has a lingering effect on how time and space are interpreted since its culmination is most visible in the now. For Dana Franklin, this now is misleading, as the story and her body are set in two distinct time periods and two geographical locales. This particular narrative blurs spatial demarcations of traditional time by pushing "the boundaries of generations[,] genre and geography"[101] and this disturbance comes at an incalculable loss. As *Roots* blends generations with genre and geography, Kinte like Franklin does not escape unscathed; he in fact is not able to fully escape at all as enslavement is a terminal disease

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[98] William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 626.

[99] Woolfork, 62.

[100] A. Timothy Spaulding, Reforming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the postmodern Slave Narrative (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 27.

[101] Woolfork, 63.

he must live with and die from. Dana becomes a replacement for her female ancestor Alice, who is repeatedly raped, gives birth to several children and eventually commits suicide. Alice escapes like Kinte and Franklin in a different way—she is not captured by terroristic slavers or thrust back and forth to and from the future, but she is physically present in one scene and mortally gone in the next. Instead of traveling on foot like Kinte or boomeranging through historical time periods, Alice's escape is within herself and not outside of it; if she wants to escape slavery, she believes she must leave her own body to transcend into the realm of freedom. Death equates physical freedom for Alice as she experiences emancipation from Rufus Weylin, confining plantation spaces, constant physical abuse though sexual assault, and lifelong imprisonment. Once Alice dies, Rufus blames transference and the uncanny facial resemblance both Alice and Dana share. In his hoax to replace Alice with Dana, Rufus continues his sexually abusive ways by attempting to rape Dana. Whereas Alice takes her life, Dana vehemently resists in self-defense, fatally stabbing him and through this act is able to save herself.

Saving herself is two-fold as she avenges Alice's rapist whom engenders Dana's familial bloodline and that of her would-be rapist. This multilayered confluence of prolonged sexual abuse, preservation and production are all responsible for why Dana is able to exist in antebellum Maryland and live in 1976 California. Although Dana is allowed to maintain her sexual agency by escaping rape, she does so by no volition of her own. The term escape is tricky and misleading because Dana is described as vanishing; to escape would mean that Dana is able to flee, run away, get out or leave. Instead, as history allows, she goes missing, takes flight or is transported—none of which is done through Dana's free will. As a force, willpower is not enough because if it were, both Dana and Rufus would return to her home in post-civil rights California. More is at play here as history will not allow Rufus the possibility to hold Dana long enough to propel himself into the present; Rufus Weylin is bound and therefore must die in the past and his passing or death enables her future life. As Dana disappears, "Rufus's last act before dying is to seize her arm—which is ripped from her body by the

cosmic pull of the past. Her severed arm is part of Butler's larger commentary about the daily terror of black subjectivity in the nineteenth century."[102] Dana returns fragmented and not quite *whole*[103], with her broken body as a testament or realist meta narrative that black people, especially black women cannot give back what history has stolen and severed. The constant threat and impending doom present to maim, disfigure and deform the black female subject haunts this text, eliciting a larger conversation surrounding the brutal reality that "the wounds of the slave past are worn on Dana's body in the present as a reminder and memento [and] what it means to inherit an erased or unknown slave past"[104] and its effects on global black diasporic women's afterlives. More pointedly, black women are forced to wear and bear the brunt of slavery on their sleeves like Dana.

This idea of the "*bodily epistemology*, a theory of literary representation that relies on physical reenactment as a method for acquiring and critiquing knowledge, especially of the past"[105] is especially useful. Bodies as systems of acquired knowledge and inherent knowing is imperative in arguing that post-civil rights writer, Octavia Butler ingratiates her readerly audiences in experiencing history in a personal, sometimes visceral and bodily way.[106] Further, Butler inaugurates the slave narrative genre by a series of fantastical journeys to the past as a way of experiencing captivity through speculative fiction. In *Kindred,* Dana embodies nineteenth century encounters by enduring very painful trips that leave indelible marks on her past, present and future self. Madhu Dubey proposes time travel as a valuable vehicle which "convey[s] certain truths about slavery that are inaccessible through the

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102 Ibid., 65.

103 See Randall Kenan, "An Interview with Octavia E. Butler," *Callalloo* 14.2 (1991): 498.

104 Woolfork, 65-66.

105 Ibid., 66.

106 Alison Landsberg, "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Towards a Radical Politics of Empathy", *New German Critique* 71 (1997): 76.

discipline of history, but they are also calculated to make their readers as well as characters feel ill at ease in the present."[107] Dis/ease is what propels Dana forward and thrusts her backwards in her declaration for the right to live a life worth living by any means necessary.[108]

Flying African/Americans

Another way to classify Dana other than superficial markers such as race, occupation, visible physical disability and gender is as a human space ship, much like human bodies function as vehicles of mobility on land. Her space ship status is only possible through diasporan Atlantic histories of ancestors that have traveled before her, so Dana inherits these alien gifts passed along by her forebears. Not to be confused with the motherland or mothership (which I unpack in Chapter 3), Dana's classification as a spaceship derives exclusively based on the fact that she is vessel traveling through space and time. In a 1981 interview, Toni Morrison is clear about the limitless reality of black Atlantic flight and "it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere—people used to talk about it, it's in the spirituals and gospels."[109] Although the text does not explicitly reference Dana flying throughout her

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[107] Madhu Dubey, "Speculative Fictions of Slavery," *American Literature* 82.4 (2010): 791.

[108] Jean Paul Sartre. "Les Main Sales; Dirty Hands." ed. by Lionel Abel (New York City: Knopf, 1949), 5.3.
The particular quote "by any means necessary" is attributed to Malcolm X's speech in 1964 at the founding rally for the Organization of Afro-American Unity in New York. There, he said: "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary. Then at the 1960 Address to the Accra Positive Action Conference, revolutionary psychiatrist and philosopher, Franz Fanon spoke about various registers of violence by stating, "Violence in everyday behaviour, violence against the past that is emptied of all substance, violence against the future, for the colonial regime presents itself as necessarily eternal. We see, therefore, that the colonized people, caught in a web of a three-dimensional violence, a meeting point of multiple, diverse, repeated, cumulative violences, are soon logically confronted by the problem of ending the colonial regime by any means necessary. However, Sartre is the first person to utilize this saying in his play, "Les Main Sales" performed in Paris in 1948, translated as "Dirty Hands" by Lionel Abel in the United States in 1949. In his play, Sartre's discussion centers around social constructs of class wherein he writes, "I was not the one to invent lies: they were created in a society divided by class and each of us inherited lies when we were born. It is not by refusing to lie that we will abolish lies: it is by eradicating class by any means necessary." I use this quote because X excludes the term "women" in his speech while Fanon argues the necessity of violence in ending colonialism and its counterpart racism; and because Sartre stresses class as a dividing social construct without acknowledging that race and class are inextricably linked and therefore, the discussion of classism is futile without the establishment of both race, color and gender at the fore.

[109] Thomas LeClair, "The Language Must Not Sweat," *The New Republic* (March 1981): 4.

travels, she is consistently in and taking flight. With time, space and place collapsing on itself, Southern California and the Weylin Plantation become uniform, codependent structural cartographies laying claim to her presence and positionality. A forcefield of compounding histories all fly by, around, and through her. This entrapment of being thrust into uncontrollable flight initiates and activates Dana's mobility throughout the novel while contemporaneously being the most turbulent in her waking life. These detrimental departures have the capacity to give or take her life and they do so, unapologetically.

Unlike Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), *Kindred* does not mention Igbo Landing or the Flying African, either as folklore or historical phenomenology; however, Dana consistently takes flight wherein she is visible in one scene and vanishes in the next. As a black woman, she defies gravity and distance by appearing in the past, disappearing in the present and is singularly responsible for ensuring her own future. Dana is always somewhere or everywhere at once in that she interacts and communicates with her ancestors, lives with her husband and is somehow almost always alone when she feels like death is an immediately awaiting threat. Dana possesses the power to flee and fly and "it is important that Kevin can only time travel if he is touching Dana, suggesting that she is in fact the text that matters."[110] She is the only one that yields the power to maneuver throughout these special spatial circumstances and paradigms. Psychically and Physically, Dana is the vessel and becomes a symbol for the transatlantic Middle Passage and reverting to the Door of No Return. The theoretical approaches to Africans taking flight in the Americas, particularly around the coastal regions of Georgia and South Carolina has been regarded in academia as wholly symbolic or metaphorical, collective fantastical fiction, colorful imagination, challenged by cynical ideologies of physical impossibility, and black incapability. *Kindred* as a literary and epistemological project and Dana as a conduit for transtemporal modes of movement, being and existence refutes the claim that Africans in

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[110] Parham, *Haunting*, 80.

America were terminally bound to ships, shackles and plantation slavery. Instead, this tradition of "The flying African embodies a kind of resistance par excellence by asserting that enslaved men and women were free to challenge the constraints of slavery and the very limits of human capability."[111] Rather than remain in America, Africans and their succeeding generations knew that distance and time is a relative, subjective construct where the original homeland was a personal flight and ocean away.

Instead of Dana taking flights bound for Africa, I argue that Maryland represents the ideas of an origin story in the American South. In other words, images or ideological constructs of Africa can manifest on American soil or anywhere in the world. In this regard, *Kindred* functions also as a fantastic diasporic roots tourism narrative or what Salamishah Tillet categorizes as, "Coming Home Tours" (*Sites of Slavery* 87). If new or revised conceptions of home are rooted in Southern California for Dana, then certainly "the U.S. South is emerging as an alternative site for homecoming and ancestral memorialization for diasporan travelers."[112] Envisioning the American South as an extension of a reminiscent Africa, or an Africa in America is a fruitful methodology in unearthing the ways in which black people create African home spaces domestically. If black people feel at home and are able to visit their families or ancestors in certain areas throughout America, who is to adjudicate that Africa is not in America or an extension of it? James Moore shares, "I [saw] folks disappear right before my eyes. Just go right out of sight. They do say that people brought from Africa in slavery times could disappear and fly right back to Africa."[113] Flying "right back" implies a decisive trip that is immediate and perhaps closer than one might imagine. Moore posits Africa as a destination accessible during

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[111] Jason R. Young, "All God's Children Had Wings: The Flying African in History, Literature, and Lore." *Journal of Africana Religions* 5:1 (2017): 50.

[112] Michelle D. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2017): 31.

[113] Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), 20.

slavery and only by those originating there. Kevin also witnesses Dana vanish in front of him; whereas Moore is resolute about what he witnesses, Kevin questions what he sees and insists his wife provides answers:

> What the hell…how did you get over there? he whispered.
> Dana, you…
> What happened?
> Tell me! He demanded.
> Tell me now, said Kevin.
> Everything. What happened to you? How did you…how did you move like that? (Butler 14-15)

The "there" Kevin refers to equates Dana's movements to flight. Not here, but "there" is meant to signify the other space, or what Drexciya identifies as the third space revealing futurity through transcending curated geographies as portals of transformation.

Taking flight does not necessitate having wings, aerial foresight or hovering above to propel mobility. Both Moore and Kevin distinctly describe flight as the power to disappear out of sight and a series of actions, if not a response to displacement. Jack Wilson, a former enslaved man also recalls that certain individuals "have magic power [t]hat come to them from way back in Africa. My mother…escape[d] an[d] fl[ew] back to Africa."[114] Like Moore, Wilson also correlates the ability to fly with people from Africa that are enslaved in the Americas. Although not initially referenced on the basis of racial, ethnic or national categorization, both men are talking about a power that is exclusively accessible to black people. Liberation, then for black peoples are cultural modalities activated through existential, experiential or experimental explorations. Similarly for Dana and "in the case with flying Africans, freedom is maintained not through literacy, escape, or arrival in the free North, but rather through death"[115] unlike in canonical slave narratives. Instead, death ensures that "flying Africans

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[114] Georgia Writers' Project, *Drums and Shadows*, 7, quoted in Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 117.

metaphorically flew from a state of oppression to freedom."[116] The transition from a life of oppression to one of emancipatory death is a fate Dana is also familiar with. Dana barely escapes with her life on her final voyage and although she is able to return to present day Southern California and to Kevin, Butler admits "I couldn't really let her come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole…Antebellum slavery didn't leave people quite whole."[117] Fracture and fragmentation are visible through the ways in which Dana's arm is violently amputated, wherein she is permanently robbed of her forearm and it is held hostage by the contemporary effects of Antebellum slavery. Dana must choose to escape with her life and return to the present with a disability or not at all—Dana chooses a life of freedom but also loss that now marks her body terminally. Her arm is no longer with her, its detachment is literal and permanent because she cannot return anywhere to re-claim it, it is forever gone. The loss of Dana's arm is a death in that the loss of her limb is irreparable. Her left arm or the upper extremity of her body is not returning. Consequently, a huge part of her body that she relies on for writing dies and she must carry this disability with her into the present and future. Dana's departed or deceased arm is an indelible marker that every aspect of slavery is heinous, violent and unspeakable as it harms, maims, disables, castrates, lacerates, rapes, and kills breathing black bodies at expedient will.

After returning from her first disappearance, Dana's anxiety intensifies around whether Kevin believes what he saw or blames her for vanishing. In disbelief Dana asks her husband:

> "Look, what did you see? What do you think happened?"
> He frowned a little, shook his head. "You vanished. He seemed to have to force the words out. "You were here until my hand was just a couple of inches from you. Then, suddenly you were gone. I couldn't believe it. I just stood there.
> "Do you believe it yet?"
> He shrugged. "It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts."

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[115] Jason Young, "All God's Children", 51.

[116] Katy Ryan, "Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *African American Review* 34:3 (2000): 406.

[117] Randall Kenan, "An interview", 498.

"And I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They're no crazier than yours." (16)

In denial, Kevin refuses to verbally acknowledge or confess what he witnesses; this scene is less about supporting his wife and more about him believing a fact but not perceiving it as a truth. Kevin's inability to articulate Western notions of the impossible or utter the possibility of Dana possessing power and magic beyond the realms of reason attests "to recogniz[ing] the irreducibility of these testimonies to life in another world and to imagine a reality based on very different assumptions about personhood, agency, life, death, and the nature of power."[118] Accepting Dana's gifts or the idea that magic is her inheritance, also means recognizing and understanding both the physical and spiritual possibilities of human flight, in all forms. Actualizing the possibilities and embracing the presence of black flight, blackness in flight or "flying Africans rely on the cultural way of knowing—a worldview—that is specific to the enslaved Africans and their progeny throughout the Americas."[119] A worldview where black people everywhere can do anything and are not limited by the cultural colonial constraints of conjecture or projection. Some enslaved Africans took flight, fleeing before the Middle Passage at slave dungeons called castles, others were bravely able to secure a moment to jump off vessels bound for lifelong bondage in the New World or swim to freedom, while some lifted themselves from plantations spaces, others flew back to Africa, and many created smaller Africas in the Americas.

Since their arrival, Africans in America have always created realities outside of the rigid prescriptions assigned and transcriptions inscribed onto them. Creating and existing in this alternate realm of consciousness and being "for the men, women, and children trudging through endless rows of cane and cotton, stories of flying Africans expanded the boundaries of their restrictive universe…upward until it became one with the world beyond."[120] This limitless expanse of upward

[118] Young, 51.

[119] Young, 55.

thought and physical mobility is "existential resistance."[121] Enslaved black people and more broadly, living African diasporic peoples today envision and create unconventional conditions to sustain unforeseen futures, potential and opportunities beyond current conditions. These possibilities allow for the birth of new ontologies, the end of the New World and the hope of being and belonging to a newer one from which escaping is no longer necessary. Because *Kindred* begins where it ends or it ends at the beginning, the novel gestures towards a black orbit, world, and cosmos. A planetary system in a galaxy where Dana embraces spatiotemporal flight without life and death borders, where she no longer justifies ancestral inheritance or God-given gifts. Octavia Butler regards epistemological worlds created by enslaved ancestors and their African American successors "as a belief in the supernatural as part of the cultural heritage and legacy bequeathed to Blacks in America"[122] or what Toni Morrisons reminds us all are "superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things."[123]

Ability, Mobility and Accessible Futurities

Volumes of scholarship center around Dana's loss of an arm as metaphoric for leaving a part of herself in the past or is read as symbolic for her returning "unwhole" due to history's fractures and ruptures instituted exclusively by and through slavery. However, my reading of Dana's lost arm both supports and extends such interpretative metaphors by examining her body as a site of transatlantic departure and arrival wherein she visually bears scars and disabilities originating from slavery's gratuitous grammar of violence. Disability bespeaks the text and marks its subject as *Kindred* opens

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[120] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 32-33.

[121] Stephen Haymes, "African Slave Religious Though and the Philosophy of Education." *Philosophy of Education* (2001): 134.

[122] Young, 63.

[123] Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers, 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation*, ed Mari Evans (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 340.

with, "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" (Butler 9). Depending on its edition and cover, readers seemingly know nothing of the race, class, gender, sexuality, location, era or any other intersectional positionalities of the narrator, only that they are disabled. We also do not know how this individual is initially harmed or what precisely preceded the moments leading to their lost arm.

Within *Kindred*, there are other characters who also have disabilities. Carrie has a speech disability, is unable to talk and uses early sign language or gestures with her hands to effectively communicate. Alice's husband, Isaac had his ears cut off after running away and Aunt Mary was caught reading and had three fingers severed from her right hand. I choose to focus exclusively on Dana Franklin because she is a free born black woman who lives a life in Southern California post-emancipation and during the post-civil rights movement. Interrogating her role as a contemporary subject directly impacted by slavery and its disabling afterlife is at the crux of this section. The opening of the novel is "hauntingly reminiscent of Sojourner Truth's working arms, through which Truth claimed her black femininity to white slave abolitionists."[124] In this analysis, both Dana and Truth are narrators who experience slavery and their "working" arms are used to enhance the meanings of humanity, womanhood and oratory. Here "working can be read as suggesting arms that are able to perform manual labor and arms that work in the sense of being able to function in…socially expected [and accepted] way[s]."[125] While "working" able-bodied arms certainly gestures towards humanness, the loss of Dana's arm also evidences how vulnerable and fragile the human body actually is. Dana's body is broken on her final trip home. Truth is thought to have exposed her arms when asking her audience, Ain't I a woman?" and thereby challenging the ideology that women are weak and incapable

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[124] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 35.

[125] Sami Schalk, "Metaphor and Materiality: Disability and Neo-Slaves Narratives" in *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, ed. Sami Schalk (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 33.

of voting.[126] Truth's hand was disabled in an accident and she never mentioned her injury in speeches, oftentimes hiding her hands in photos and paintings.[127] Truth's maintenance of agency in wanting to keep her arms hidden suggests that she controls the gaze around her injury, thereby creating an invisibility around her disability. Unlike Truth, Dana immediately reveals her disability as they are the first words she echoes as a black female narrator who encounters slavery and its inevitable crushing effects on the body. In *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (2017), readers see Dana sitting up in what appears to be a hospital bed looking directly at the reader. While her right arm is in a resting position, an empty left sleeve where her forearm was is missing (see Figure 1). Dana stares directly at her viewer as she is an admitted patient in a hospital bed, appearing dejected, contained and alone.

The "traditional slave narratives aimed to show their black protagonists' humanity, they required the demonstration of bodily suffering to guarantee authenticity and to spur the reader into sympathy, yet they also needed to avoid reducing the narrating subject to his or her suffering body."[128] It is no coincidence why Truth bared both hands to satisfy the multiple expectations of her white abolitionist audiences who were appraising her humanity, suffering and the authenticity of her aural narrative speech. Truth wanted to be human first and woman second, not reduced to black and disabled. Her being a formerly enslaved black woman with a disability would eclipse both her personhood and womanhood. Whereas Truth describes herself to viewers as a woman first, Dana's identity is entrenched in readily admitting her disability. Unlike Truth, Dana cannot hide either of her arms as her left forearm is absent and its absence is audible and evident. When we look at Dana in

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[126] See Nell Irvin Painter, "Representing Truth: Sojourner Truth's Knowing and Becoming Known." *Journal of American History* 81.2 (1994): 461-492.

[127] See Meredith Minister, "Female, Black, and Able: Representation of Sojourner Truth and Theories of Embodiment." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32.1 (2012). http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/3030/3057.

[128] Sherryl Vint, " 'Only by Experience': Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives." *Science Fiction Studies* 34.2 (2007): 244.

figure one, we see indelible loss. However, she does not offer any further details or allow access to insights leading to the moment of rupture; instead, Dana adheres to canonical slave narrative writing which demonstrates suffering without being reduced by it. Instead, Dana is neutral in divulging excess information and keeps possibilities for recovery, healing, and closure open as options for a future differing from her current circumstances in a hospital bed. While "a disabled narrator could easily be interpreted by readers as evidence of the permanent damage done to black people by slavery…In the antebellum period, a[n] [en]slave[ed] narrator could not make a claim to rationality, morality, and citizenship while also claiming disability."[129] Since Dana is a post-civil rights fictional subject who experiences antebellum slavery, she does not have to adhere to the strict formulaic strategies of proving her humanity at the detriment of concealing her disability; instead this idea is flipped and Dana Franklin becomes even more human because of her disability. The pain of her amputation paired with her surviving slavery makes her supra human in that slavery is violently peculiar, abnormal and terminally disabling.

This is not to suggest that Dana is emotionally, psychologically or physically superhuman but to examine the exceptional abnormality of transatlantic slavery and its excruciatingly and exceedingly brutal outcomes on black life—for people like Dana sitting awake inside of a California hospital or those who did not make it home, alive and whose last trip has already ended. Freedom typically completes and concludes traditional slave narratives, but Butler and Dana disrupt this narrative posture towards a cure by assertively maintaining that the left forearm is forever gone and cannot return back home with her. This thematic severing of the text through the loss of Dana's arm disproves and illuminates the falsity that freedom is a linear progression or that black people are free from the centuries long amputating hold of slavery's violent effects on contemporary moments. Meaning, "we

[129] Schalk, "Metaphor and Materiality," 38.

cannot divorce images of disability from the other oppressive systems also operating within texts and within cultures and histories which these texts are created."[130] Slavery on the black body and psyche has a pulling and tearing effect that disables and disfigures—nothing remains whole within this institution and therefore the novel also separates itself from the reader with the presence of the wall. Textually, *Kindred* is historically set post-1865 and during the post-civil rights era, however images of slavery saturate the pages while the locus of the text itself offers glimpses of emancipation and not, freedom. Slavery leaves nothing unscathed and so the image of Dana conveying the loss of her left arm is one based on sets of histories involving limbs of familial trees and branches being cut off—Dana is the manifestation of the missing link because she, too has lost something that cannot be recovered. It is this terminal loss and severing of culture and history that births *Kindred* as a text and Dana as an estranged diasporic citizen of sorts whose missing limb is a result of oppressive power systems and machines that always break bodies and never re/build them.

Anti-black racism and terror, or "the relationship of blackness to systematic disabling violence in the past impacts the relationship of blackness and disability today"[131] and Dana embodies these colliding histories. Imperialism, Colonialism, the Middle Passage, Slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, Ghettoization, the continual fight for Civil Rights, the era of Mass Incarceration, and now the militarization of police sponsored genocide have always been and will be continue to be disabling for black and black-presenting or approximating individuals. To date, nothing is changing this reality for African Americans and black people in the United States of America, therefore the social construction of blackness and disability are ideologically and inextricably linked—they cannot be divorced. As Douglas Baynton writes:

[130] Schalk, 41.

[131] Schalk, 42.

> Disability arguments were prominent in justifications of slavery in the early to mid-nineteenth century and of other forms of unequal relations between white and black Americans after slavery's demise. The most common disability argument for slavery was simply that African Americans lacked sufficient intelligence to participate or compete on an equal basis in society with white Americans. A second line of disability argument was that African Americans, because of their inherent physical and mental weaknesses, were prone to become disabled under conditions of freedom and equality.[132]

It is no surprise then why Butler begins her novel with disability and why Dana's first words are disarming and intimately identify with disability. Dana takes ownership of her ability differences before she acknowledges her blackness or womanhood, thereby refusing to have readers diminish her identity or categorize her before divulging her eye witness testimony. She takes ownership of her disability far before giving additional identifying information. Given the history of how early America treated its black indigenous populations, it is crucial that Dana's blackness represents a peculiar disability seeped in slavery but that is also wholly debilitating in any era. Slavery is a constant centuries-long continuum or an extension of anti-blackness that enables racism to breed disability as a conglomerate of colorist, racialized, gendered, physical, economic, social and historical repercussions continuing to permeate and reverberate within the United States and abroad. Being black is not inconvenient, it is a terminal impairment, a structural and impenetrable antagonism. Therefore, Dana does not evade race but uses other ways to describe her blackness as disability in addition to the fact she has just lost her arm.

Harriet Jacobs assures readers in the preface that her narrative is nonfiction and begins with the admission of being born a slave, while Olaudah Equiano amplifies the difficulties of publishing one's own memoir. Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown immediately validate their humanity through their birthplace. Solomon Northrup's first words pertain to being born a freeman. In keeping with these vivid firsthand testimonial accounts, Dana enters this tradition through loss as marking her humanity and thus livelihood. Like Jacobs, her narrative is believed to be nonfiction because it is *her*

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[132] Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History." In *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, edited by Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky, 37. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

arm that is lost and attends to Equiano's sentiment about penning a memoir without an arm to write it. Dana revealing that she lost an arm during her last trip "home" can also be read as an ode to both Douglass and Brown by identifying a definitive site from which she came and went. On the page, she cannot all at once be living with a disability, black and woman for fear of premature judgement. This labelling attends the myth where blacks are susceptible to disability due to pseudoscientific racism under conditions of presumed inherent inferiority. Instead it is useful to critically conceptualize disability and

> [t]he idea of a misfit and the situation of misfitting a[s] a materialist feminist understanding of disability by extending a consideration of how the particularities of embodiment interact with the environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects. The interrelated dynamics of fitting and misfitting constitute a particular aspect of world-making involved in material-discursive becoming.[133]

Dana embodies spatiotemporal worlds throughout the novel and is forever changed. This change is always visible through Dana's flesh but now her missing arm is yet another marker of not only how the world changes her but how she changes worlds. Her body remains in various stages of transformation. She alters aspects of the past and present while keeping the outcomes of the future in-tact, particularly the birth of her ancestor. The instability of Dana's position and place identify her a misfit since she is everywhere but fits, nowhere. Misfitting then becomes a futuristic feature since one does not belong in the past or present. Envisioning a future self or the arrival of new worlds, somewhere other than Los Angeles and Maryland for Dana entails that she is a figure of a future that is yet to be written or lived. If Dana Franklin is not a tourist, immigrant, a political prisoner, refugee, in exile, or enslaved then how do we begin to characterize her displacement? Being incapable of stasis renders Dana "in perpetual transformation…in its location within a constantly shifting environment[,]

[133] Rosemarie Garland-Thompson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept." *Hypatia* 26.3 (Spring 2011): 591.

[s]o who one is and what that means is fluid as well…[t]he encounter determines both meaning and outcome."[134]

It is this very shape shifting that deems both Dana and even Kunta Kinte as misfits because they either choose to exit their current lives or are thrust into alternative worlds. Roaming to locate a new world means that "our task becomes not just to transform our sense of margin and center, but also to imagine a country, and a world without borders."[135] Although male, it is critical in remembering Kinte as being taken against his will in Africa into a literal New World and then making the conscious choice to leave the plantation in reclaiming his freedom. Through emancipating himself, Kinte is violently disabled by asserting his free will and maintaining his humanity. Both Dana and Kinte's encounters as black transformative figures and subjects makes them both prime for and prone to disability through no faults of their own. Their outcomes are the same in that one loses an arm and the other a foot; they are both forever changed through moments of fleeing, flight and fighting. And while we certainly know that Dana returns home alive on her last trip, we also surmise that like Kinte, these experiences never leave their enslaved victims quite whole. Further, the prologue inaugurates disability by disrupting typical slave narratives beginning at birth. Dana's ability differences are not congenital and are instead acquired on "June 9…the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday".[136]

Like classical autobiographies of enslavement particularly Jacobs', Dana too remembers her birthdate and age. While Jacobs does not recall being or feeling enslaved until age six, Dana also vividly recalls her first traumatic encounter with slavery, or being viewed as a slave. Although Dana does not

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[134] Douglas Baynton, "Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History," 598.

[135] Yogita Goyal, "Standing at the Border." *American Literary History* 34.1 (Spring 2022): 196.

[136] Butler, 12.

realize she is in antebellum Maryland on her first trip, her mere presence within this era makes her susceptible to being harmed, maimed and eventually disfigured. That Dana is transported back in time to slavery on her birthday is also disturbingly intentional thereby further blurring the lines of what it means and looks like to have a disability at birth. She is thought to be an enslaved person on her birthday. Temporally, the narrator admits their disability in the epilogue while the Weylin family believes Dana is enslaved and we are simultaneously presented with "the 'before disability' self and the 'after disability' self"[137] which challenges the novel's structure. Our introduction to fragments of who Dana is begins with disability, progresses to Dana as nondisabled and then to her being disabled again as we accompany her throughout the before and after, pre and post disabling moments of her travels. Rather, Dana's black female status at birth is the primary or original marker of her disability in the novel despite being revealed later as the temporality of disability refuses simplistic ableist conventions before, during or after a single moment of loss or destruction.[138]

Conclusion: Transatlantic Trauma Tourism

The beginning is inevitably the end of *Kindred* as its protagonist mourns the loss of her unrecovered arm, unrecorded familial histories and unreconciled life in 1970's Southern California. Chapter One's, "The River" opens the day before Dana and Kevin move from their Southern California apartment to Altadena. While shelving their collection of fiction and nonfiction books, Dana begins feeling dizzy and suffers from debilitating nausea. Not once while the couple is packing does either come across literature about the Middle Passage—this historical moment in distinctly missing in her search of how to survive slavery. Meanwhile the room blurs and darkens around her before Dana disappears and upon returning is "wet and muddy"[139] as if at sea, all while her body

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[137] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 42-43.

[138] See Schalk, 50.

uncontrollably rocks back and forth, as if on a vessel. Darkness in small cramped quarters is reminiscent of being in the hold or bowel of a slave ship where no light is transmitted. Because this is the first time in the novel Dana is transported, that she re-appears on the edge of an unknown river clearly foreshadows that she is already in the beginning stages for the f(l)ight of her life and first Middle Passage voyage. Dana arrives at a transatlantic tributary and even without a ship "coastscapes similarly provided settings for cultural interactions between Africans and Westerners…riversides were transnational contact zones."[140] This initial interaction between Dana, a black woman and Rufus, a white child can be read as the most central contact zone between the African (read as an enslaved black woman) and Westerner (as a white presenting coming-of-age male). An immediate cultural contact zone is breached exclusively based on racial lines and invisible watery borders. Cultural zones such as these undeniably and automatically reproduce Middle Passage imagery through the novel's first scene following its prologue.

Dana appears on a riverscape near the Weylin Plantation not far from Talbot County, Maryland while witnessing a drowning. Although the river is unnamed in the text, through geographical proxemics, it is either Wye River or Choptank River; it might also be Chesapeake Bay but the first chapter is explicitly titled "The River" and not "The Bay". Eerily similar to the Weylin's lineage to which Dana belongs, Wye River is near the actual Wye Plantation, a historic family residence whose inhabitants owned hundreds of enslaved black people. The Lloyd Family owned this particular homesite and among these individuals was a young boy of six or seven years old named Frederick Douglass.[141] The Choptank River, although a freshwater conduit is the one Harriet Tubman notably

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[139] Butler, *Kindred*, 14.

[140] Kevin Dawson, *Undercurrents of Power: Aquatic Culture in the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 31.
[141] *Frederick Douglass and Wye House: Archaeology and African American Culture in Maryland.* [Exhibition]. R. Lee Hornbake Library Special Collections Gallery, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland.

[80] Sharpe, 19.

relied on during her own Middle Passage-like voyages North on foot to liberation. Unbeknownst to Dana, the child drowning is a direct ancestor. Within the black Atlantic imaginary, images of drowning during slavery are associated with the Zong or being intentionally suffocated in water for insurance monies, black bodies being thrown overboard whether dead or alive and the mass suicide known as Igbo Landing. While Rufus Weylin is phenotypically a white male, his successor is a black woman being transported.

Initially when reading, the term "Middle Passage" is conspicuously absent from the novel but the watery imagery and continual flights that Dana makes and takes are vivid and visceral. This passage represents "those Africans who were in the holds who left something of their prior selves in those rooms…who passed through the doors of no return…those Africans [whom were] thrown, jumped, dumped overboard in Middle Passage."[142] To date, no scholarship explores the continuities between the novel's historical and temporal experimentation of The Middle Passage or The Door of No Return, both as vehicles in broadening the work of new slavery narratives, Middle Passage Studies, Memory Studies, Border-Crossing Studies and African Diasporic Studies. I'm thinking through and arguing that it is the "Door of No Return" that crushes Dana Franklin, permanently disabling her and sending her back home in California for the final time. She recounts, "it is as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. Something cold and nonliving. Something…paint, plaster, wood. I looked at the spot where flesh joined with plaster."[143] Human bodies and their parts, including Dana's forearm are buried within this vastly deep American soil and are not exclusively confined to bygone plantation spaces. Underwater cemeteries and crime scenes spanning millions of miles marks The Atlantic Ocean as the largest unmarked global graveyard.

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[143] Butler, *Kindred*, 261.

Dana's amputation and subsequent physical disability comes in both the prologue and epilogue—there are no surprises in that readers realize she has already lost an arm. Readers, however are not privy to how and why this happens? The oft cited, "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm. [T]ouched my empty left sleeve"[144] are arguably the most important, or recited lines at the start and end of the novel. By the text's close, these same words become echoes of caution, serving as a strict warning that history's past seeks all, specifically those who believe they are estranged from it. It is through this loss and lost sense of self as an African American post-civil rights female subject, that Dana must undergo confinement through time, being kidnapped by history's hold on the present, and forced to endure mostly solitary Middle Passage travel in her contemporary waking reality. Always leaving home but never through her front door, Dana must reconcile her initial detachment with her family's transatlantic history amidst being thrust into the matrix of time travel and displacement. Trapped in both geographical locations at once, Dana becomes a literal prisoner in her own home—one is an ancestral site of her enslaved kin while the other is a home built by Dana and her white husband. Unable to escape blackness and whiteness as social constructs with very real and brutal consequences, her spatial realities and ideologies are forged between southern antebellum slavery and living through slavery's afterlife in southern California. However, the end of novel is not as spatiotemporally structured or obvious as we expect. In this final fight for flight, Dana must defend herself against rape and death or never return to her present life. While the choice is not entirely hers, alone she is ultimately confronted with the decision to either kill or be sexually assaulted and then possibly murdered by her perpetrating forefather. This final scene before being in the hospital is not as black and white as her life appears, or is it? There is a looming uncertainty about where Dana goes and where her arm is during the last scene before the epilogue. I argue that this particular gory scene

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[144] Ibid., *Kindred*, 9, 264.

of blood, violence and immeasurable loss experienced by Dana mirrors postcolonial eras also endured by black Africans off the coast of Senegal at Gorée Island where they never return.

Dana is a conduit, a genealogical thread and breathing testament in a long history of teleporting agents. Her bondage centers within the vestiges of her neglected familial legacy, post-emancipation delusion and present-day illusion. This text and Dana are "here to connect the social forces on a specific, particular family's being in the wake to those of all Black people; to mourn and to illustrate the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake."[145] As theory and praxis, the wake requires mourning and memorialization—without them, possibilities of physical movement and psychic mobility as embodying futures are futile. How is Dana to move past that "which is unfolding still…how do we memorialize an event that is still ongoing? How does one memorialize the everyday [or accept] ongoing atrocity?"[146]

In 1978, two years after the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* and one year before *Kindred*'s publication, Gorée Island was named a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) site. Since "so many of us made our way to the New World through a fort and a hole in the ground…one hears the moaning of captives. What made those people survive, to replicate themselves—to live?"[147] Through this hole, fort, door or white wall, Dana's narrative is most recognizable and therefore becomes legible. This legibility of shame, pain and sickness propel Dana to plantation slavery's past particularly in Maryland and even farther back to transatlantic slavery beginning specifically in West Africa. By centering Senegal or Africa, transatlantic slavery is foregrounded as integral to Butler's work. Like Transatlantic slavery, monuments as an extension of

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[145] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 8.

[146] Sharpe, *In the Wake,* 20.

[147] Nikki Giovanni. Preface to *Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*, by Ken Bugul. (University of Virginia Press, 2008).

archival evidence or lack thereof is an equally useful lens for understanding the inspiration for *Kindred*'s first and final frameworks of rupture and return, wherein new cultural knowledges are at work, creating.

The intention here is not in creating a discursive argument that "enables post-civil rights African Americans to replace (and thus temporarily reconcile) their sense of exclusion from America's canonized national self-narrative with recourse to an alternative, albeit romantically imagined, Diasporic site of origin."[148] While it might be one representative of slavery's permeating collective consciousness, the horror of departing from Maryland and arriving in California is not a replacement, remedy nor a reconciliation for her bloody amputation. In keeping with the text's non-linear movement, Dana must keep returning to Maryland to reach an even more distant historical past. Instead, *Kindred* reimagines the Weylin Plantation as an extension of a white structural slave castle or coffle and the slave ship. The wall that severs Dana's arm is an equally destructive tool and is not an inanimate object, it is very much alive and is a fatalistic portal she must cross to resume life outside of slavery. What seems to be the recurrence of random series or repetitions thrusts her violently into one of the deepest pasts accessible to twenty-first century black African American subjects. According to the UNESCO site, it is "[r]uled in succession by the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French, its architecture is characterized by the contrast between the grim slave-quarters and the elegant houses of the slave traders. Today it continues to serve as a reminder of human exploitation and as a sanctuary for reconciliation."[149] Rather than being a safe space of recollection like the organization insists, for

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[148] Salamishah Tillet, "In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Gorée Island." *Research in African Literatures* 40.4 (Winter 2009): 122.

[149] United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage Convention. "Island of Gorée." https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/26/#:~:text=The%20island%20of%20Gor%C3%A9e%20lies,centre%20on%20the%20African%20coast. 14 July 2023.

Dana it becomes the ultimate resting place and the origin story for her arm; a space of fear, finality and fatality.

Dana's origin story is impossible without her losing her arm where millions of Africans lost their lives, culture, language and identities. Because Dana's once functioning arm joins and becomes a part of the wall that nearly kills her, both her arm and Gorée Island are two living and sacrificial monuments that become one. That is, Dana's flesh is reunited at the very site of rupture with those of her ancestors. Because they survived, she is able to live and while millions lost their whole selves, she miraculously escapes but loses a forearm in the process. Slavery in any capacity cannot be quantified and the Middle Passages Dana takes are a testament to this immeasurable loss since neither limb nor lineage will ever fully be recovered for homeless Africans in America. She almost does not survive the historical preamble for the Middle Passage which is the vehicle that delivers her to Maryland and pushes her forward with the experiential knowledge to continue living in the present since nothing in 1976 Southern California compares to what she has already survived. Dana's survival in the last scene allows her to live in the novel's current moment through knowing that nothing is worse than what lies on the opposite side of the same wall that crushes her arm and nearly demolishes her entire being.

When returning to Baltimore, Maryland post-antebellum amputation, Kevin declares to his wife: "It's over. There's nothing you can do to change any of it now…and you've found no records."[150] Although Dana knows there might not be any historical records of the black side of her family, her bodily flesh bears markers of the past. Much of the novel's last page are of Kevin speaking to Dana because she is unable to verbalize how this moment represents the beginning and not the end of the

[150] Butler, *Kindred*, 264.

story—a feeling unable to be articulated because of a "yet unresolved unfolding"[151] or "telling the story that cannot be told."[152] Saidiya Hartman communicates this revelation best when arguing:

> If slavery persists as an issue in the life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.
> (Hartman 2007, 6)

The insistence there are no records and there is nothing left to be done on the final page cruelly echo these same sentiments Kevin expresses in the first chapter when advising that Dana allow herself to pull away from the reality of her trauma. Indeed, Kevin's suggestions are a dismissive misfire attempt to denounce telling an unresolved story that is still, unfolding. There is a willful arrogance, not to be confused with ignorance entrenched around the erasures of black enslavement and the contributions of the enslaved and their ancestors that is familiar and universal. Butler reminds herself and all of us as readers and mis/informed individuals of history that black people in America have, are and will continue being breathing archives. African American live today is the question, enigma and answer to an eerily uncertain future. Octavia Butler cautions us all that moving beyond slavery or its remnants is impossible without bloody precursors of destruction in imagining and thriving in other, more different worlds. One world must end for another to emerge and like Dana, we eagerly look towards the next, the other afterlife, where we all can stay alive to live.

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151 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 14.

152 Patricia J. Saunders, "Defending the Dead, Confronting the Archive: A Conversation with M. NourbeSe Philip." *Small Axe*, 12.2 (2008): 65.

Appendix of Images

Annapolis, Sept. 29, 1767.

JUST IMPORTED,

In the Ship LORD LIGONIER, *Capt.* DAVIES, *from the River* GAMBIA, *in* AFRICA, *and to be ſold by the Subſcribers, in* ANNAPOLIS, *for Caſh, or good Bills of Exchange, on Wedneſday the 7th of* October *next,*

A CARGO of CHOICE HEALTHY SLAVES. The ſaid Ship will take TOBACCO to LONDON, on Liberty, at 6*l.* Sterling per Ton.

JOHN RIDOUT,
DANIEL OF ST. THO^s. JENIFER.

N. B. Any Perſon that will contract for a Quantity of Lumber, may meet with Encouragement, by applying to D. T. JENIFER.

Figure 1. Maryland Gazette. *Lord Ligonier Advertisement.* 1 October 1767. Stairwell Room: Revolutionary Annapolis Wall. Ink on paper. MSA SC 2731. The Maryland State House, 100 State Cir., Annapolis, MD. 20401. 13 May 2023.

Figure 2. Prologue. *Kindred*: A Graphic Novel Adaptation by Damian Duffy and John Jennings, 2017. New York, New York City.

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Lose Your Daughter: Middle Passage Imaginaries in *Beloved*

In a 1989 *Time* magazine interview, Toni Morrison discusses the collective national amnesia and global suppression engulfing Transatlantic Slavery for everyone, including African Americans in the United States. Admitting the topic is "something that the characters [in the novel] don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember,"[153] Morrison posits the recollection of slavery as a concerted act of willful neglect precipitated by unimaginable shame and unending trauma. However, the more we consume of *Beloved*'s fiction, the clearer the truth of the past becomes and it is this unfolding truth that we must remember. Actively remembering slavery whether symbolic or material is central to the novel, genre and the recollection of memories forever haunting present-day life.

Slavery's ongoing contemporary traumas and systemic replications posit African American subjects as the nexus between worlds that are old, new and have yet to be lived. Black women hold the "rememory" of slavery within them but are also portals to their own future selves, consistently offering up alternative possibilities of envisioning what post slavery afterlives look like for black matriarchs, pregnant new mothers and maturing young women. What is constant or always emerging from the past, contemporary and future worldmaking spheres is the maintaining and sustaining of the African diaspora. This language of trauma or lexicon of enslavement is quintessentially a diasporic dialect and this chapter concerns itself with how black female characters in *Beloved* throughout generations and eras find new ways of transmitting and translating this speech to stay alive, create life, and conceiving the magnitude of embodying what it means for "You [to be] your best thing."[154] This chapter's central postulation examines and demonstrates that whether on local or global trajectories,

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[153] Bonnie Angelo, Interview with Toni Morrison, "The Pain of Being Black." *Time Magazine* May 22, 1989.

[154] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International/Random House, 1987), 322.

the sexual exploitation of black women—both enslaved and those now nominally free does not end; there is no expiration date or time limit for the ways feminized black bodies are upcycled on global axis of circulation, consumption and capitalism.

My usage of the Black Atlantic and the African diaspora are interchangeable since both terms comprehensively address and acknowledge the complex geographical and historical matrix of mass dispersals, implications of connections or convergences, divergences, engagements or entanglements and conflicts specific to peoples of African descent who sprout about globally. Diaspora is impossible without the African woman. The first site of the diaspora is the womb and similarly, Africa is the cradle of humankind. Black women then are the diaspora, whether mothers, daughters, sisters, friends or nonbiological kin—they share supranatural linkages and fantastic convergences always present in and outside of the literature, constantly morphing, transporting, transmuting and thrusting themselves and everything they touch into alternative realities and imaginative worlds. Unknown worlds such as these are precisely where and when Beloved emerges, as she is reborn into the afterlife of transatlantic slavery. Beloved's exit from the watery womb or tomb is replicated by the presence of Sethe, whose ability and willingness to mother prompts Beloved's prioritization to seek spatial occupancy and emotional connectedness. Here, home becomes synonymous with the locality and proximity of the black woman—as a physical landmark representing the feminine divine as a direct source to homeland or belonging, specifically through motherhood.

Many readers and critics assume and share ideas that Beloved "is unquestionably the dead daughter's spirit in human form"[155] however I think the dead baby haunting 124 is a separate entity or spirit altogether and that Beloved, is a fully alive young woman who is also able to procure a sexual partner of her choosing, procreate and reproduce future life. Consequently, Beloved as a pregnant

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155 Thomas R. Edwards, "Ghost Story." *New York Review of Books* 5 (November 1987): 18-19.

woman becomes an extension of Sethe through the metaphorical metamorphosis or representation of the Mothership, which is an immediate and accessible vessel to and from the Middle Passage. I argue that Sethe symbolically and materially represents the Motherland or an origin story for Beloved, not a homeland on the continent of Africa. I maintain that while Beloved's mannerisms resemble that of a baby, she is in fact a reincarnation of Sethe's mother—a passenger and survivor of the Middle Passage. This circular economy of black female life begins with Ma'am, is reproduced through Sethe and will continue when Beloved eventually gives birth to her non-enslaved child. Additionally, I argue that Beloved is a stranger and a wandering single woman looking for a place that feels like home resembling the watery spaces from which she initially comes in hopes of continuing this black female centric legacy. As a fictional black diasporic subject in pursuit of other worlds, Beloved is visiting her metaphorical kinfolk on land before returning to her subterranean, aqueous or tributary residence. Otherwise stated, Beloved's search for belonging both begins and ends with Sethe in the American Midwest and principally Cincinnati, Ohio becomes an extension of a more local and accessible diasporic home. Morrison's "60 million and more" equally qualify and undeniably quantify everyone who perished and survived the triangular terror of Middle Passages and Plantation Slavery globally across the Atlantic Ocean and are responsible for founding the expansive black African diaspora. Like the diaspora, we see human life cycles replicating themselves exclusively through women and water.

Vividly described as "A fully dressed woman walk[ing] out of the water,"[156] Beloved's possible representations and characterizations are limitless. Identifying who Beloved is, might be, may become or is becoming entails unpacking the very name or symbol itself. The term "be" is to exist, occur or take place while "loved" equates feelings of deep affection for someone. Additionally, the suffix -ed is used to form the past tense. Put differently, Beloved exists to exhibit love for those ancestors in the

[156] Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 60.

past who live through their successors now in the present. As mentioned earlier, the act of remembering is evident in the acknowledgement of the departed. Remembering keeps the very thing that is buried, alive. This text is about the presence of a particularly young departed life and formidable drive to live and love that lies deep within our imaginations and fears. Therefore, *Beloved* is not only about the loss of a baby girl, an unexpected and disturbing new member of the family, or the gratuitous gluttony accompanying institutional Antebellum terror that takes and denies life without impunity—it prioritizes working or moving through slavery's excruciatingly painful and suffocating afterlife as a productive survival tactic rather than pushing past, ignoring, denying or neglecting these harsh realities. Beloved will always exist because she/it/they are an ideology and ontology so entrenched in this nation's global reach that it is impossible to forget because it precipitously interrupts contemporary life, haunting everyone everywhere always. These systems, symbols and assertions are most illuminating when considering Beloved as an epistemology or theory of knowledge itself.

Beloved is a human being and not a ghost in the text. It is also important to know that both entities or forms exist in and outside of the slate grey home in which Sethe, Denver and Paul D reside. The identity of Beloved since its publication is intriguing to readers while equally perplexing them. One theory is that she is an active but nonliving spirit "full of a baby's venom"[157] whereas the other is of a living, breathing and fully dressed walking woman. That a baby who died eighteen years prior appears in the form of "A young woman, about nineteen or twenty" is logical and simple regarding chronological age and the novel's progression of time. As Morrison admits, "She is a spirit on one hand…what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. She is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from a true, factual slave ship. She speaks a

[157] Morrison, *Beloved*, 283.

traumatized language, of her own experience."[158] Margaret Atwood contends, "Like the novel itself, the character of Beloved resists a singular interpretation."[159] Elizabeth Abel believes that "*Beloved* deliberately represents captive persons as subjects rather than objects of repression, and does so primarily in a discourse on the hunger, passion, and violence generated in the…mother-daughter bond produced by the conditions of slavery."[160] Walter Clemons argues, "Beloved is also a ghost from the slave ships of Sethe's ancestry."[161] Deborah Horvitz amplifies Clemons' assertion by arguing that Beloved "is not only Sethe's two-year-old daughter, whom she murdered eighteen years ago; she is also Sethe's African mother."[162] By contradicting previous critics, Elizabeth House concludes that Beloved "is not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery."[163] All interpretative frameworks are useful in uncovering the multilayered thickness of one singular, titular character. All assertions align themselves with Middle Passage Studies or what Sowande' M. Mustakeem defines as

> the momentum of scholarship moving the Middle Passage from the periphery to consider how slavery function[s] outside the locus of plantations. Looking beyond crowded cities, distant farms, murky swamps…Going further, it introduces the concept of "slavery at sea" into the lexicon of studies of slaving voyages, and makes meaning of the process. Doing so, examines the social space of ships and the ocean as epicenters in the making and unmaking of transported slaves. These variegated seaborne pathways operated as the primary isolated channel through which bondspeople arrived into the Americas.[164]

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[158] Marsha Jean Darling, "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," *Women's Review of Books* 5 (1988): 5-6.

[159] Margaret Atwood, "Haunted by Their Nightmares." *New York Times Book Review* 13 (September 1987): 1-3.

[160] Elizabeth Abel, "Race, Class, and Psychoanalysis? Opening Questions." *Conflicts in Feminism*. Ed. Marianne Hirsh. (New York: Routledge, 1990): 199.

[161] Walter Clemons, "A Gravestone of Memories." *Newsweek* 28 (September 1987): 74-75.

[162] Deborah Horvitz, "Nameless Ghosts: Possession and Dispossession in Beloved." *Studies in American Fiction* 17.2 (1989): 158.

[163] Elizabeth B. House, "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who is Not Beloved." *Studies in American Fiction* 18.1 (1990): 17.

[164] Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 4-5.

This transdisciplinary valence is precisely what Morrison encourages when unpacking her novels and such investigations welcome diverse worlds of possibilities and untapped openings for "the concurrent presence of multiple as well as ambiguous meanings."[165]

Alternative identities and obscure occurrences in the novel also appear through sequences of numbering and biblical imagery. At the close of the novel when the neighborhood women visit Sethe to pray over her body, Beloved is identified as "tak[ing] the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun."[166] Unclothed and outside in the middle of the day, Beloved resembles an Eve-like figure in the Garden of Eden. Eve is the first woman and matriarch much like Sethe is the "original self" and through her bodily being, the origin story begins. Adam and Eve have seven children, most notable are Cain and Abel. Their third child's name is Seth, who in the Book of Genesis is the patriarchal ancestor. Seth with an "e" becomes Sethe, a daughter and woman who is also an enslaved fugitive, wife, and mother. Like Seth is the third son of the first woman, Sethe's deceased baby daughter is also the third child. That the family resides at 12_4 is not coincidental but an intentional omission. The number "3" is conspicuously absent in Sethe's physical address. Howard is the eldest son, then Buglar, the deceased baby girl is the third child and Denver is the youngest. The dead child's number and place in the home is missing almost like an external erasure or void. Internally, however chaos brews and both sons flee, abandoning their single mother and Denver once the ghostly presence of their baby sister begins appearing throughout the home. Whether the young woman they call Beloved that appears at their doorstep is the former baby reincarnated is less important than the entitled positions she presumes and spaces she assumes in Sethe's homelife.

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[165] Karla F.G. Holloway, "Revision and (Re)membrance: A Theory of Literary Structures in Literature by African American Women Writers." *Black American Literature Forum* 24.4 (1990): 618, 629.

[166] Morrison, *Beloved*, 308.

While the home is central in housing Beloved and the dead baby girl, both characters are also channels, carriers and containers for reaching past lives and future realities. Like the Genesis creation story in the Bible, Seth is the ancestor of Noah who built a large boat for his family, the entire earthly animal kingdom and survived the catastrophic Flood. If the Great Flood mirrors the Middle Passage, then Beloved as a restorative project is about an archive of the sea from the beginning, during and after the cataclysmic stages of transatlantic slavery. To clarify, the Middle Passage is comparable to the Great Flood insofar as seaborne bondage eventually washes away, drowns out and submerges the materially present cultural traditions, familial cohesion, language and tribal affiliation. Since Africa is the beginning in the creation of the diaspora, then for all black displaced peoples, our genesis begins with slavery at sea. This post-rupture and subsequent global dispersal from being forced from the originary continent to unknown Atlantic territories is a direct consequence of modern Middle Passage markets. One can imagine Africans on seaborne vessels thinking the end of the world had either already arrived or was fast approaching as they were taken across what probably appeared to be an endless sea world with no visible shores to dock in sight. Here, the Atlantic seascape acts as a type of cultural ark of survival while militarized watercrafts of mass destruction emulate the end of one world while being abducted from home, transported and transformed into a racialized object is an induction into another. To this end, black people are akin to the first humans on earth and act as essential conduits in the creation of an entirely New World, however neither had or held control over the forsaken borders or portals crossed throughout their respective voyages.

Expanding Morrison's Neo-Freudian Presence

Much of the critical reception history spanning more than three decades revolves around the orbit of Toni Morrison's 1987 fourth novel, *Beloved* wherein she earned the American Book Award, Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and the Nobel Prize in Literature prioritizes Sigmund Freud's theoretical frameworks of psychoanalysis. My contributive intervention here while seemingly based on

Eurocentric western thought or white male Freudian theories of nonblack progeny is invested in how Diaspora (as peoples, places, spaces and futures) births infinite realities for black people, especially black African American women who Morrison maintains are the "original self…the one that is always there."[167] So, how do readers of literature, histories of slavery and fiction arrive at psychoanalysis as a method of freedom for the very populations it excludes and denies humanity to? According to the American Psychological Association (APA), psychoanalysis primarily concerns itself with focusing on influences of impulsive repression, internal conflicts and childhood traumas that effect the mental health, life outcomes or lifestyles and growth adjustment of the individual.

By Freudian standards, childhood development is foundational in shaping the individual's entire life span and thereby predicts how people function in the world and their interactions with others. Attention to early childhood and the circumstances responsible for shaping adulthood fit well within the *Beloved* novel , which explores how African American women, young black girls, and black babies in the novel experience varying registers of unmediated and lingering traumatic events. I argue that for enslaved women and their bond children, that returning to the initial site of rupture is the most productive portal or threshold that Sethe, Beloved and Denver must cross—only then will Sethe and Beloved as mothers be able to provide further support for their children and maintain their own well-being in the process. Once this occurs, Beloved and Sethe can experience loving each other from afar, excluding any toxic codependent attachments. Beloved's obsession with her so-called mother and preoccupation with the oral is deeper than a psychosexual stage; rather Beloved attempts to unearth the original location of the mother; that is, both Beloved and Sethe are in search of finding their mothers because they are lost daughters of a smaller diaspora in Cincinnati. My further assertion is that while Freud's theories are useful, they cannot adequately or fully encapsulate the life choices,

[167] Nellie McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (1983): 422.

chances and outcomes of Sethe, a black American enslaved fugitive women created through the realm of fiction directly from the historical record of Margaret or "Peggy" Garner. It is slavery that pollutes, disrupts, and corrupts black women's bodies, minds and spirits. A direct consequence of a physically and psychologically unprotected woman, wife and mother renders an "abnormal" human response resembling desperation, depression or "madness" as there is nothing normal about enslavement. Since subjection is a fundamental deviation from what is typical or healthy, then every-thing and being it encounters will unequivocally be maladaptive.

Within classical psychoanalytical theory, much of which has been debunked, "the child's first observation, in reality or fantasy, of parental intercourse or seduction […] is interpreted by the child as an act of violence."[168] Through centering Sethe's "primal" relationship with her children, conversations encapsulating most of the prominent characters are based in pre-Oedipal repression and fear. Such psychological impairments seek to uncover connections between mothers and daughters prior to stages of growth that engage with and rely heavily on latent dependency and maturation or independence. This primary relationship between Sethe and Beloved is indicative of pre-Oedipal behavior that Freud recognizes particularly in young girls wherein Beloved, the hyper-theorized returning daughter is in a dependent position or stuck in a perpetual latency phase of infancy despite her chronological age of nineteen or twenty years old. Other than the physical markers of age and young adulthood, Beloved functions, at least in parts of the novel as a baby and her sole focus is returning to and solidifying attachment exclusively with Sethe, whom many critics and readers alike, adamantly believe is her mother. By neglecting her pseudo sister Denver and subsequently becoming impregnated by her father-like figure Paul D, both whom also rely on Sethe's attention and affection, Beloved fits "into the model of the pre-Oedipal daughter…develop[ing] Freud's notion of the oral

[168] The American Psychological Association Dictionary of Psychology. "Primal Scene (see also Phallic Sadism and Primal Fantasy." https://dictionary.apa.org/primal-scene. 13 October 2023.

character."[169] This stage is characterized by "forever wanting to suck, to consume, to take in, endlessly hungry and needy"[170] relying on constant affirmation, maintaining consistent expectations but primarily on sustenance.

In the text, nourishment comes exclusively from Sethe, for "it was Beloved who made demands…Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire. She wanted Sethe's company for hours."[171] It is this unnamed gluttonous appetite, not explicitly for food but solely from her delegated mother-figure (motherland) that causes Beloved to crave more maternal love and belonging. As the narrative unfolds, it reveals that wellness in the form of tangible food and drink are insufficient for Beloved in uncovering who she is, discovering what she needs, where she wants to be (geographically, physically or emotionally), who she wants to be with sexually, and who she desires to become. In many ways, Beloved begins to consume, or swallow the spatial dynamics of the home. She overtakes it and Sethe's home is no longer her own. Both Sethe and Beloved teach themselves, each other and readers alike, that home is not always a fixed architectural structure. There is also an internal or psychic feeling that one creates firstly for themselves; only then are individuals able to open their homes, which is an extension of the self, that becomes accessible to others.

For mothers, having a stable living environment is vital to the health and developmental life span of the baby and growing child. Infants are thought to be helpless and wholly dependent on their parents, legal guardians or caregivers as life sources from which all their needs depend. As a baby in a young woman's body, Beloved carves out a place in the world of the novel for herself and this self-

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[169] Jonathan Halper, "Misery and Company: Sigmund Freud's Presence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Articulāte* 17.6 (2012): 42.

[170] Craig Chalquist, "A Glossary of Freudian Terms." *Terrapsych.com*. Web. 2 October 2023.

[171] Morrison, *Beloved*, 283.

making both allows and disavows peoples, energies and daily realities. Despite her being a new edition to the household, she functions as a type of familiar stranger or a persistent haunting presence while she dictates life and living at the gray and white house on 124 Bluestone Road. As Beloved's desires are constantly satiated, the more her wanton expectations become unsustainable and unmet by her chosen family, namely her mother. Sethe's continuous pouring into, nurturing an immediate bond with and consistent, yet excessive nourishment of Beloved threatens her own health while her uninvited visitor becomes stronger and increasingly egotistical. Morrison signals that Beloved undergoes "Freud's first stage of psychosexual development: oral, which precedes anal, phallic, latent and genital."[172] Oral fixation and desire is at the center of pleasure for Beloved and the mouth becomes a figurative symbol and literal site for her to both be a baby-like figure while also having a baby. Black Mother-daughter psychodynamics extend Freudian parameters by calling attention to existing psychic but also spiritual bonds present between black women, their sisters, female kin and biological mothers. This is particularly true during American chattel slavery and absolutely while experiencing the foreboding violence inextricably wedded to maritime enslavement. Relationships between enslaved mothers and children inheriting their status indoctrinate the haunting necessity of exhuming disparate origin stories from which they came before their mother's wombs is essential to their own internal progression.

Confined to 124, Denver like her mother experiences communal ostracization due to her inability to establish her own identity independent of her mother and subsequent familial tragedy. Like Beloved, Denver has minimal contact with the world outside of their home and at eighteen years old is isolated and unfamiliar with life beyond domestic confinement as she struggles with inaccessibility to external influences. Within the existing literature, Denver is often labeled as having a "superego

[172] Jonathan Halper, "Misery and Company," 42.

[that] is stunted"[173] or fundamentally lacks having a self-critical conscience that allows individuals to monitor their own behaviors based on socialization. Since assimilation and acclimation are akin to acculturation, Denver's temperament becomes increasingly hindered, oftentimes contributing to scholarship describing her as awkward or queer. Personality is dependent on exposure to different people within various places and situational circumstances, but Denver's lack of experiential knowledge means she is under-socialized. Having no ideal self-image either because it has not been modeled or is morally thwarted, renders Denver's character unable to emerge due to consistent deprivation. The loss of Baby Suggs, her two older brothers fleeing, not being able to fully mourn her once-deceased sister who "returns" and may not be her sister, a preoccupied mother and no father physically present exacerbates the complexity of Denver's identity formation.

What is remarkable and overlooked in contemporary studies on Denver is that she is fully aware of her own isolation and social retardation, rendering her a resilient realist in the text. She might be the only one living in the novel that learns and eventually embraces that she is "[he]r best thing."[174] Denver wants to be autonomous and therefore seeks freedom from her mother and the confines of domesticity, freedom to roam and be independent and freedom through being self-reliant. Unprompted but viscerally moved, she professes to her mother and Paul D: "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either."[175] Nobody visiting speaks to a communal neglect so sparse it is suffocating. While neighbors and townspeople shun the entire family, it is internal chaos and not entirely external environmental factors causing Denver's distress. Expressing such unbearable

[173] See Halper, 43.

[174] Morrison, *Beloved*, 322.

[175] See *Beloved*, 17.

discomfort is not simply the result of an erratic tantrum or unprovoked impulsivity but a psychological breakthrough wherein she comprehends the magnitude of leaving, getting out and physically going outside of the domicile to become a more, free young woman and adult. Described by scholars as dramatic and mischievous, there is a knowing and prognostic tone to Denver's words. Denver's unacknowledged intuition or clairvoyance is powerful and her character acts as a reliable guide or rational meta narrator. She is hyperaware that to grow and thrive as an individual, she can no longer live in her family home. This phase of development is consistent with the fifth stage of psychosexual development wherein the objective for the child is psychological detachment and independence from the parent. No longer wanting to be viewed or treated like a child, Denver's declarative stance clearly signals that she is ready to be an adult outside of 124 Bluestone Road.

For Denver, the idea of three adults in an already small haunted house is insufferable. Knowing that Paul D will be staying indefinitely and having a disruptive ghost as a biological sister is too much to bear and this is before Beloved's arrival. It is this matrix of trauma, drama and tragedy intermingled with loss and familial voids that provide a space for both the "spiteful" spirit in their home and Beloved, as both entities converge by doing similar types of work in the novel. However, this overcrowding of spirits, people, and strangers causes what appear to be sudden but repressed outbursts by Denver directed toward her mother and Paul D, the first time he visits. Her inquisitive inquiries stem from longing for a past she is unable to recall and a future that excludes her as Denver confirms: "I heard his voice downstairs, and Ma'am laughing, so I thought it was him, my daddy. But when I got downstairs it was Paul D and he didn't come for me; he wanted my mother."[176] Nobody prioritizes, visits or comes to see, take, invite or save Denver—not Paul D, her two older brothers or Beloved. Denver's wish is for her father, Halle to return home to protect her from the outside

[176] Morrison, *Beloved*, 245.

community while simultaneously providing community inside the home since she has no one other than Sethe, who is preoccupied with her own past and unfolding traumas. Although she might fear Sethe's abandoning her for Beloved and Paul D, "this is presumably underscored by a desire to have access to a penis with which she feels some connection and that she can be sure will provide her with power to face her underlying fear of Sethe."[177]

While Paul D does appear when she is yearning for her father, Denver's desires for male attention, affection and protection are unfulfilled and his presence alone does not provide the power or phallic potency required to combat nearly two decades of an authoritative mother and absent father. Her interest in Paul D acts as a replacement of missing an image of father that would help usher her into this next phase of development. Consequently, if Denver was exposed to her father at an earlier age, she envisions a different quality of life for the entire family, one that deviates from her current, primarily all-female unit. With her father, or permanent male figure, she and the entire family would have a masculine presence to complete her idyllic image of a black nuclear family equipped with both her older brothers and living sister. While I do not think Denver experiences penis envy, at times she feels threatened by Beloved's closeness with Sethe, and her anxieties are more rooted in having to split her mother because of an unexpected, yet emerging sisterhood. Instead, Denver is undergoing early stages of womb envy wherein her anxieties center around her mother's ability to create and sustain life. Because the household is now comprised of three adult women and a baby girl, Denver is vying not simply for her mother's attention or Beloved's approval but an entrance into womanhood, femininity, friendship and sexual exploration—as mentioned earlier, Denver notes that neither boys nor girls like or visit her. As a young female loner, Denver is constantly stuck between being treated like a girl and wanting to be regarded as a woman. By societal standards, older adolescent girls are

[177] Halper, 43.

often regarded and elevated as women almost exclusively through motherhood. Therefore, credence to womb envy, or the desire to be pregnant, engage in nursing and motherhood rather than penis envy or fear of the phallus should also be unpacked through theorization.

According to Freudian theory, the primal scene refers to sexual relations between parents that the child observes, constructs and fantasizes about and since this experience is misunderstood, the child interprets it as a violent trauma. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy redefines this notion "as the critical event or events whose significance to the narrated life becomes manifest only at a secondary event, when by a preconscious association the primal scene is recalled."[178] In other words, Denver's own entrance into the world is traumatic. Her origin story is gendered, isolating and extraordinary, yet her father is again, absent. Sethe gives birth on the banks of the Ohio River with an all-female cast. Again, it is Sethe and Denver who are connected through the umbilical-chord and Amy, a white woman aids in the birthing process. Therefore, Denver has no male figure to project onto because she never experiences a male protector—Sethe is oftentimes forced into dual parentage roles that require varying degrees of gender expectations, reversals and rearing. So, while sex is not central to Denver's earlier memories, the violence that attends her mother, a fugitive enslaved woman being encountered by a wandering white woman is dangerously foreboding. And although intercourse is not explicitly encountered, the sex act has to happen and does occur consensually between Halle and Sethe for Denver to be conceived.

When Beloved recounts images of the primal scene, it transports her back to the vessel itself through auditory and visual prompts; from a psychanalytic perspective, these are considered hallucinations which visit her through sensations. However, what if hallucinations, the concept of false perceptions or events is an insufficient framework for describing these very real sensory adaptations? While Beloved functions as a woman-child, she is also able to participate in sex, consent to sexual

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[178] Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, " 'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels." *Contemporary Literature* 31.3 (1990): 303.

contact and conceive a child. Therefore, Beloved's encounter with the primal scene differs in that the violence she recalls happens directly to her while she witnesses it and is raped. Beloved addressing instances of sexual assault allows her to testify through aural transmission and oral admission that unfolds upon her arrival and is confirmed by persistent references to the Middle Passage slave ship enroute to the Americas or wherever she comes from before her arrival at 124. For Beloved, the slave ship itself and not witnessing her parents is wholly reflective of the primal scene and her complex transatlantic identities. That Beloved is forced into the primal scene of witnessing terror inflicted on her own body and others while on the voyage is unfathomable. Therefore, for Beloved the moment of rupture and catastrophic loss is undoubtedly during the Middle Passage. At the center of this unimaginable trauma lies multiple interpretations and reiterations of how Beloved experiences and translates the transatlantic. While these unspeakable memories undoubtedly overwhelm and interfere with Beloved's contemporary waking life, they also possess the vehement ability to revisit her in dreams, forcing her to remember former life on the ship while also conjuring up repressed memories for Sethe and the inability to bond with her Ma'am or "woman", a rape victim survivor of the Middle Passage.

Beloved in Two Acts

In the final two of four soliloquy chapter's, Beloved gives one of the most detailed descriptions surrounding her various tribulations throughout the Middle Passage. Most striking is the constant mention of "we" which equates to yet another woman that Beloved is traveling with due to consistent usage of she/her pronouns. There is an undeniable physical and linguistic duality and it becomes increasingly complex to decipher who is narrating their journey. I argue that both reliable narrators share a twin-like kindred spirit during their voyage wherein they shift between each other, repeatedly taking turns relaying what they are able to recount when the other cannot. Here, I am differentiating between the dead baby girl that was killed by Sethe to maintain her freedom and Beloved as Venus,

or what Saidiya Hartman terms, "the consolation of this vision—a life recognized and mourned in the embrace of two girls."[179] As the drama and trauma mount in their accounts of what they endured, so does the comingling of recognition reclaimed by both young girls. These two female narrators employ testimonials as a method of storytelling wherein both are telling identical stories in fraternal ways. For this reason, there are two chapters wherein both Beloved's speak. Chapters 22 and 23 mirror the other with the admission, "I AM BELOVED and she is mine."[180] This declarative stance and language of ownership supports that the character of Beloved is not only split but that there are two of her present in both chapters, also while enduring slavery at sea, and throughout the transatlantic world. Specifically, Beloved's interest and primary investment is the possibility that two bodies become one in hopes that "the face lost…now can join."[181] Each soliloquy is an act of admission wherein the only characters in the play are Beloved and Beloved's, beloved. While these two characters may be fictional, this duo most certainly works in tandem, relying on symbiosis at sea and archival performances to amplify their tonal reach.

Saidiya Hartman's seminal incarnation, "Venus in Two Acts" engages with Atlantic Slavery's archive by magnifying its limits, silences and impossibilities through prioritizing the enslaved woman:

> she [who] appears in the archive of Atlantic slavery as a *dead girl*…she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world. The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon's laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master's bedroom—turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus.[182]

Through abstraction, Hartman intentionally focuses on the unnamed and dead girl(s) rather than acknowledging one singular individual that is visible and well documented in the archive. Originating

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179 Hartman, "Venus," 8.

180 Morrison, *Beloved*, 248, 253.

181 Morrison, *Beloved*, 252-253.

182 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe 26* (12.2), 2008: 1.

from late Old English, the Latin Venus in Greek mythology is the goddess of beauty, love, sensual love and sexual desire. Reduced to physicality and external admiration, the black Venus is portrayed and treated as a sexual object, a superfluous play thing always made available to plantation owning tyrants and for the deviant sexual appetites of maritime slave captains, sailors, and crewmen alike. By envisioning restorative justice where none exists for slavery's multivalences of horror and terrorism, Hartman imagines an unspoken, or unspeakable recognition for the murder of at least two black girls subjected to rape and death whose demise and fate is a type of looming, haunting fixture within the un/published record.

Ambiguously referred to as Venus, Morrison also attaches agency to names. Hartman maintains that the archive is a nonfiction text wherein the most central characters are "Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally."[183] Like Hartman, Morrison utilizes other names to tell distinct stories; Sethe calls herself Lu when meeting Amy on the banks of the Ohio River. Amy's last name is Denver and Sethe names her second baby girl after the woman who helps her give birth on the banks of the Ohio River in a canoe. Further, Sethe names her departed daughter, Beloved after "[t]en minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too?"[184] Wanting nothing more than to leave a legacy of love for her daughter, the inadequacy of words in capturing a bond deep like the ocean contained within a mother's womb is impossible and unspeakable. No singular name or quantity of letters captures the insurmountable void of a lost child, the loss of a child, and living through the loss. The power of naming and the authority deprived from not being named attends to the violence and silences accompanying the forced migrations of enslaved women. By tracking their progression across watery Atlantic worlds, Hartman and Morrison are able

[183] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 1.

[184] Morrison, *Beloved*, 5.

to vocalize the conditions that precipitate the silences through the characterization of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother Nan, Sethe herself, Denver's riverscape origin story, Beloved and Venus. Perhaps most generative is that the work of *Beloved* and "Venus in Two Acts" grants spaces for the convergence of imagination and truth all at once for *her* in all stages, phases and centuries. Morrison and Hartman, "invent her thought, plumb them for a subtext that [i]s historically true in essence, but not strictly factual in order to relate her histor[ies] to contemporary issues about freedom, responsibility, and women's 'place.'"[185] That history can be so unbelievable that it inspires fiction also requires that fiction supports and in part, derives from history.

Coming to Jamaica in 1750, Thomas Thistlewood began as an overseer, eventually bought his own plantation, and kept a meticulously recorded diary of his daily life. As a noted sadist and rapist, Thistlewood took pleasure and was aroused by his own propensity for the intermingling of brutality, inflicting pain, power and perversion. He raped one woman by the name of Sally repeatedly over one hundred times throughout a three-year span, taking scrupulous notes and providing graphic details. It is estimated that he raped over 138 women and engaged in 3,852 acts of nonconsensual sexual intercourse during his 37-years in Jamaica, alone.[186] Sally is only known to the extent of being his forced sex slave; we only know her name because he mentions repeating carnal obsessions and enacting abuse on her body. She is known to the extent of abuse sustained on her body and the damage done to her womb. In many ways, she haunts Thistlewood's travelogue. Unnamed and mocked as a deity, Sally mirrors that of "Venus, as both 'haint,' or one that haunts the present, and as disposable life."[187] Similarly, Sethe's other daughter functions as both a *dead girl* and a haint, as referenced when

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[185] Morrison, *Beloved*, XVII.

[186] See Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and in Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 156.

[187] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 5.

Denver shares, "we have a ghost in here."[188] Conversely, Beloved is very much alive and is a representative of the Black Atlantic Venus and her multiplicities. While Venus can be the dead girl, she is also very much alive in this 21st- century Atlantic moment as she keeps reappearing everywhere in literature, music, television and film. And, while both the baby and young woman called Beloved function as "haints" because they haunt the narrative present, they fulfill two very distinct roles.

Although these parts portend to various layovers and destinations, their visual presence and literary sightings are consistently diasporic as each re/appears from unknown waterborne routes because "[t]here is not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage."[189] Hartman decries the inability and unwillingness of the archive to maintain its recognition of the nameless and countless fate of enslaved women reduced to the moniker of the Black Venus. Both Hartman and Morrison ponder the relationships between the two by wondering how many times Venus, the unnamed younger and older woman, and Beloved were exchanged, raped, beaten, and sold? Did they make it on land, did their feet touch soil? What came of their lives on land or at sea? If they did not survive Middle Passage slave trading, did they jump ship? If so, where specifically? Where are the memorials of their now, coral reef coated bodies that were dumped in the Atlantic world? Are they actually final "resting" places if we do not know where they are, or if these spaces exist? Why are there no monuments? How do we begin mourning "60 million and more" watery gravesites mapping the second largest body of water in the world? Where to begin? How does one begin tracking and tracing 41,105,000 square miles of the Atlantic Ocean?

The accumulation of dead black babies, girls, and women that crossed the Atlantic are vast but they are also the culmination of less abstract figures. She, Venus and Beloved are very alive

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188 Morrison, *Beloved*, 15.

189 Hartman, "Venus," 3.

beings—she is "Delia, Drana, Anarcha, a naked Diana…a Hottentot. A *sulky* bitch"[190] and our beloved female ancestors. To unsee what has already been encountered is impossible. Visualization means never forgetting and always remembering the haunting present through bearing witness and being in the presence of a stripped and ripped torso of Delia Taylor (possibly a minor) who resembles, was perhaps called, mocked and treated like Venus (see Fig. 3). She is the American-born daughter of Renty Taylor, a literate enslaved man born in Congo. In an effort to promote a eugenics campaign proving inherent black inferiority, Harvard scientist Louis Agassiz forced seven women and men to pose without any clothing against their will and without obtaining consent. These photographic and pornographic images in 1850 lend themselves to canonical pseudoscientific inquiry and mythological technologies of black hypersexuality. White European seaman and scientists alike prioritize their abject and primal obsession with the black body which is then projected in derogatory histories of daguerreotypes. Delia stares directly at the photographer, Joseph T. Zealy and his lens—she is unblinking, still, and like Sethe has wells for eyes. Eyes as deep as the ocean, there is also a glass-like quality to the grim glaze that meets our gaze. Delia's eyes are wet and saturated, they appear crystalized or congealed.

As if trying to hold back rainwater for tears, a real-life Delia is described similarly to the other girl with Beloved, "if we had more to drink we could make tears…the air is heavy I am not dead."[191] Delia's pain is archived through the is image and is being violated at the very moment this photograph is taken. The shame does not end because she is still being viewed by us, analyzed and articulated onto at Harvard University's Peabody Museum Collections and abroad. Transatlantic markets crave and feast on the bodies of girls or women like of Drana, Delia, Venus and Sethe until almost nothing remains but the naked and brute realities of unrelenting imperial power. What we now see in Delia, is

[190] Hartman, "Venus," 6.

[191] Morrison, *Beloved*, 248, 252.

the result of an additional 174 years of archival bondage—she is stripped, ripped apart and bare, with absolutely nothing belonging to her. Delia does not own herself and only her thoughts are her own, as we will never be privy to them. But if windows are indeed eyes into the soul, she is shattering, being shipped and submerged in the life of slavery and its afterlife. Still, the operative word is life and she is living through legacies of white, European and western apparatuses of oppression, commission, omission, transmission and accessibility. But she is also alive despite her being a socially dead girl where she is open to gratuitous sexual violence, subject to natal alienation and terminal dishonor. Hartman emphasizes the sexually deviant behaviors of one pedophile and slave ship captain, Thomas Thistlewood, however his accounts act as a standard for treatment of enslaved women and their bodies. Never having to answer for his inhumane sins, he will not be held accountable or tried posthumously. If we pay attention to what the captains, sailors, crewmen and seamen say on record, we find that they heinously misuse the power of their isolated occupations at sea to inform their aggressively cruel sense of entitlement in their quests to conquer, penetrate and destroy black women's and girl's bodies.

Physical black bodies and fluid blue bodies serve as an immediate incantation wherein watery materiality is a magical gateway, specifically for women. After walking out of water (see Fig. 1), "Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids."[192] If water is the only marker that anchors her arrival, then she has either escaped from a waterborne vehicle or swam from the place she comes from. In this regard, Beloved would not have been seeking a homeland in the continental or regional sense, but attempting to find a motherland or mothering presence at 124 Bluestone, specifically in Sethe herself. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Beloved's goal is seeking connectedness and taking occupancy

[192] Morrison, *Beloved*, 60.

where emotional intimacy exists, specifically because she is estranged from her biological family and native home. Because Sethe warmly welcomes Beloved into her home and heart quickly, the bond between a mother and a daughter is solidified despite biological DNA; and it is this particular kinship that affords the space for Beloved to seek motherhood for herself, which is principally why she becomes pregnant with Paul D's unborn child.

The nineteen or twenty-year-old young woman they call Beloved that appears at 124 Bluestone Road exclusively for Sethe is consistent with the portrayal of the captive African girl aboard the slave ship named Venus. Beloved's introduction lies within her emergence from an Atlantic adjacent tributary. Wet and gasping for air, her introduction into this new world or post-plantation portal is identical in the ways Dana in *Kindred* (1979) appears when first being transported and landing on the edge of a riverbank in antebellum Maryland. As Mustakeem stresses,

> The inability to breathe worsened slaves' conditions as they crossed the Atlantic. 'I have seen their breasts heaving, and observed them draw their breath with all those laborious and anxious efforts for life," one surgeon detailed, arguing that respiratory problems frequently emerged through immersion in and the ingestion of toxic air from bodily fluids and excrement'.[193]

Captain John Ashley Hall, who sailed the *Neptune* slave ship in the 1770's describes such conditions, "I have frequently heard them [the enslaved cargo aboard the vessel] crying out when below for the want of air"[194] which suggests that Beloved has chronic symptoms affecting her lungs and breathing patterns that are consistent to recent peri-Middle Passage travel. Many critics have credited Beloved's breathing and speech pattens to someone who has had their throat slit during infancy and still functions as a baby. However, her disability or inability to grasp a full breath of air has been undertheorized as a medical condition and speaks to what many scholars consider to be fragmented

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[193] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 60.

[194] Testimony of Captain John Ashley Hall, in *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, 72: 231, 275-76.

thoughts, irrational behaviors, and stunted speech for her age. Beloved's rudimentary linguistic expression then may be a result of the novel's stream of consciousness method in magnifying internal dialogues that propel inward conversations, outward.

The ways in which Beloved communicates is consistent with an individual who suffers from acute asphyxiation. This may have been caused by a recent drowning, asthma from inhaling toxic substances below deck, chocking or strangulation. A primary symptom of asphyxia causes the sufferer to oftentimes lose consciousness which is expected given her presumed position on the human trafficking vessel. Beloved physically and tonally is always on the brink of death because she lives and therefore exists in limbo. Either in water or on land, home or afar, and finally either physically with Sethe or aboard the slave ship, Beloved is somehow always en route or in pursuit. Beloved is never still and always in flight, whether denoted by corporeal mobility or psychic transference, her mind and body are consistently ruminating on the past or future, seldom the current moment. This might be because her body and mind exist at two unconscious continuums. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, "Officially, the slave trade was forbidden in 1873 under British pressure, but it went on secretly for several years."[195] Because *Beloved* is set in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio after the American Civil War, suggests that Beloved might have been born outside of the Midwest or American South and even conceived or birthed during the Middle Passage. Since Beloved was born during the antebellum era and arrives at Sethe's home post-emancipation, it is unclear which geographical and physical spaces from which she derives, only that she first appears walking out of water.

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[195] United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization World Heritage Convention. "The Central Slave and Ivory Trade Route." https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/2095/#:~:text=The%20Slaves%20were%20brought%20to,on%20secretly%20for%20several%20years. 9 October 2023.

However, what if Beloved is not coming from grated hatchways between decks and instead escapes drowning? What if she was previously on a ship and consequently, is gasping for air from either being thrown off or by relinquishing herself to the sea? Was she drowning moments before we encounter her walking out of the water? Kevin Dawson reminds while warning us that:

> Tragically, myths, misperceptions, and the enduring legacies of racism have converged, resulting in African American aquatic inadequacies that have, for decades, produced numerous black deaths, while claims pertaining to a lack of buoyancy allow Americans to sidestep the heartbreaking consequences of racism. Sources indicate that starting during the 1870s, Jim Crow racism increasingly forced black swimmers off natural waterways.[196]

While Beloved does not die during the Middle Passage or fatally drown, perhaps most useful are the correlations between black death and racial myths of black aqueous deficits taking place in the 1870s during the novel's setting. Further, Sethe must cross the Ohio River's huge waterscape in emancipating herself and that of her progeny while giving birth on its banks. This supernatural experience focalizes and supports claims that:

> Water was a central element in the spiritual traditions of many peoples throughout Atlantic Africa. Many believed…rivers, were sacred spaces and the dwelling places of spirits… that the realm of the dead lay beneath the ocean or a large river and that ancestral spirits could be evoked to assist one during times of need.[197]

Since illegal slave ships were still operating in the 1870s despite the Civil War ending and slavery being abolished, the bitter irony remains, like Dawson professes that due to increasingly hostile racism, that black swimmers were separated from natural waterways. Since transatlantic enslavement, water has always been racialized and consequently privatized. Violence transformed watery spaces from places of leisure or tranquility to traumatic sites of racially gendered subjugation, intensifying the impossibility of safe spaces for African Americans during the pre, pro and post slavery eras. While Beloved escaping

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[196] Kevin Dawson, "Parting the Waters of Bondage: African American's Aquatic Heritage," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education* 11.1 (2018): 3.

[197] Dawson, "Parting the Waters," 12.

from an illegal slave ship like *Clotilda* might appear more plausible on the surface, the possibility of swimming from Africa is also a viable option within African folkloric traditions (see Fig. 2). If Dana can fly through and be transported to different centuries, surely Beloved can swim across the Atlantic—absurdity aside, there is an inherent magic pertaining to self-identified black women throughout the diaspora particularly in fiction. Just because these inexplicable and extraordinary qualities seem unimaginable does not mean that they are not also very real. On the contrary, within the genre of fiction, anything can happen because everything is possible. While history has its categories, limits, boundaries and borders—fiction does not. Fiction is infinite.

Sea'ing Slavery

From the novel's onset, water signals remembering memories or "rememory" and melancholia. *Beloved*'s characters are familiar with the constant state of grief; they accept it as a part of their lives and exist alongside it without claiming any form of victimization or victimhood. Within Freudian terms, mourning is inadequate in this particular narrative because it does not claim to have accepted loss, reconciliation, or closure—nothing has *passed on*, except for time and even that, Sethe argues awaits people, psychic instincts and situational outcomes. Temporally, moments, days, years, and events collapse onto themselves, creating a cyclical rather than a linear perception of time. Non-linearity, like water is also fluid because it flows and wanders. And like time, "all water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was" ("The Site of Memory" 99). Elements of time and water do not radically change independent of each other. Together, this dyad renders the spatial persistence of haunting in the present possible through past traumas sparking newer sufferings, physical violations, and open wounds and wombs. However, melancholy is a permanent fixture in the particular lives of Beloved, Paul D, and Sethe. For each, reality represents their inability to detach from bygone objects. This systemic revocation of having the choice in possessing the will and power to forget is neither available nor accessible to the novel's characters because "some things just

stay…even if [they] don't think it, even if [they] die, the picture is still out there" (*Beloved* 43). And it is precisely this overflowing of unwarranted pictures, locations, and transgressions across time that poses the conundrum of detaching from past objects, sites and individuals, impossible. Instead, the project of the novel and its characters is rooted in maintaining and nourishing past attachments and a deliberate refusal to disengage from historical atrocities believed to be either lost or forgotten. It is within this refusal that all three individuals remain faithful and dedicated to fragmented objects and pieces in time. Value is placed on what they can envision and sense even if unable to physically touch. Negations and negotiations such as these signal "the hypostatization of the absence of evidence as the evidence of absence"[198] allowing the departed to be actualized in their invisibility. Here, the representation becomes the most vivid reflection of reality. This is precisely how these characters enliven the objects that surround and sustain their livelihoods. Thus, the proximity of water to bodies marks the resurgence of submerged memories.

Upon Paul D's arrival, he follows "her [Sethe] through the door straight into a pool of red and undulating light" (*Beloved* 10) while Sethe simultaneously recalls her estranged husband, Halle and their three children that she ships across the river. For Sethe, pools and rivers equate romantic and maternal love and loss. For Paul D, he must go through the red pool of anger, grief and venom to reach Sethe. Reaching Sethe emotionally means that he will have to deliberately confront both his and her traumas directly by sinking in the river or swimming in the pool. Although illustrated as a flashback, she relives this scene in the current moment despite the absence of everyone she is remembering in the past. Abstractions like this, make objects such as the river appear as a site in her home, as if Sethe were on its banks. Her domicile becomes a river and further "necessitates an organic connection between the

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[198] Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present" *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (September 2012): 461.

individual and the community"[199] if not nature itself, or Mother Nature wherein Sethe's nature is to nurture or mother and not be enslaved, raped or commit the act of infanticide.

Sethe's eyes are described as *wells* that are unable to reflect any light (*Beloved* 10) while Paul D experiences "a *wave* of grief [that] soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (*Beloved* 11). His inclination to cry comes after having waded in the pool for Sethe and witnessing her diluted well eyes. Connected through an inexplicable bond, Sethe and Paul D are synched through the acknowledgement of unending grief that saturates their present when with each other. Paired together these emotive scenes of wells, waves, soaking, and crying are discernable through internalizing and suppressing reservoirs of sorrow that threaten to overflow and overwhelm these two characters. Sethe's wells or wailing eyes, her sight, and subsequent vision become sites and sources of reliving memories that infiltrate her reality. Therefore, she possesses the ability to sustain life within her by replenishing what is buried, but not dead in her psyche. Much like Sethe's emotionally contained damp reserves, Paul D also conceals his psychological pain and withholds his tears when in her house. Wells and tears assemble images of sea or salt water symbolism, suggesting that both Sethe and Paul D, (whether individually or collectively) house bodies of water inside of them. Wells are enclosed, produce sweet water, are deep and the groundwater from which it sprouts is invisible. Tears are fluid, immediate, visible although transparent, produce saltwater and are at times, uncontrollable. Here, Morrison's generative conversation and "characterization of water is useful to thinking about home and wandering: Here water is a wandering body; whatever origin water has, it carries with it—water wanders."[200]

Just as oceanic bodies of water wander, so too does Paul D in order to find Sethe at 124

[199] Phillip Bryan Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture.* New York: New York University Press (2015): 1.

[200] Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press (2012): 128.

Bluestone Road two decades later. Their reuniting is not possible without water and their black bodies connect through the site of home. His conception of home also warrants wandering depending on where and with whom he is situated spatially and temporally. Paul D acknowledges, "he didn't believe he could live with a woman—any woman—for over two out of three months. That was about as long as he could abide in one place" (*Beloved* 49). Whether wells or waves, themes of roaming as wetness allude to ideas that bodies can also become containers, prisons, boxes, coffles, and graves that not only meander, but that are also stationary or portable. Although Paul D claims "to recall trembling in a box built into the ground…[g]rateful for the daylight spent doing mule work in a quarry because he did not tremble when he had a hammer in his hands" (*Beloved* 49), he is still in a box, the same container that prohibits him from acknowledging his wave of grief and visibly crying. Paul D's trembling demonstrates that like Sethe, sensory experiences revisit him in his waking life. That he shakes and quivers unconsciously and uncontrollably during moments in time intimates the back-and-forth motions of the nauseous voyage across the Atlantic for millions of Africans.

It also reads as an indication that Paul D has undiagnosed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder from plantation and chain gang life, which is also not explicitly mentioned in critical studies centering Paul D and his trauma. Particularly, this scene reads much like the wave of grief Paul D describes feeling earlier in the novel. Trembling in a tomb or existing within dark dank catacombs suggest that being buried alive is a literal and figurative consequence of being enslaved whether pre or post emancipation. When Beloved begins narrating the second section of the novel, she remembers, "someone is trembling…he is fighting hard to leave his body…there is no room to tremble so he is not able to die" (*Beloved* 249). Beloved introduces an enslaved man stuck in the bowels of a slaver that may (or may not) be representative of Paul D's reincarnation much like the ways Venus is reinvented historically; equally significant is the looming existence of the floating box, on land and at sea. If he is trying to leave his body at sea as Beloved articulates, this qualifies why he remembers singing, "Storm upon the waters" (*Beloved* 48).

In a song by Edith Stanford Tillotson titled, "Peace, Be Still" written in 1920 (during the end of the convict leasing system and at the height of the chain gang penal reform) the lyrics read:

> Storm upon the waters, terrors on the deep,
> While the winds and waves wildly beat,
> Thru the driving tempest, Jesus lies asleep,
> Till disciples kneel at His feet.
> Master, oh hear us, stormy tempests blow,
> Save, or we perish, in the waves below".
> Calm o'er the waters that obey His will,
> Comes the sweet voice of Jesus 'Peace, be still.'

This song is literal and metaphoric in form, illustrating the point of view of someone lost at sea, whose forced oceanic movements forecast death while also suggesting trying to overcome a tumultuous period in one's life where the only reliable source is Jesus. In this vein, the song acts more of a plea or prayer than articulating an actual hurricane occurring. It is unclear whether Paul D is experiencing a psychic storm (alluding to mental illness, trauma and anxiety), is reliving a past life as human cargo from Africa to the Americas, or is experiencing the trembling sensation of the back-and-forth wave-like rocking of manacles while a member of the chain gang. What is unmistakable however, is that he is adrift, confined to a carceral state of living and dying in his waking life. Also striking in this poetic passage is the speaker's faith and reliance on God for direction, mercy, and peace. In Mark 4:39, Jesus awakes, rebukes both the wind and sea by commanding nature's elements to "Silence! Be still". Being still amidst Paul D's trembling is also a reminder that God has dominion over all and that His will is the only One that matters. If he sung this particular song, Paul D's hymn becomes an active discussion with the Almighty, an appeal for grace. However, he avoids this song because, "he couldn't go back to "Storm upon the Waters" that they sang under the trees of Sweet Home" (*Beloved* 48-49). Why does Paul D abandon this song about being captive at sea while he is in bondage on land at Sweet Home plantation? Here, certain songs induce memories of enslavement and become attached to the cage or box on land. Songs become the figurative equivalent of literal captive holding cells aboard slave vessels and on northeastern antebellum plantation spaces. Paul D's *waves of grief* are a literal manifestation of

black bodies in bondage, regardless of maritime borders and geographic scape, scope, or scale. The stability of the corporeal containment of black lives, lies in the notion and recognition that Paul D is lodged between a Middle Passage wave and a very hard place, underground as if stowed away in the barge's bowels.

While water breaking through and outward is symbolic of Beloved, Sethe vividly recalls everything about her two daughters' entrance into the world. Denver being born on a bank, while the others are carried by their enslaved fugitive mother, all while journeying across the Ohio River, and waking up on free soil adhere to an alternative history of Middle Passage nativity made possible only by traversing. Sethe's bladder fills when Beloved arrives, which is also the precise moment her rememory revisits, "it went on and on, she thought, No more like flooding the boat when Denver was born" (*Beloved* 61). For Sethe, the flooding is psychic and physical, spatial and temporal, literal and metaphorical, past and present. When Miss Amy Denver of Boston assists Sethe in birthing her youngest daughter, whom Denver is named after, she warns Sethe of her capacity and capability of sinking them. As a body of water herself, Sethe connects to a larger one:

> As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it. The break, followed by the redundant announcement of labor, arched her back. "What you doing that for?" asked Amy.
> "Ain't you got a brain in your head? Stop that right now. I said stop it, Lu. Lu! Lu![201]

Amy positions Sethe as both a wave of watery mass and the very vessel in which houses the water. Birth, her newborn baby, and the Ohio River are conflated as providing life to the other and do not exist independently in this scene. The words, "body", "water", "river", and "labor" appear on the page as a sequence of narrative events that unfold on the banks of this historical site between slavery and its unpredictable afterlife.

Further, the four terms function as a cyclical continuum where life begins with the body or

[201] Morrison, *Beloved*, 98.

water and concludes with labor or land (similar to Beloved's fate towards the novel's close as a pregnant woman). Sethe's womb becomes an outlet and a container for life; her divine gift is her ability to be carrier and custodian of historical questions around (bodily) traumas while housing the (laborious) answers. Her arched back during labor signals the conjoining of two rivers. Sethe, "like water, remember[s] where [she] was before [she] was "'straightened out"' ("The Site of Memory" 99). Sethe becomes an even larger body of water through the birth of her black female progeny. A consequence of her memory when activated is that her mind and body become an actual river in which cathartic release is done through elimination and urination. Sethe's waters breaking from the inside out, allow her, the psychic power and strength to remember everything in the outside realm that she internalizes. Sethe cannot escape the past because it overwhelms her waking life and revisits her in particular bodily sensations, where "some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. Some things you forget. Other things you never do[…]the picture of it—stays, out there, in the world" (*Beloved* 43). Ashraf Rushdy claims that rememory, as an outlet functions as an effective use of self-discovery through reliving traumatic memories, which recreates legibility within narrative worlds that need reiterating (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 95). Memory then is active and specifically audible through the living dead because they speak to us so we don't have to speak for them.

When making her first physical debut in the novel, Beloved is described as fully clothed and walking out of water (see Fig. 1). Dressed in all black, as if coming from a funeral (perhaps her own), she is soaking wet, partially asleep, while her belabored breathing is shallow and heavy. Infant-like but in the form of a young adult woman, Beloved is being birthed for the second time from another body of water, wherein the watery materiality of her ancestor's becomes her life source. As if in utero, Beloved is resurrected from her aqueous grave or the womb as the symbolic amniotic fluid breaks and she enters the world as either a living reincarnation of the slain baby, as a ghost, a stranger or single black female. As a reflection and revelation, Beloved's arrival is surrounded by water like Dana

Franklin's. While walking on land, Beloved is a conduit for the dead as her body becomes a mobile and fluid vessel of the Middle Passage. Not only an embodiment of bondage, she is a visibly moving force asserting that slavery's afterlife is neither dead nor buried. Rather, her ghost-like but real-life presence is articulated through the process of naming. Conjugating the word Beloved directly references the past, present and future perfect as the voices, moods, numbers, and persons affected by transatlantic atrocity and genocide. Emerging from submersion, Beloved's presence is similar to that of a dream or memory as she appears out of nowhere and is felt everywhere. As soon as Sethe gets a glimpse of Beloved, her bladder instantaneously fills to capacity, "she never made the outhouse and the water she voided was endless" (*Beloved* 61). An overwhelming watershed of memory is felt throughout Sethe's body in an attempt to expel internal toxic memories, externally. Like a text, Sethe's body cites both the sight and site of her trauma and thus suppression. As soon as Sethe's body recognizes her beloved baby's spirit is akin to this strange new woman that feels familiar, marks the precise moment when her water breaks.

Despite Beloved materializing out of water, she is parched and deprived of sustenance when she reaches the mother-figure and motherland that is Sethe. New to this world and dehydrated, they all observe "her drink cup after cup of water…the woman gulp[ing] water…as though she had crossed the dessert" (*Beloved* 62). Whereas Sethe is constantly releasing water, Beloved consumes it as her thirst to achieve emotional closeness or physical proximity to her homeland through an estranged maternal figure swells or overflows like a torrent. Through her eyes, Sethe represents wells which typically contain fresher water because of nutrient rich mineral contents and Beloved attempts to swallow her "mother" whole in her quest for prioritizing or "want[ing] the join" (*Belove*d 252). Because Beloved sleeps for four days and awakes only for water (64), the family suspects that she is ill. However, because she emerges from water, her survival is dependent on it, like all living things. Beloved requires water like she desires and needs a mother; Sethe is Beloved's proxy and her self-preservation is made possible through saturation. Therefore, Beloved's *well*ness, or vicinity to the well relies on the

inundation or satiation of wetness and Sethe's specific water supplies. Aboard slavers:

> Set adrift beyond public view, ship commanders had complete control over the daily distribution of water, allowing them to determine the regularity of distribution but also to designate those slaves most worthy of preservation and depravation. Their decisions of access affected the lives and physiological makeup of bondpeople, forcing some to suffer dehydration, become weak, endure swelling, and confront difficulties in dispelling toxins from their bodies.[202]

Like a slave ship, 124 weighs thickly on Beloved as she describes their home as 'heavy'. Unable to fully live in water, Beloved is confronted with displacement as she struggles to breath, stay awake, and therefore remain alive on land. Beloved's source of energy and will to live on land co-depends solely on Sethe as she creates a drought surrounding her pseudo mother's existing familial and romantic relationships by greedily consuming and exhausting all water sources and food supplies from her extended kin.

Aside from depleting the water in the house, Beloved's presence is also generative and engaging because it resembles that of Nan. Nan and Sethe's mother, referred to only as Ma'am in the novel, endured the transatlantic crossing together on the same ship from Africa to the Americas. Before Sethe ever discusses her mother's or Nan's significance, Beloved repeatedly refers to Sethe, her surrogate mother or guardian as Ma'am twice; meanwhile Denver asks her mother why Ma'am was killed. Both young women refer to their mother and grandmother (or images thereof) as "Ma'am." Despite Sethe being given a name, both children conflate the identities of the mother and foremother. Beloved calling her "mother" by the grandmother's name is even more interesting given that she and Sethe connect through water. Like Beloved and Sethe, Ma'am "and Nan are together from the sea" (*Beloved* 74). Further, Nan is described as having had, "one good arm…And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now" (*Beloved* 74). Before this scene, a concerned Paul D expresses to Sethe, "Can't walk, but I seen her pick up a rocker with one hand" (*Beloved* 67). Although a small coincidence, Beloved uses, albeit her strongest hand to pick up a chair—

[202] Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea*, 68.

just as Nan used to "hold [Sethe] with her good arm" (*Beloved* 74) when she was a baby. The irony that Beloved would pick up a rocker by herself and with only one hand relates back to Sethe's own infancy and rememories of Nan. Similar to Nan, Beloved also uses different or peculiar words and speaks her own dialect that only resonates with Sethe. Through the privilege of language, Beloved is able to communicate with her other mother figure using more than words, akin to an alternative mother tongue. Accomplished through the implementation of objects and symbols, their expressions solidify their connection, creating friction between Denver and Beloved. Paying close attention,

> Denver noticed how greedy she was to hear Sethe talk. Now she noticed something more.
> The questions Beloved asked:
> "Where your diamonds?" "Your woman she never fix up your hair"
> And the most perplexing: Tell me your earrings.
> How did she know? (*Beloved* 75)

Their complex and exclusive matrix of communication is beyond Denver's auditory and affective comprehension. In fact, the dialogue between Sethe and the arrival of her new representative eldest daughter is less about actual words spoken and more about "the message—that was and had been there all along" (*Beloved* 74).

Such diasporic lexicon is one of the myriad yet precise goals of *Beloved* as a narrative treatment and an homage to and for black women among the "60 million"—it is "[t]he task of writing the impossible, (not the fanciful or the utopian but histories rendered unreal and fantastic)."[203] Black enslaved women are everywhere in the archive but their words, voices, and feelings about life and the world are at the same time nowhere. Whether Venus, Ma'am, Nan, Sethe, Beloved, or Denver, all types of women live within historical records waiting for their revival or recovery. If the archive is predicated on impossibilities and the equivalent of entering a mortuary, then readers, theorists, and archivists, must unearth the buried and allow them spatial resonances for narrative speech. The only

[203] Stephan Palmié, *Wizards abd Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 97.

way that anything dies is when it is eternally forgotten like the words Nan spoke to Sethe that she can no longer recall nor repeat. All language warrants analysis and decoding linguistic encryptions are a ruptured aesthetic method of painfully realistic storytelling. And although white captains and crewmen are predominantly given the privilege of writing and speaking during seafaring voyages and Middle Passage interchanges, the black woman is always present and a notable part of their, or his stories.

Morrison demonstrates that remembering slavery is a form of ancestral love through acknowledgment and that never forgetting means always 'passing on' narratives of trauma to enable possible psychic spaces for healing; and if reconciliation is impossible, that memorialization is as necessary and fluid as oceanic migrations. Interrogating Halle's confinement in the attic or on land is critical to a longer project on the spatial dynamics of carcerality on the plantation that would inspire brilliant conversations alongside Harriet Jacobs. This shift from sea to land is visible through reimagining the process of what Paul D describes as, "Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on" (*Beloved* 78) wherein Halle undergoes the transformative process of becoming a cipher. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "in cryptography, a cipher (or cypher) is a series of well-defined *steps* that can be followed as a procedure." For Halle who lives through machinations of waiting and watching from above in the crawl space of the attic, his movements and modes of hiding enable his futurity, like Jacobs. Through abstraction, Halle's presence becomes a disappearing act. In what ways does the invisibility of black subjects render them outside of slavery's domain? What lies beyond claiming emancipation or celebratory agency? This type of Middle Passage traveling on land is imperative in the fields of Ecocriticism and Ecopoetics, Environmental Humanities, Geography, Black, African American, and African Diasporic Studies because it traces riparian sites where landscapes and waterways meet while prioritizing sights of black bodies in flux and in flight. Interrogating prior discourses and extending the conversation around imagining Middle Passage transport beyond swimming, sailing, floating or crossing and through walking, hiding, stealing away, and surviving as forms of self-preservation through black oceanic memory is as vast as the sea's horizon.

Conclusion: Aquafutures and Oceanic Arenas

In Chapters 22 and 23, Beloved wonders inquisitively, "All I want to know is why did she go in the water…I wanted to join her in the sea."[204] This singular statement led me to consider traditions of alternative realities for black people. In researching prospective worlds attending to black mythos, it became transparent that subterranean water worlds are a crystal-clear medium for both departures and arrivals. More pointedly, in Chapter Two of *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe and her colleague Anne Gardulski assert "the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. Nobody dies of old age in the ocean."[205] Life cycles for substances and people entering and leaving the sea is demarcated as residence time. Afterlives of oceanic slavery as never becoming "old" or aging in saltwater is what drives this research project—it's timelessness is timely in that no expiry date exists in our lifetime that expels black life, people and history from the Atlantic and Earth. Gardulski concludes that the energies produced in the water continues cycling, thereby sustaining a residence lifetime of 260 million years. This means that enslaved black peoples have been in residency or taken up residence at sea since the first of Portuguese ships kidnapped and transported an estimated 5.8 million Africans[206] into slavery in the late fifteenth century alone. To think that Indigenous Africans and black Americans will be on Earth longer than dinosaurs during the Mesozoic Era is prodigious and posits African Diasporic descended peoples as the longest living species to date in the Atlantic and therefore on Earth.

One such submarine world differing from Plato's mythic Atlantis that ends in permanent submersion, is Drexciya. Where Atlantis is covered by the sea, the Atlantic Ocean is uncovered and

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[204] Morrison, *Beloved*, 253.

[205] Sharpe, *In the* Wake, 40-41.

[206] See Paul Ames, "Portugal Confronts its Slave Trade Past," *Politico*, February 6, 2018. https://www.politico.eu/article/portugal-slave-trade-confronts-its-past/#:~:text=Over%20the%20next%20four%20centuries,a%20Portuguese%20colony%20until%201822.

opens for Drexciya. It begins with an underwater civilization or nation similar to the underwater kingdom of Talokan in *Wakanda Forever* (2022) that is created distinctly by pregnant African women whom were violently thrown off slave ships exclusively during the Middle Passage. This subaqueous continent[207] existing within the inner Atlantic is and has been populated for centuries by the unborn children of these same enslaved women. This is one of the worlds where Beloved emerges and we can apply her origin story from the very site of Drexciya since fully dressed, she walks out of water. Native or indigenous inhabitants of Drexciya have fully adapted to breathing underwater from being in their mother's wombs. It is no surprise then, that Beloved has such difficulty breathing when on land and is in such a hurry to reach Sethe, who represents an extension of or a terrestrial womb even if not that of her biological mother. Sethe is a meta-Atlantic figure in that she carries an ocean within her and her womb is a smaller body of water or a sea.

Often referred to as Mother Earth, the majority of the Earth's surface is water which suggests that a water world on Earth likely existed. If this is also the basis for Plato's Atlantis and Drexciya then it represents a defining shift and transformation for humankind. Like amphibians associated with both land and water living, what if human beings were once more than just—human? How might Drexciya be a meditation on and a gesturing back to the future from an aural sonic historical framework? Were humans once able to breathe and exercise unique mobilities underwater while also learn to walk on land over time? Did God allow evolution to usher us from relying on fins to walking on foot? If so, then human beings were either semi-aquatic or primarily marine mammals, similar to pinnipeds in many ways. In maintaining these ideologies, Drexciya equally privileges human and

[207] Thinking through the ways Africa, the Americas and Europe converge, the Atlantic Ocean as a trans-subterranean space functions more like a continent or other world than simply one among four large expanses of sea. The Atlantic is therefore the New World because it transcends the strictures or structures of nation states, sovereignty and in/dependent territories. It remains indefinitely wide open from the outside purview but divinely protected from the innermost periphery.

cultural hybridity. It is this very brand of hybridization that sustains the continual ebbs and flows of cross-cultural travel and exchange that render Paul Gilroy's Atlantic, Black.

Engaging in a timely contemporary conversation, Morrison, Sharpe, and Drexciya—an electronic music duo (James Stinson and Gerald Donald) from Detroit all fundamentally have the same reference points. These converging lenses of scope all prioritize the outcomes of Middle Passage crossings for black people that did and did not make it to the Americas. While Sharpe focuses on particular processes of unfolding, Gardulski centers on the miraculous lifetime of the enslaved as particles electromagnetically-bound, and Drexciya unmasks "an infinite journey to inner space from within."[208] Yes, the Atlantic and its aquatic extensions are undoubtedly grim graveyards and constantly unfolding crime scenes. They are also sites of new life where the dead engulf already existing and very much alive aquatic ecosystems. Electrons flow from the negative terminal to the positive and this electronic current creates the basis for an origin story submerged in the historicity of the Middle Passage and further thrusts itself into infinite waves and cycles of unending black life through sonic resonances. Middle Passage Studies, saltwater slavery and its undercurrents of power must be understood from the frameworks and methods of Tidalectics, or being anchored across both waterborne and landscape fluidities. Drexciya's tasks experiments with an oceanic worldview that prioritizes the Atlantic as its own virtual world, independent of restrictions or demarcations projected onto landmasses by human life forms. Instead, Drexciya shifts from dry lands to watery depths while reconfiguring how we visualize music, listen to and absorb sounds, and imagine boundless underwater diasporas.

[208] James Stinson, "Drexciya Interview with Liz Copeland," By Liz Warner. *Music Overnight*, WDET, 101.9 FM. May 2002. https://www.mixcloud.com/backintosh/drexciya-interview-with-liz-copeland-music-overnight-wdet-1019-fm-detroit-052002/

Figure 1. Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter (2016). "Love Drought," 00:1:15 - 00:1:41 [Scene from music video].

I imagine Beloved, or Morrison's "fully dressed woman walk[ing] out of the water" resembling this image of black women walking in, through or on water. Each comes from a long line of Drexciyan foremothers wherein they inherit the gifts of submarine life. Further, this emergence from liquidity honors their now underwater African ancestors who proudly perished through orchestrating a mass suicide by drowning during Ibo Landing rather than the social death and terminal sentence of enslavement. (1:15-1:42) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUyQSKe75L4

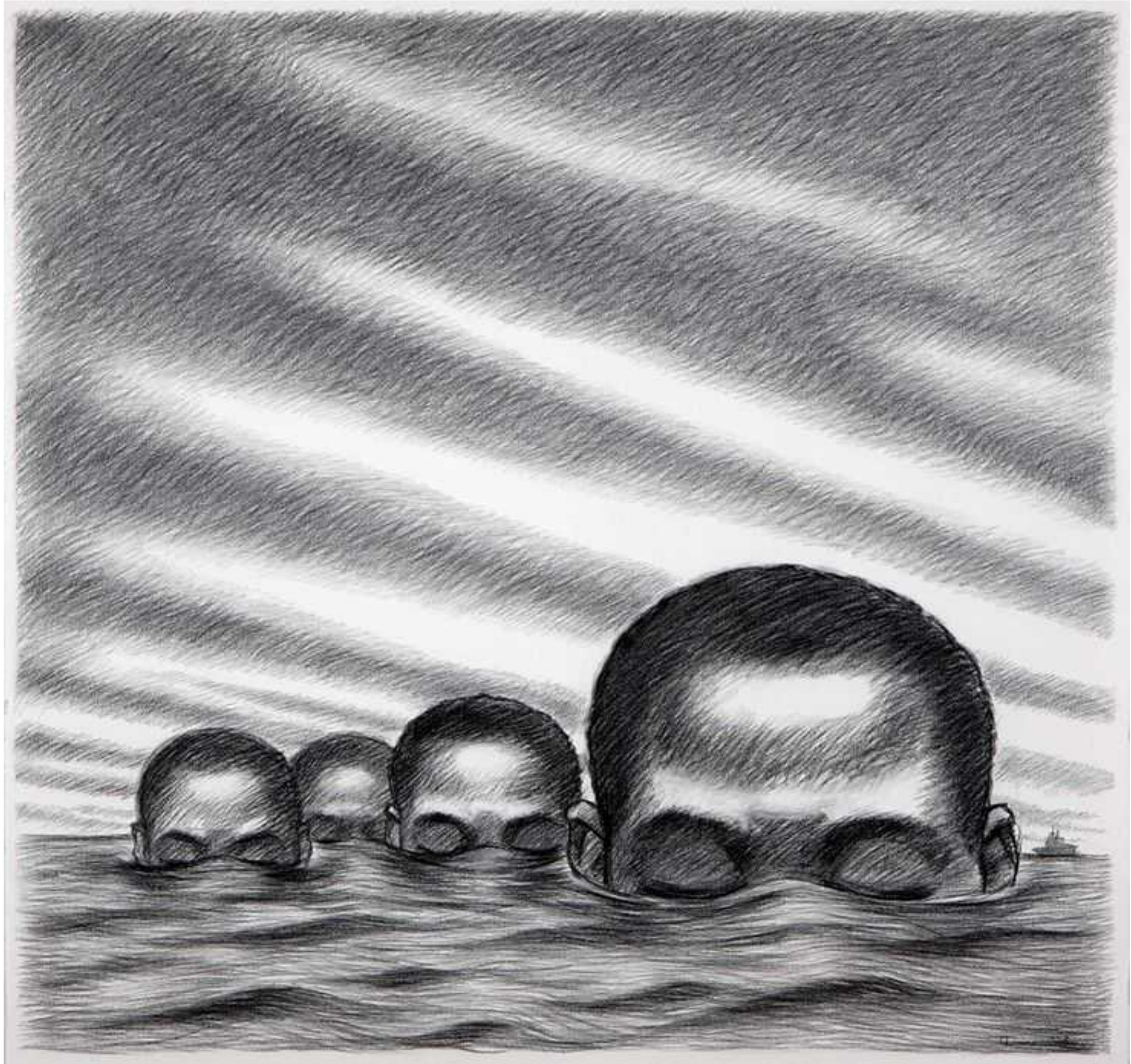

Figure 2. Donovan Nelson, *Ibo Landing 7*, 2010
Charcoal on Paper, 54 x 52 in (137.16 x 132.08 cm)
Collection of Valentine Museum of Art.

Figure 3. Left: Joseph T. Zealy, *Delia*, frontal view, 1850; right: Joseph T. Zealy, Delia, profile, 1850. Quarter-plate daguerreotypes

Delia is cited in Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts" wherein she is the dark-skinned African and American victim of sexual exploitation based exclusively on her slave status. Through the gaze of heinous hyper-exploitative exploration inscribed onto the native black African and American woman, Hartman allows the archive to position her alongside countless other rape victims during the transatlantic era wherein her body, womb and vagina are passageways or incubators of brute European semen and seamen.

Figure 4. Sasha Huber, *Tailoring Freedom*, 2021
Metal staples on photograph on wood, 97 x 69 cm
Courtesy the artist and Tamara Lanier

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Un/Mapping the Past, Forward

Gloria Naylor is often described as a novelist, editor, screenwriter, television producer, educator and essayist—winning the National Book Award for best novel in 1983 and earning a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1988. Additionally, she had visiting academic appointments and professorships at institutions like Princeton University, University of Pennsylvania and New York University. What is not as openly discussed is that Naylor is just now emerging and should seriously be read as a black literary geographer through her narratives and methodological arc. When first beginning research on the brilliantly zonal American author, I knew absolutely nothing about Naylor's exodus elsewhere. Firm in her belief, she was vocal that both her private life and work were under surveillance by the United States government and subsequently left New York for the largest United States Virgin islands of St. Croix, which remains an unincorporated territory. It's unclear why she left one island in the Atlantic Ocean for another in the Caribbean Sea. What might Naylor have been in search of, was she running to something or from somewhere? How was her life near Christiansted, St. Croix similar or different from her lifestyles in New York, North Carolina, Florida or Saint Helena Island off the coast of South Carolina?

This chapter certainly cannot answer these intimately personal questions or details surrounding particular movement, migration, mapping or moment for Naylor. Instead, it uncovers myriad capabilities for African American women to create safe home spaces. Their capacities to shape such places where seemingly none exist for themselves, communities, current and future families while physically in the United States and yet, deeply outside of its aggressive grasp is remarkable. Temporally and psychically these enclaves, whether on rural islands or within a dense metropolis are not always locatable on any American map. If they are visible to us, our colonized eyes will not recognize this brand of un-mapped geography as it will be deemed incomprehensible or indecipherable to mostly all our senses. How do we begin naming an entire novel marked, mapped and maintained by the maternal

black presence from the very first page? Why does the message, picture, outline or chart require a western designation attending to features of cartography or topography? What do we call a map in the form of a novel that encounters us, immediately disrupting our ideas of space, race, place, or gender while oscillating between the real, imagined and future state (as location, position and condition) of United States born black women? America in particular, like a map is the manifestation of white men stealing, owning or historically laying claim to these spaces while simultaneously bending nature and equally breaking peoples to their will. It is black women who occupy and thus operate these exact locations through materiality, maternity or maternal desires, femininity, and matrilineal legacies. Histories of these so called un-mapped enclaves in the center or at the edges of earth substantiate the yearning and necessities for even newer worlds where an alternative geographical narrative derives—one rooted in plantation soils and soaking wet like transatlantic middle passage memories; this is where the black woman's mobility becomes a monument, producing limitless meaning through movement while charting her safest and most sacred spaces.

Geography frames plots or sequences of events in this novel, but also pushes beyond scopes of retelling or remembering one's memories. Naylor's novel uncovers a different type of interiority—one that is stable, others that are fluid or ever-evolving through dialogue, nostalgia and becoming. Naylor's brand is one of tracking and unpacking geographical personhood as a map itself. Particularly in *Mama Day* (1988), these characters are the very geography responsible for occupying generational spaces creating multi-textual environments and thus outcomes. Put differently, all people and pointedly black women represent geography due to their humanity, physicality and productivity. That is, characters themselves represent forms of geography within the atmosphere or setting of Willow Springs. Akin to fictional characters in a novel, Naylor's message is that all people have an impact on this planet we are inhabiting and must share. This idea of prioritizing environments in which people survive and black women, specifically thrive posits Naylor as an environmentalist, humanist and black

feminist. In other words, many of us have been colonized and therefore our bodies and minds have been inscribed onto; this ideology also permeates throughout the novel. Equally important is the idea that as living beings, we are all charting through our respective lives similarly to characters contained within the novel's imagination.

Works such as these are themselves maps in the form of narrative prose stories. Stories like this emanate and equally animate the often overlooked, denied or deliberately ignored lives of black women and the magic they render throughout the text. For this reason, these accounts become marginal or are described as being folkloric when such experiences are familiarly rooted and work within a long history of literature within realms of the supernatural, specifically within the black deep south. This idea of the black south is expansive and situates itself within the Americas and abroad. It is characterized as: local and global, familiar and foreign, familial and estranged, visible and hidden while also being a prison and refuge. These situational and circumstantial events are historical and geographical as they boldly mark and map a classist, sexist and anti-black planet showing no signs of atonement in the twenty-first century, or the twenty-second if America survives that long. It is this uncertainty, destabilization and distrust in America that gives access to thinking about alternative ways to live anywhere in the world. Naylor gives her readers and black women a way to escape, even if momentarily through the text's pages by providing us access to a fictional black island based on the actual Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia. This multidimensional sight or site allows for the ability of imagination required to curtail hopelessness while equipping us with ways to best combat a society intent on confining subjects and their ideas of space through mapping as mechanisms of controlling how black women construct invisible perimeters and deconstruct parameters.

<u>The Mother(s) Land</u>

Utilizing the unknown map in the frontispiece directs our attention to the past, present and future as there is no definitive way of knowing its date of creation. In this regard, the novel and its

map are timeless and also genre bending as its contents feel like a travelogue or tourist guide. We need, or at least want to understand the meanings of these places. While the novel is fictional, does that imply all in it, is too? Both South Carolina and Georgia actually exist, as does the Atlantic Ocean. As a replication of archival material, this map centers multiple life forms while prioritizing the community's proxemics in relation to state lines and between bodies of water. In many ways, *Mama Day* functions as a black feminist transatlantic text. By traveling beyond the features of its characters, the novel extends itself to historical relationships with both the land and water. That Willow Springs borders on the Atlantic Ocean attests to the origin story of stolen African captives being thrust into the New World. The Springs after Willow suggests conception and a new birth in the form of an island. To spring means to move upward or forward—to originate or arise from. Because islands are surrounded by water, it is the water that births the land Willow Springs rests on. Such inundation of watery spaces birthing the island and thus its inhabitants, supports the feminization or maternalism of the fictional barrier island of Willow Springs itself. Situated off the coast between Georgia and South Carolina, Willow Springs belongs to neither state nor the government. As a privately owned black landmass, it functions inside the realm of geography because it is mappable but is also beyond it because we cannot see behind the native flora or restrictive fencing (see Fig. 1). While the words written on the map follow English language conventions, they remain unfamiliar—Willow Springs, its environment and the people while not hidden are virtually unseen or unknown but in plain sight. This very aspect of being protected by land and separated by water is what makes Willow Springs one of the safest places in the novel but also the most vulnerable due to its history of being a self-sustaining black owned island since 1823. The island is small but substantial, the population is hyper-insulated and even visiting non-native outsiders know a trusted insider that was born there.

Within this vein, Naylor extends an invitation to an exclusive history or way of living and "[e]verybody knows but nobody talks about the legend of Sapphira Wade. 1823: persuaded Bascombe

Wade to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs."[209] Sapphira Wade's reverence is mentioned alongside 1823 and is synonymous with the fictional sea island. Marked by the year of her reign on the island, nothing is possible without the presence of this particular black enslaved woman whose legacy reverberates throughout the text, more like a supernatural force than a mere character. Her characterization is so highly lauded and regarded that her name, 1823 and Willow Springs occupy a type of spiritual realm; one that is otherworldly and incomprehensible to those outside of communal kin. All the female characters in the novel (Mama Day, Aunt/Miss Abigail, and Ophelia or "Cocoa") are primary, having equal influence over each other and the island bequeathed to them. Their matriarchal community is one of feminine power, encouragement and support all while evoking the spirit of their most sacred of ancestors. Consequently, this is a novel about black women who are biologically linked, but also about an island's gendered geography. Willow Springs as an origin story is geographical because of the histories created by these women. Katherine McKittrick calls these "black women's geographies [based] in their knowledges, negotiations and experiences"[210] while Erica R. Edwards identifies these spaces as "call[ing] forth new languages, new practices, and new imaginaries of survival and safety."[211] Black female progeny on this island come from a legendary bloodline, enact agency and have an influence over land, animals and people in the same way. In Willow Springs everything works together for the greater good. Home is everywhere encompassing the island, some spaces in unexpected places while unforeseen circumstances are encountered in other domains. What remains constant is that nobody departs Sapphira Wade's Willow Springs unchanged. Instead, visitors

[209] Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage Books and Random House Inc., 1988), 3.

[210] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x.

[211] Erica R. Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror* (New York University Press, 2021), 14.

find a newer home space and are far more equipped to tackle the larger world outside of the island's limits—everyone who visits, even those once considered outsiders are bound by kindred bonds.

Forced migrations like slavery at sea render a type of otherworldly occupancy wherein Africans in America are neither treated like visitors nor citizens in a world they made, new. During transatlantic enslavement aboard human cargo vessels, black geography was hidden in the bowels of the ship where dark bodies were deeply stowed. This type of erasure posits such flesh as simultaneously invisible but hyper-valuable despite their disappearance or lack of physical presence on deck. In this regard, Eurocentrism posits black skin, black corporality or black mobility, and therefore black life as wholly "ungeographic" to borrow McKittrick's term. However, black life renders itself legible through various registers and it is through abstraction but also absence that the black body is always looming, even if beyond our scope of vision. Kathleen Kirby conceptualizes geography as "overlapping physical, metaphorical, theoretical, and experiential contours–bringing into view external actions taking place in space with subjectivities, imaginations, and stories."[212] Similarly, Naylor's *Mama Day* privileges black women through what Jenny Sharpe argues are "the crevices of power"[213] where female forces actively engage in reconfiguring geography by reshaping terrains as alternative forms of community building within a larger context of world making.

A New(er) York in Willow Springs

This year in 2024 marks the quadricentennial of the Dutch settling in New York, one of thirteen original colonies. Geographically, the island of New York is fundamentally marked and inextricably linked by domination, displacement and transatlantic slavery. Such spatial colonization posits New York as initially unmapped but also ripe for geographies of exploitation much like the

[212] Kathleen Kirby, *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1996), 9.

[213] Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women's Lives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xxi.

island of Willow Springs. Voyaging, violence and enslavement mark the landscape of an old New York as geography is constructed nearly everywhere by white European men projecting their masculine fervor and fury onto precolonial waters, lands and individuals they transported from one world to another. The relationship between Bascombe Wade and Sapphira is also marked by both characters experiencing transatlantic travel, white privilege or deplorable enslavement concurrently. It was along the Hudson River that Dutch colonial travelers established the colony of New Amsterdam and forty years later, it was renamed New York when the English succeeded. New York is also the home of one protagonist, George Andrews who represents the breadth and depth of internalizing his colonized status as a type of lone or lost black man. Naylor situates a bustling New York against the backdrop of an old rural Willow Springs in excavating that any geography where blacks exist, can be made into a safer space created for and by them.

As a native New Yorker, Naylor's writerly pursuits and interests construct the very geographical expanse this text provides. As the daughter of a transit worker and telephone operator whose parents relocated to escape the structural replication of backbreaking physical labor, Gloria Naylor's fascination with navigation, negotiation and communication reads almost as a hereditary birthright. Fleeing their hometown of Robinsonville, Mississippi to escape systemic cycles of sharecropping cotton, ensuing debt peonage and southern Jim Crow apartheid, both Roosevelt Naylor and Alberta McAlpin Naylor were intent on cultivating psychic and physical environments of freedom for their two daughters. Location, access and the space to think beyond agrarian confines while embracing the vibrancy of diverse city life was established early for Naylor. Rather than viewing geography as finitely fixed or based on rigid demarcations, Naylor allows herself to be led in this pursuit that ultimately affords her the creativity to write both real and imaginary spaces, whether they exist in her world or within the pages of her novels.

After graduating from high school, Naylor joins the Jehovah's Witness faith and left seven years later due to her unwillingness to participate in organized religion. This refusal to be defined but also guided by institutional religion is fundamentally a negation of colonization and domination. Constantly in search of belonging, Naylor enrolled at Medgar Evers College to study nursing, but quickly left after realizing that her intimate love for reading literature far outweighed any other spaces she chose to occupy. After transferring to Brooklyn College, she was introduced to African American literature almost exclusively through reading black women's work like Anne Petry's *The Street* (1946) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970); this is the place Naylor realized the possibilities for her own writing. Earning her Bachelor's Degree in English, she published her debut novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and then earned an MA in African American Studies from Yale University a year afterwards while writing *Linden Hills* (1983) as a thesis project under the guidance of Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. While Naylor did not adhere to religious dogma, her belief in literature and the study of black peoples through elite echelons of academia further proves her value in evoking sacred methodologies if not spiritual modalities of power through her work.

Collective spirituality and not organized religion is what structures *Mama Day*, which visits the fictional sea island of Willow Springs that lie both in and outside of the American South, existing as a separatist land and sea mass. The very first page is of an island map completely surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, natural vegetation and fauna. While there are words on the map itself that identify the physical placement of a community, Naylor redefines what constitutes origin stories privileging how, where and when narratives might begin through imagery. That readers are greeted with a map before introductory prose allows the privileging of space over place. Pictures occupy spaces where places exist. Although there are words on the map, they read as a foreign language we lack knowledge of. Readers experience a type of cognitive disruption to what we are beholding and this is precisely where the actual narrative begins—however, we must keep reading the text if we are to adequately investigate

the signs and signals on the first page. In this regard, *Mama Day* functions like Chapter 2's *Kindred* because it ends precisely where it begins. When encountering the novel's photographic preface, we automatically occupy positions of outsiders, tourists, ethnographers, or castaways.

There are no identifying markers on the map to non-natives and untrained Willow Springs eyes—it is an insulated island that is identifiable solely by individuals and families who inhabit it. Additionally, there are no street names, signposts or landmarks other than South Carolina, Georgia, the Atlantic, The Sound and a bridge. On the first page, (see Fig. 3) there is a family tree that begins with Sapphira Wade, born in 1799 and ends with Ophelia or Cocoa, born in 1953. Familial mapping of the town, its folks and the island is integral to the theories surrounding cartographies of separation, autonomy and territory. Naylor provides a map for readers to enhance our understanding of the real, unknown and unmarked. As visitors, we are not privy to the inner workings of Willow Springs because we do not have access to it, yet. The novel's map invites, inverts, dissuades and perplexes guests to enter a smaller unknown world, both literarily (as readers witnessing the map like archival material) and figuratively (as we assume this place is fantastic and fictional). As readers who are unfamiliar with how to situate this geography, how are we able to successfully reach the island psychosocially? Accessing the island and its people is reliant on narrative discovery but also the belief that there may be places just like the novel's map that do, exist.

I read Gloria Naylor's placement of the map, family tree and bill of sale all as visual and written testimonies that seemingly incomprehensible documents, imagined or fantastical places for black people are very real. All three archival materials validate the existence of both peoples and places first originating with the Middle Passage. Naylor hereby testifies that because certain places on a map, names on a shipping ledger, and centuries of trading commodified flesh might be unknown, unrecorded or unrecognized to some has absolutely no bearing on the legitimacy of its existence or the value it carries throughout generations. While attempting to read narrativized supporting evidence

or replicas of archival materials, the novel has already begun the process of reading us and any expectations we project onto the island or its inhabitants. As cultural consumers, the text provides a visual glimpse of a symbolic site or homeland that is created rather than located or reachable on a map; it only exists to those who believe in it and their belief allows various forms of accessibility.

In a 2000 interview, Gloria Naylor shares that "Sapphira Wade" is the basis for a historical novel "follow[ing] Wade's journey from Norway and Sapphira's journey from Senegal."[214] Her meticulous manuscript although unfinished illustrates years of research and attention to how the individual stories of a Norwegian-born Bascombe Wade and a Senegalese-born woman named Sapphira are connected. Giving credit and attention to both Willow Springs founders, Naylor creates a world for them before arriving at and settling on the island. While *Mama Day* does not consistently refer to Africa as a homeland, it explicitly references it through the figure of the mother (who bore seven sons) and the land that is deeded in 1823. Representing the mother-land as an embodied black African-born woman adds to the significance of homelands being fluid. Home is not exclusively dependent on coordinates on a map. Both Sapphira Wade and Bascombe Wade take Senegal and Norway across the Atlantic with them. Their cross-cultural exchanges once in America posit the triangular slave trade as a newer take on how African, American and European hybridity creates different types of transatlantic capital within historical fiction.

Naylor's work of fiction represents something very real. Willow Springs is an island created by one black woman, cultivated by black people for black women. While not explicitly named, the archetypal island of Willow Springs is representative of Gullah islands as sites symbolizing a precolonial or anticolonial home, resistance to technological infringement, geographical modernization and to rural gentrification and mass displacement. The necessity to hold onto rich and

[214] Charles E. Wilson Jr. "A Dialogue with Gloria Naylor." *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004): 185-193.

fertile bequeathed land and cultural customs stems from the preservation of memory and an unwillingness to accept colonial domination as a final reality on the island. This rejection also alludes to the inability to be confined or defined by enslavement like the Africans or Igbo's did by flying, walking or swimming back to Africa that is vividly outlined in both Chapters 2 and 3. Towards the middle of *Mama Day*, Sapphira Wade is not identified by name but again by the year 1823, the year of maternity, independence and resistance: "a slave woman who came to Willow Springs and…left to journey back home east over the ocean" (Naylor 111). Lauded as an original maternal ancestor in the novel, she is regarded with the same spirit, energy and will of those that historically partook in a mass suicide in 1803 at St. Simmons Island, Georgia. Real-life Igbo men and women who survived one Middle Passage chose to collectively drown through another passageway. Their refusal to have their God-given freedom revoked is identical to Sapphira Wade's tenacious determination to be a free, self-actualized human being and not under the terminal possession or proprietorship of another individual. Naylor supplants these supposed well documented myths and beliefs with the Willow Springs inhabitants. Each of them actively and effectively practices retention and transmission of African diasporic values rooted in oral folkloric histories that pay homage to origin stories and homelands where blacks were forcibly removed centuries ago. Africa becomes the American south and is synonymous with returning to a paradise with its own distinct sets of internal problems and pressures. While paradise is certainly lost at the beginning and end of the narrative, it is eventually restored to a degree. Willow Springs is still considered a utopia because it remains unscathed by colonial domination and destruction. The land was willed to an African-born black woman named Sapphira and will remain under black female ownership for centuries to come. Ripe for exploitation, the island is not for sale nor will it be transferred to anyone outside of their bloodline. Inheritance here lies in the maintenance of virginal land near the Atlantic Ocean and passing it on to generations of black female progeny.

After the map's preface and before the proof or bill of sale, there is a family tree with Sapphira Wade singularly centered at the top, born in 1799. In the same ways Willow Springs is characterized through its independence or separation from the mainland's mainstream value systems of capitalism, rural-to-urban renewal and tourism, so too is the matriarch of the island, itself. Willow Springs is gendered and personified as a Sapphira Wade-like force while she is portrayed as an island on the family tree. Willow Springs is obsolete without its matron and her dominion is not possible without the island in which her husband relinquishes to her. She also acts as the founder, not the initial purchaser of the land. In this regard, she separates herself or her colonized African-born body from that of her land-owning husband. Like the inland portion of the island, her name is at the top and isolated. Although it is her legacy of successors listed below her, the family tree's hierarchal ranking is striking. The man she procreates with is not listed, as if she bore her seven children entirely by herself. There is no mention or record of any male presence according to this integral line of descent. Since it is unlikely that she was utilizing intracervical insemination, intrauterine insemination or in vitro fertilization in the nineteenth century, it is unclear why this particular paternal erasure is so stark. If this is an origin story, then both Willow Springs and Sapphira Wade act as virginal wombs that produce plentiful bounties in the form of land and children. It is as if God is the only Father who helped conceive and deliver her children. The biological father of her seven sons is regarded as absent and nonexistent as if he is a mere donor within the novel's historical record. According to the family tree, Sapphira Wade is a single mother who birthed seven sons on her own or through immaculate conception.

However, the text's origin story does include him and we discover:

> It happened in 1823: she smothered Bascombe Wade in his very bed and lived to tell the story for a thousand days. 1823: married Bascombe Wade, bore him seven sons in just a thousand days, to put a dagger through his kidney and escape the hangman's noose, laughing in a burst of flames. 1823: persuaded Bascombe Wade in a thousand days to deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs, poisoned him for his trouble, to go on and bear seven sons. (Naylor 3)

While knowing that she had seven sons, there is an asterisk by the name of Jonah Day at the bottom of the page that reads, "God rested on the seventh day and so would she. Hence, the family's last name." Subsequently, the beginning Chapter One elaborates on this idea of the number seven equating completion and perfection. What is clear is that she marries Bascombe Wade and kills him three times and in three different ways, further complicating folkloric mysteries surrounding her life and husband's death. Sapphira Wade also takes the last name of her husband despite not passing it onto their sons. There are three distinct events in 1823 and each detail what was done to Bascombe Wade on account of Sapphira Wade. She is the protagonist and antagonist based on what unfolds in 1823. In a thousand days, Sapphira smothers her husband, gives birth to seven sons, stabs him in his kidney, has him transfer the deed to the entire island, and poisons him. As mother, murderer, and wife, her character is extraordinary yet plausible all at once.

It is later revealed that "a slave woman who *took* her freedom in 1823…(l)eft behind seven sons and a dead master" (111). There is no mention of a marriage or husband; instead, there is a bold insinuation that for Sapphira to become free, she has to seize liberation and that the man laying claim to her body has to die. While it is unknown whether Sapphira Wade, whom he also owned loved or was romantically invested in her husband is unclear but most importantly, inconsequential. How can love exist when consent is denied or impossible to contest? How does an enslaved woman marry her owner? All important questions, Naylor guides our attention away from a bi-racial and transactional relationship rooted in southern American slavery towards a cosmopolitan romance novel. Ophelia, or Cocoa as she is called by loved ones, worries she will be unable to date, marry and have children with a successful black man in New York City. Her concerns are as contemporary, relevant and valid as they were during its year of publication in 1988 and within the 1985 setting of the novel. Cocoa's preoccupation with wanting to connect and marry someone of African descent stems from her deeply rooted ties to an all-black homeland. To understand the invention of Willow Springs, it is useful

turning to prosperous nonfictional Gullah islands communities and their cultural transcendence spanning over 400 years.

Off the Gulf of Gullah

South Carolina and Georgia's Sea Islands are culturally and ecologically unique landscapes along the southeastern coast of the United States. Although these lands were historically claimed and settled by white European landowners through colonial acquisition or theft, they too were cultivated and cared for almost exclusively by people of African descent. Such large-scale agricultural plantation spaces while housing blacks and whites also provided a significant amount of social and physical isolation from the mainland surrounding the sea islands themselves. Culturally, enslaved populations brought to South Carolina have been traced from Africa and the Caribbean, prospering on this land for more than three centuries. The consistent presence of Gullah populations maintaining their culture and preserving their land is an inspiration for Naylor whom recreates such spaces in the form of Willow Springs. Because places like Willow Springs physically exist in South Carolina and Georgia, it allows for opportunities to visit actual Sea Islands, whether through heritage travel or within literary fiction. Naylor offers her readers multiple modalities in reaching black landscapes and how we can all preserve them. More than a cautionary tale on how to keep native lands unscathed, Naylor pushes the boundaries of how African descended people work in community with the land in recreating geography that is mutually beneficial to people and indigenous agriculture that sustains all lifeforms.

A huge reason that the Gullah have sustained their lifestyles and maintained their culture is because they are the dominant racial group on the islands. These individuals exhibit

> more African influences in their self-expression, behavior, and beliefs than any other long established large American population group; they are genetically less mixed with white and Native American than most other African Americans…theirs was the largest overwhelmingly African American area in the United States; and Sullivan's Island off Charleston, South Carolina, is often called the Ellis Island of Black America. (Pollitzer 1999, xiii)

This idea of self-actualization found within individuals and communities spanning South Carolina and Georgia like the introductory page of the novel maps out for us, is about preservation. While the Gullah did not travel back to Africa, they did not have to. They created a subset of the African continent within the United States and choose to remain here as a testament of their refusal to leave their homelands. Choosing to stay is also in opposition to relinquishing the land of one's ancestors wherein the land itself is earned and not owned. Although the Gullah did not choose this geographical location to settle, something far deeper is at play—the land, soil, and water chose them to live in harmony with and that is a far greater gift than anything colonialism or slavery took away. Such a rhythmic harmony as this is precisely why Naylor positions the Sea Islands as the site of the origin story because without the facts of historical slavery, a fictional space like Willow Springs cannot be imagined nor written.

There are five distinct factors that are responsible for the development and livelihood of the Sea Island Gullah peoples in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia. These include the presence of African roots; being the racial and cultural majority; isolation; agricultural systems; and the early allotment and purchase of land.[215] The Gullah populations that inhabit St. Helena Island where Naylor traveled conducting extensive research are direct descendants of over 200,000 enslaved people imported directly from Africa. Connections made from the African continent to the majority of the Sea Islands situates a definitive site and traceable location of persistent African heritage on southern United States soil. Importing forced labor increased rapidly and because these individuals were directly from Africa, African cultural traditions or norms, linguistic patterns and community building were reinforced over centuries. As a deeply southern region, much of the antebellum slave

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[215] Elizabeth Brabec and Sharon Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures: The Landscape of the Sea Island Gullah." *Landscape Journal* 26.1 (2007): 152.

culture was unequivocally shaped by both first-and-second generation Africans with direct and distinct connections to the continent, its people, communal lifestyles and linguistic characteristics.

Between 1795 and 1804, the enslaved population increased by nearly sixty thousand and were referred to as the new stock importations.[216] If Sapphira Wade, the matriarch in the fictional setting of Willow Springs were an individual and not a character, she would have been among this new shipment of African importations. Described in the text as born in 1799, she too was born in Africa and brought to America's southern Lowcountry either as a baby or young child. Although not explicitly mentioned in the novel, if Sapphira Wade were old enough to remember her native homeland, she would have retained many of her African traditions. If someone like her forgot them, they would have certainly been raised by other first-generation Africans who imparted the value of remaining African in America and how to behave freely when in bondage. People of African descent largely outnumbered white plantation and people-owning populations which suggests that Europeans were also heavily influenced by African blackness if not accustomed to both overt and covert displays of indigenous customs. Consequently, Naylor magnifies this reality by introducing both Bascombe Wade, the white Norwegian European as being married to his property, a black Senegalese Sapphira who shares his last name and bears seven of his sons. Such creolization attests to the physical closeness of white planters and their black property and progeny. However, it also illuminates the murky slippage between white men and the black women they believed themselves to own under the law, in both body and mind. While it appears that there may be some type of intimacy between Bascombe Wade and Sapphira, Naylor is quick to remind that an enslaved woman took and was not granted her freedom in 1823 on the first page of Chapter One in the novel. That this admission comes directly after the map and land deed suggests that while Sapphira Wade's character is fictional, it also resembles

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[216] Rowland, Lawrence S., Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers, Jr. *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina*. (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

the real Gullah described as living on the various Sea Islands. Taking ownership of the freedom one is entitled to exemplifies that Sapphira is herself the only master capable of fully possessing her personhood and her refusal to be owned.

Sapphira's autonomy over self extends conversations speaking to the strength of the Gullah culture and "a connection to the land not seen in other regions…since they had lived and worked the land for generations, they felt they had a moral, if not legal, claim to the land."[217] Autonomy, environmentally sustainability and agricultural productivity is specifically made possible through the geographic isolation of the island itself. As explicitly referenced in the novel, there is a singular bridge that allows access to the island's mainland and inland. However, this fictive bridge breaks and is subsequently ruined from a storm; similarly, much of the Gullah islands are still only accessible by boat, passenger ferries and have bridges that cross to intracoastal waterways as we see on the map before the novel's prologue. Much like the persistence of African culture on the island, this equally meant that Eurocentric whiteness was limited among enslaved populations. Bascombe Wade is outnumbered by the bondspeople he owns but it is unclear whether he wishes to liberate them amidst his signing the land deed over to all the enslaved individuals he legally owns. Perhaps the isolation of Willow Springs is the reason for bequeathing his property with, more property in the form of an entire island. Intentionally unclear in the book, was he forced to "deed all his slaves every inch of land in Willow Springs" (Naylor 3), was he the only non-black individual on the island, and how did his minority status in such an isolated space affect his decision to alter the historicity within the novel? We must consider the many factors responsible for influencing a fictionalized affluent planter like Bascombe Wade in this particular region to sign all his covetable real estate to his laborers. Revisiting the five factors responsible for preserving Gullah ways of life in the Lowcountry of South Carolina and Georgia, we begin to unpack glimpses of real sea island politics. Was Wade overwhelmed by the

[217] Elizabeth Brabec and Sharon Richardson, "A Clash of Cultures," 153.

presence of Africans being the racial and cultural minority; did he fear extensive isolation; or become influenced by thriving agricultural systems maintained by blacks; or was he an advocate of the early allotment and purchase of land for African descended peoples despite owning these same people?

Agricultural task systems are specific to the South Carolina Lowcountry regions. It was brought to the Sea Islands from the Caribbean by native enslaved populations and their immigrant planters. It involves individuals in bondage being assigned a daily task throughout the day and once complete, the laborer is then in total control of their time for the remainder of the day. Gang systems are distinctly different because they involve the enslaved working in larger groups under the control of a driver and are forced to work entire days from dusk until dawn. Tasking allows for further autonomy despite absolutely no financial compensation. The freedom of time while in bondage differs significantly from having to spend all of one's waking hours consistently laboring without adequate time to invest in oneself or family. Task labor systems allow for investing in one's own life while reinforcing bonds with family members, having a better understanding of the landscape and locations of community wherein social organizations are solidified. This degree of sovereignty within such a rigid structure of southern plantation slavery frames the importance of owning one's time as resistance while being tasked with a role and exhausting all of one's labor everyday throughout a lifespan. Whereas gang labor is terminal, the task system's interest is in preserving the black body for a lifetime. Although the objective of both networks is to fundamentally extract endless supplies of enslaved labor, one is more progressive or slower and the other is accelerated or deadly. Both forms of labor are fatal, however task labor illustrates a social death whereas the other accelerates physical death.

Researchers theorize that the "task system allowed the [en]slave[d] the free time to form their own communities, develop and practice their religion, devise their own amusement, provide extra sustenance for their own families and even acquire wealth, through the production of barter of

wares."[218] Practices of bartering wares or trading goods and services without utilizing money builds communal currency that prioritizes relationships, while ensuring both individual and collective needs are met. Intimacies involved in the capital of trading extend the exploitative enterprises of slavery and allow spaces for complex systems within other institutions to exist and thrive. While enslaved peoples were unpaid and considered transferrable property, they improved this schema by trading what they earned or created. Distinct practices of self-preservation exist wherein Sea Island Gullah people are able to keep parts of their creative work, devote time to themselves, and focus exclusively on sharing with other black people. Practices such as these while not explicitly hidden are considered sacred in that they were autonomous and secret to white planters who might believe themselves to own all the rights and creative productivity of their plantation laborers.

Consequently, these alternative lifestyles and intracommunal interactions of bondspeople who are perceived as the commodity trading other commodities is miraculous. These behaviors exhibit a pride and belief in one's humanity through black labor production extending the confines of plantation slavery. Whether based on singular tasks or toiling all day completing multiple skilled duties, enslaved Sea Island peoples continue creating ways to disengage with racist systems and focus on mutually beneficial organizations. Through fostering a strong sense of self through one's unpaid labor, these individuals understood their value and the economic structures they helped create, maintain and sustain. Knowing this reality contributes to a positive self-image and identity formation responsible for many captive Africans in this particular Lowcountry region to qualify their interest and investment in the land that superseded anyone else. Simply because they were viewed as property does not mean that they could or would not one day become proprietors.

[218] See Rowland, Lawrence S. *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina*, 353.

This is precisely Naylor's position on black female land ownership because "it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words" (Naylor 3). Sapphira Wade epitomizes the "most significant historical factor in the development of the Gullah community…the purchase and allotment of land."[219] Although imagining it, Naylor poses the idea of an enslaved matriarch possessing the deed and raising a family on that land despite the era in which she exists in the novel. Although the dates are not identically aligned to Sapphira Wade's fictional reign in 1823, Special Field Order Number 15 on January 16, 1865 declares:

> The Islands from Charleston south, the abandoned fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea…Each head of family could preempt a plot of not more than forty acres of tillable ground…no white person, unless military officers and soldiers detailed for duty, will be permitted to reside…[T]he sole and exclusive management of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves, subject only to the United States military authority.[220]

This is critical because the Civil War began at Fort Sumter, South Carolina in 1861 and ended during Spring 1865. The order referenced was published during the winter of 1865 before the war officially ended. Equally relevant is that less than two months after the order, the federal government also set up the Freedman's Bureau wherein small plots of land were released to freedmen but the question of title and deed ownership continued being a contentious issue for formerly enslaved individuals. This would have meant that individuals like Sapphira Wade who were once legally considered slaves would have faced further issues obtaining title deeds on land and properties. Since she marries the same white planter who also owns her during a time in the novel, she would have also had trouble purchasing or subsequently living on the land. However, if Sapphira Wade and other freed people on the island had the entire land deeded to them, it eliminates the issues of ownership that real living Gullah populations were subject to before and after the Civil War.

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[219] See Bracbec and Richardson, 155.

[220] Guion Griffis Johnson. *A Social History of the Sea Islands: With Special Reference to St. Helena Island, South Carolina.* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1930), 188.

Land being allotted specifically to the head of household during the antebellum period speaks to the legend of Sapphira Wade as a wife, mother, and enslaved woman married to a free-born European man. Further, it portrays a segregationist interest rooted in exclusive land rights and a push by the government in the establishment of prime real estate on fertile ground by the sea. However, this field order and the Freedman's Act were revoked by President Andrew Johnson, which meant many plantations among the Sea Islands were re-confiscated by the federal government and sold to former plantation owners. If plantation owner Bascombe Wade were real and not a character, or would have lived and not have signed the title deed over to Sapphira Wade or all the other people he owned on the island, he too would have gotten this land back legally without appeal or protest. Land allotments like these suggest that there was an interest in allowing blacks to settle on land they single-handedly cultivated but also an investment for freed black populations building their own separatist communities without white infiltration.

Despite the Gullah already having an established culture within the South Carolina and Georgia regions, the federal government felt it necessary to intervene in the release of these lands to freed black individuals. Despite this fact, "by 1870 much of the islands were owned by a society of free black farmers who had an opportunity to become self[-]sufficient."[221] Naylor challenges this conception of the historical record by providing a context of black legacy and ownership within the Sea Islands decades before post-emancipation. She further problematizes ideologies surrounding patriarchy, stolen native lands, ownership of people and white male progeny by insisting that black women defy this myth. Naylor and the multinarrative perspective accomplish this feat by introducing one enslaved woman who went "and bore seven sons" (3) on the same land where the majority of her modern-day all-female family resides more than 165 years later. Sapphira Wade is both described as a "slave woman" (3) and "a slave woman who *took* her freedom" (111) so in many ways she embodies

[221] See Bracbec and Richardson, 157.

the very order that might have benefitted a Gullah person like her, a substantial land allotment. Most fascinating however is that the text claims that she became free in 1823 and this federally backed order was issued some 42 years later. This suggests that Naylor likely found supporting documentation that freedmen and freedwomen existed as early as the 1820's and that perhaps the government was instituting rights to specific communities that were unofficially, in full effect.

While there was a clear mandate to allocate lands to freed peoples throughout Gullah communities, the "heirs' property" results in joint ownership of property. It is not individually based and while all heirs may use and operate the property, none have the title. Meaning, if the title or deed to the land is not legally changed in the court of law to reflect new ownership, the land remains in the name of the deceased ancestor. Therefore, the land belongs to everyone which is why the narrator insists that all of the enslaved and not just Sapphira owns Bascombe Wade's land. In the case of *Mama Day*, Sapphira Wade does not have to deed her land because it automatically passes onto her seven sons. Traditions of both African and Gullah land ownership are understood as a communal effort in conservation and operation by entire families laying claim to lands. Traditionally African systems center on "cooperative organization evolv[ing] among blacks in the Sea Islands after emancipation; following kinship lines, relatives purchased land near each other."[222] Ideas of African kinship ties traveling across the Atlantic Ocean to create home spaces away from origin sites further illuminates the lack of western demarcations of space on the map (see Fig. 1). There are four home tracts on the island marked, "Mama Day's Trailer", "Ruby's House", "Abigail's House" and "Bernice and Ambush's House". If we consider "The Other Place" and "Graveyard" as final resting places or homes for departed ancestors, then there are five houses in total. Homes being close together depict social networks of extended kin that provide support and protection. While Willow Springs is certainly

[222] William S. Pollitzer. *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 131.

considered rural, the community is not isolated from each other. Living closely together or among too many people is a western Eurocentric ideology rooted in competition, access to excessive land ownership and the division of space. In fictive Willow Springs or with the real-life Gullah communities such environmental individualism does not exist nor does it hold any cultural capital. Landscapes much like property is to be shared equitably among family, extended non-biological kin and other indigenous inhabitants. Property is arranged in patterns where boundaries are blurred and distinctions dismissed.

Categorizing the physical landscape begins outward and moves inward where the plantation is primary, the family compound and then individual homes. Rather than simply a space of labor, the plantation also represents a defining place of the ancestors. Regarding agricultural task systems, many individuals and families continue to foster relationships with the land due to strong feelings of connectedness and pride for the land they nurtured. In addition to plantation spaces being sites of stolen extracted labor, these landscapes are still regarded as sacred residential ancestral sites. Such ancestral sites extend themselves beyond plantations boundaries to what the narrators in the text term, "The Other Place" "and written sources indicate [as] slave cemeteries covered in trees, and the graves not marked…[n]othing ever marks the graves, but the place is entirely devoted to them" (Pearson 1906, 65). Prioritizing the dead is one major theme of the text as it begins with the legend of a black enslaved woman and ends with the memorialization of a free black man who gives his life so that his wife—a black woman who is a future heir and matriarchal successor can live to create her own legacy.

Access to these family plots and cemeteries remain an ongoing issue of confusion if not contention within the Sea Islands. Since graves remain unmarked, they are invisible to outsiders who have no way of knowing or comprehending the gravity that the land is sacred and an eternal home for departed ancestors. Conflicts between the sacred and secular, that is honoring relationships with God

or prioritizing neo-colonial capitalist ventures invested in over-developing native lands is consistently present. Sacred ancestral grounds necessitate that:

> when someone dies, the brush is cleared away from the funeral party and the actual burial…if the graves are unmarked, older residents remind the younger ones exactly who is buried where. In this way, the names of many of the deceased are remembered, though most graves remain unmarked. Thus, the cemeteries provide a focal reality that in many ways symbolizes the social meaning of belonging (Guthrie 1996, 23).

Death, like life is equally valued and paying homage is a constant or consistent act on behalf of the living. Although unmarked, the Gullah know precisely who is buried where, there is no confusion about the spaces in which the departed occupy. Older residents naming those buried to younger ones exhibits a deep historical knowledge of ancestral land and individual legacies verbally transmitted within private communal spaces like the graveyard. Just as the plantation or compound function as equal public and domestic spheres, cemetery sites are much more insular and private in terms of accessibility. Unmarked graves within this context are community property as anyone living within the area has access to these plots but also to distinct histories that are exclusively disseminated through oral traditions. Phonetically, the novel is written in a series of monologues with four primary narrators that alternate between tone, perspective, experience and gender. Such interplays throughout the novel function similarly to the vocality of characters whether still living, in transition or deceased. Belonging and the social implications of having a final resting place rely on the living to provide individual stories to others who did not know them. Resting in peace then is dependent on ensuring that the elders impart histories to newer generations ensuring everyone knows each other, whether in life or through death. There is no hierarchy for the living and the dead because everyone's story is told and their life matters just like their death does. Orality in this context creates storytellers among Sea Island residents specifically, the Gullah. Even after death, conversations are occurring in the presence of the deceased. Gullah griots then are similar to the narrators within the novel because their conversations center both the ancestors and the living which create future spatial abundance for incoming and upcoming

generations. An overwhelming amount of information is being transferred and shifts back and forth between speakers in various locations in different temporal spheres. Through fiction, Naylor suggests that Gullah-like people are the creators of the novel itself or the impetus for it. Gullah subgroups are recipients of the island's knowledge and memory through textual fiction rooted in historical fact which is the purpose of the novel itself. As cultural learners, much of the coastal Sea Island populace must remember the past as an actively concerted assignment to pass it on to the next generation. This practice of genealogical transmittance thrusts time, history and legend into the future thereby embodying black legacy through land accumulation and the accessibility of resting peacefully in the afterlife on consecrated land.

Shortly after Ophelia and George arrive to Willow Springs, she tells Mama Day "I wanted to stop by the family plot to clean up a little. Grandma, it's a shame the way you let that place run down" to which her grandmother responds, "I'll be spending plenty of time there soon enough" (Naylor 152). Dialogues between black female family members gestures towards a lexicon of cultural custodians and the replication of matriarchs within families. Although the characters are fictional, their conversation reflects similar messaging as the one referenced above by a Gullah Sea Island resident. Ophelia insists on maintenance of the plot being essential. For her, this location is a heritage site that everyone must collectively maintain. Cleaning up this space becomes Ophelia's priority while visiting her family members. As one of the successors of Sapphira Wade, her responsibilities are rooted in feelings of obligation through her bloodline, race and gender. As a black woman in the novel, her work is to monitor the upkeep of the family plot. This is partially why she scolds her grandmother for neglecting this particular spiritual domain. Since her life is in New York and not Willow Springs, it is increasingly more difficult for Ophelia to consistently care for her grandmother and great-aunt Abigail. Mama Day and Aunt Abigail are sisters and care for each other, however the rebuttal Mama Day gives further supports the position of the cemetery as an actively alive site. Mama Day's calm insistence that

she will soon be spending plenty of time there supports this idea of the graveyard as a fluid and not dormant landscape. It yields rest, peace and opportunities to communicate or honor ancestors despite their being a physical absence. As Mama Day suggests, such absences are inconsequential as both life and death should be regarded with the same admiration and devotion. Her comment also suggests that she is preparing Ophelia for the continual labor and conservation required in being a custodial heir to the land and guardian of historical legacies. Unmarked graves and cemeteries act as sacred safe spaces for entire communities while extensions of homes arranged in a cluster or characterized as compounds symbolize further privacy from its already rural surroundings.

Compounds, or clusters of buildings and homes can be found directly on the map (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) with no visible plantation site anywhere on the diagram. Enslaved housing quarters were within the planter or master's direct line of vision on all plantations throughout the American south, the Lowcountry, and coastal zones. Hierarchal trajectories like these illustrate, seemingly offer no privacy for enslaved individuals and their families, instead reinforcing constant threats of surveillance. As the map details, the natural landscape provides opportunities for both privacy from the mainland, visitors and tourist while maintaining close proxemics to community kinfolk. Plots are conveniently separated or obstructed by the main road, long expanse of fence, wildly tall vegetation and thicket. Natural environments equally offer protection and separation; keeping native inhabitants or residents insulated and outsiders on the periphery. Further this reconfiguration of colonial architecture provides a communal restructuring outside the purview of white omnipresent views of black life. The destruction or invisibility of the plantation does not erase its existence but shifts the importance to black indigeneity and nature, or raw undeveloped landscapes. No longer plantations or exclusively sites of terminal oppression, these compounds regulate and relegate such territories into fluid home spaces. Areas such as these, reject linearity in opposition to living under colonial forms of white might and norms of historical reconnaissance. Prior to emancipation, spatial order and organizations were

based on the wanton demands of plantation owners. Through communities of compounds, the Gullah are able to reconfigure these physically social structures while creating a more organic arrangement like the land on which they live. Since the compound is central to familial life, social and racial uplift, its purpose is not exclusively for the betterment of nuclear families. Instead, the compound with its expansive reach is for the assistance of extended family that is not biologically bound or genetically linked. Communities as an extension of oneself or household are inherently African and indicative of traditional village settlements. Returning to conventional African lifeways as mechanism for survival and renewing a connectedness with the land reflects the importance of bringing an African island in the middle of America's deep south.

Diasporic Orphan

If mass continental kidnapping and displacement creates abilities to dream of other worlds, how might being parentless correlate with homelessness? How are connections through parentage linked with ideas of home, rootedness and conceptions of belonging? Can one be without parents and still have a sense of home or a place where they feel intimately and freely at home? Is having access to parents foundational in creating conceptions surrounding home and identity? In other words, can a black child that has lost their mother and has no recollection of their father find their way home without a map? Naylor asks us all to reconsider if we should be asking these questions of the imaginary characters or of our actual selves? What if the fictional map is not for those in the novel but for us? Which steps and markers will help in leading us home?

George Andrews, the new husband of Ophelia grows up a New York City orphan who repeatedly attempts to confirm his feelings of home and belonging in Willow Springs through western or Eurocentric modes of demarcation. Heavily relying on mapping rather than trusting his intuition as a guide, Andrews utilizes written data rather than oral histories and employs the scientific method to solve cultural phenomena. He verbally explains to his wife that Willow Springs is paradise and that

he is "entering another world" (Naylor 175). His interactions with black women in the text stem from admiration and their pride in remaining culturally rooted in and communally connected to their island. I interrogate the reasons for Andrews' prioritization of theory over empirical processes while on the island to validate his experiences through identifying him as an outsider or orphan of the diaspora. His simultaneous distrust of the mysticism surrounding the island's history of black cultural identity formation conflates with his childlike fascination. Cultural concoctions like these, posit Andrews as the quintessentially successful, upwardly mobile African American, ripe for diasporan membership but unaware of his participation within heritage roots tourism.

As a diasporic orphan and urban citizen, George finds comfort and pride in his city despite not having access to traditional or nuclear family ties. While introducing Ophelia to New York, he simultaneously overlooks the most admirable aspects of his own community. While he holds tremendous regard for other ethnic communities, he minimizes the breadth of his own, relegating it to just a neighborhood, taking it for granted without assessing his environment as a larger part of his cultural self. Initially he separates Manhattan culture from that of Willow Springs until noticing that Ophelia goes "on and on, telling me all about *my* city, I could see that you understood nothing…you who had gone there following a myth" which is that Manhattan "[i]s a network of small towns, some even smaller than here in Willow Springs" (61). George immediately notices the value and similarities of his home base through the ways Ophelia acknowledges the importance of her home space. It is this familiarity and comfort that both subscribe to surrounding their respective urban or rural enclaves. Naylor does not privilege one space over the other; instead, she illustrates human connections to these sites as a methodology for excavating who we are, how we conceive of the world within these confines and how we construct our own ways of living and creating newer experiential worlds. Neither Willow Springs nor Manhattan are afforded priority in the novel as both render complex and distinct characteristics exclusively their own.

For George Andrews being an orphan is less about having a family and more concerned with the inability to lay claim to specific histories and therefore sites of lineage. At times, he appears to be envious, insecure or resentful of his wife's familial ties when in reality many of these traits are disguised as disbelief, admiration, ambition and unconditional love shared among close knit communities of black women across generations. Devoted to his wife and their marriage, his masculinity cannot fathom a world where black women maintain dominion over the land, everything operates organically and at the same time, where men are seemingly obsolete. If George allows himself to sit still and relax his preconceived notions about rural country spaces and native blacks that occupy them, his anxieties would diminish. Much of George's preoccupation with idealizing Willow Springs and his wife while there is entangled with his desire at reclaiming a lost home space, recuperating a fragmented racial identity, and fulfilling a detached ethnic designation. It is also equally rooted in him not ever having access to a black mother-figure or initially choosing a black female partner or lover. His only experiences with a female role model derive from an administrative guardian at the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys. Mrs. Johnson is meticulously mentioned throughout the novel as the only maternal-type figure for George. George's proximity to claiming a home in Willow Springs does not conclude his immersion process on this particular black female-centric island milieu, but exhibits the necessity for transformation through hybridity and cross-cultural examination or exchange.

Such histories of transcultural currency are also imprinted onto or through Ophelia, who is lovingly called Cocoa by family and Willow Springs citizens. Interestingly, she is fair or lighter-skinned with golden red hair but referred to as the color of chocolate. Cocoa's great-great grandmother, Sapphira Wade is, "satin black…18 & 23 black…[t]he black that can soak up all the light in the universe, can even swallow the sun[…] and it's only an ancient mother of pure black that one day spits out this kinda gold" (Naylor 3, 48). Regardless of skin tone, Cocoa is and considers herself black. However, her complexion is proof of an unmistakable historical encounter or exchange. While

Bascombe Wade is also her ancestor, she, her aunt and grandmother identify more with their darker-skinned African forbear. Narrating blackness through 1823 for Sapphira and Cocoa is critical to histories of violence afflicted and inflicted on both white and black bodies. Since Sapphira is an enslaved woman who births seven sons, then murders her owner/husband three times, Naylor encourages us to confront the exploitative sexual and reproductive nature of such interracial circumstances. These outcomes are specific to black women during transatlantic and antebellum plantation slavery. With the exception of Sapphira and Bascombe Wade, all their progeny and successors are all multiracial, multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational American-born Willow Springs citizens. But, is Willow Springs within the United States? This question problematizes boundaries and exposes the vastness within black cultural geographies since diasporas are created through carrying cultural hybridization through forced migrations and colonial conquests of transatlantic travel. Naylor exposes the possibilities of blackness being rooted and sprouting everywhere. Like Willow Springs, community and identity does not restrict itself to geographical sites in constructing a home or sense of belonging. This perspective supports that George's identity is firmly planted and entrenched within the cultural idiosyncrasies or geographical nuances of Manhattan despite being unacknowledged by himself. While he knows his city or home space well and exposes Ophelia to it, he often overlooks how culturally in tune he is to the specific rhythm of his New York island. Without claiming ownership over Manhattan, George constantly carves out spaces for himself. The shelter, Columbia, and his firm are all signposts much like the novel's map of Willow Springs.

Part of George's reluctance and excitement surrounding the cultural exchange that awaits him stems from initially seeing Ophelia twice in one day. He ruminates, "Until you walked into my office that afternoon, I would have never called myself a superstitious man. To believe in fate or predestination means you have to believe there's a future, and I grew up without one" (Naylor 22). While George's statement seems practical considering he does not believe himself to have any natural

or normal sense of upbringing, it is disheartening if not self-deprecating. Because he grows up nontraditionally unlike his wife does not make his story less valuable, or future unimportant. The fact that he does not have an identifiable family makes his story more interesting and the stakes higher. Even though his character is not real, he finds something authentic—a family and a home in an interviewee, who becomes his friend, lover and ultimately his wife. In many ways, his future depends on first seeing and meeting Ophelia serendipitously, spending quality time with her platonically, and ultimately encountering the paradise-like retreat of Willow Springs.

If we consider that George first sees Ophelia before they officially meet, this type of fortuitous fate or destiny can also be considered a form of magic. Before Ophelia's interview that day, both her and George see each other despite not speaking or interacting. They are nothing more than two strangers at a diner during a busy lunch hour as they see and pass each other without significant thought. It is not until Ophelia walks into the office of George Andrews, an equal partner at the Andrews and Stein Engineering Company that he admits, "there was no way for me to deny that you were there in front of me and I couldn't deny any longer that I knew it would happen—you would be in my future. The feeling is so strong, it almost physically stops me" (27). Although George does not consider himself superstitious or a believer in luck, he somehow comprehends the intensity of his feelings at this moment. Such feelings accompany his knowledge that Ophelia holds a significant role in his future, a future he also claims was once inaccessible growing up as a New York orphan. It is also based on languages of kinship, blood and tradition—your history awaits and will always find you.

George's first day on the island he is greeted by Ophelia's pleasant and welcoming aunt. Describing the interaction, he is shocked and thankful: "Miss Abigail put her hands on each side of my face—Well, bless your heart child — a lump formed in my throat…Up until that moment, no woman had ever called me her child. Did they see it in my face? The intense envy for all that you had and the gratitude for their being willing to let me belong?" (Naylor 176). While endearing, this scene

is emotionally vulnerable and sad. What is comforting is Miss Abigail's genuine embrace of her niece's husband who is also a stranger but what is most hurtful is that George believes he is an unclaimed son to an unknown mother and abandoned child that nobody misses until now. Believing that he is a motherless child in a grown man's body, George becomes hyperaware that something is missing in his life outside of his wife and that is a black maternal figure. Miss Abigail need not be his biological mother for him to acknowledge the words he has been waiting his whole life to hear and feel. While he may not be fully healed, in this exact moment, he understands feelings that accompany physical touched and unconditional love by an older, wiser black woman other than his wife. The lump in his throat and initial discomfort is due to him being in a foreign environment while encountering alien women that accept him for no other reason that he arrived with someone they love unconditionally. Further, the intense envy he articulates is really an overwhelming gratitude stemming from his wife having access to multiple maternal bonds that are unfathomable until he is in this moment. Typically considered southern hospitality, this type of welcoming is also consistent with ideas of a homeland outside of Africa, diasporic spaces that await the black body, community connectedness and active uplift. Ophelia introduces Willow Springs island as a heritage site and form of roots tourism responsible for calling George back home, from one city island to a rural one.

While playing cards with Dr. Buzzard in Willow Springs, George instantly recognizes a song. Unprompted he acknowledges "I didn't understand the rhythm and I refused to spoil it by attempting to join in. Perhaps if I had known that I only had to listen to the pulse of my blood" (214). Institutional inculcation for George occurs during boyhood and his beliefs are rooted in mainstream systems valuing types of knowledge that can be proven, application and resolutions. This is why he surprises himself by thinking he knows the same tune as Dr. Buzzard. Unsure of what he knows, he does not trust his intuition or feelings to join or subscribe to his blackness. Therefore, George is American

while sometimes negating the African or black, like "[t]he opposition between Willow Springs and Mainland values as signifying a binary between African American and Euro-American values."[223]

While not required or necessary, there are absolutely no cultural markers that aid in discernable racial identification other than George admitting he is black through experiences or interactions with other ethnic groups. Not yet an individual, he remains institutionalized, "the orphaned son of a prostitute, who loves Shakespeare's *King Lear* and prides himself on individualism, meritocracy and scientific rationality. The text ascribes his cultural amnesia […] therefore as a signifier of his status as a cultural orphan."[224] He could be anyone, anywhere in the world but his eventual connection to Ophelia brings him into focus. Logical or rational thinking like this is not limited to George Andrews but specific to the representation of learned, high value men in the text. Naylor subtly hints that these types of men: black, educated at top tier or Ivy League universities that are good-looking and career driven, exist in our real world as they do in this narrative. Their conventional modes of thinking and living align with American ideals and the conviction that American Dreams do come true. These types convince themselves that they epitomize the embodiment of being audacious and self-reliant.

One of Willow Springs' own residents has a son who is also institutionalized like George, believing in what he can record and rationalize. Reema's boy, only identified through his mother is also from Willow Springs, however he moves away to attend college. His transcribing interviews and recording orality into publishable literature is inferred earlier in the text:

> when Reema's boy—the one with the pear-shaped head—came hauling himself back from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder and a funny way of curling up his lip and clicking his teeth, all excited and determined to put Willow Springs on the map…and then he went around asking us about 18 & 23, there weren't nothing to do but take pity on him as he rattled on about 'ethnography,' 'unique speech patterns,' 'cultural preservation,' […] And he sent everybody he's talked to copies of the book he wrote, bound all nice with our name and his signed on the first page. (Naylor 7)

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[223] Daphne Lamothe, "Gloria Naylor's "Mama Day": Bridging Roots and Routes." *African American Review* 39.1/2 (Spring-Summer 2005): 161.

[224] See Lamothe, 160.

The son's reasoning behind keeping record of oral culture is for personal and professional gain. As the narrator's tone suggests, this young man is a part of the system despite being born and raised outside of it. His priority is in exposing if not exploiting the Willow Springs community's striking "local color" or regionalism that persists within the characters, their dialects and cultural customs. Rather than there being a genuine interest in the culture in which he derives, his pursuits lie in extraction. Despite the people on the island having their own vernacular, the narrator suggests that Reema's son has his own way of speech and communication that includes unnecessary pronunciation and pontification that naturally accompanies those emigrating and who have formal higher education. Rather than being as impressed with her son as he seems with himself, the community wonders about his motivation for wanting to spotlight Willow Springs when he is less invested in his home locality. What he takes for granted, he realizes others will assign value to. For him, this island, its folklore and lure are marketable tools for people unaware of its spaces and places on a map.

His training affords him the privilege of amnesia or forgetting that he comes from the very population he is theorizing. Academia distances him from seeing himself as a local. Instead, he is an educated Willow Springs transplant, author and citizen who treats his time on the island more like a resident tourist. Not knowing the origin story of 1823 fundamentally means he lacks understanding the circumstances of his own arrival or how his ancestors came to own the land he is returning to. In many ways, Miss Reema's boy is also a lost son of the diaspora. While both he and George grown up on islands and go to prestigious "fancy" colleges or universities, Ms. Reema's boy has the benefit of knowing his mother and having access to a larger black community outside of his immediate family. Naylor reminds that in *Mama Day*, black men are able to step in or out and leave black communities whereas their black female counterparts are not given the option to do the same out of unspoken but expected obligations to one's family, cultural communities or race. Neither Ms. Reema's son nor Mrs. Johnson's George Andrews feel a duty to their race as their quests for careers and stable livelihoods

outweigh their sense of local pride while minimizing the exigency in establishing identities based on the islands from which they came.

When narrating, George describes just how practical, predictable and structured his life was growing up in a shelter, while also uncertain during his years at Columbia. He remembers:

> I couldn't have grown up if I had wasted my time crying about a family I wasn't given or believing in a future that I didn't have. When I left Wallace P. Andrews I had what I could see: my head and my two hands, and I had each day to do something with them. I may have knocked my head against walls, figuring out how to buy food, supplies, and books, but I never knocked on wood. No rabbit's foot, no crucifixes—not even a lottery ticket. I couldn't afford the dollar or the dreams while I was working my way through Columbia. (Naylor 27)

The lack of emotionality, pure will and drive that George has, is intentional. Considering his upbringing in a government sponsored institution, George's future is of utmost importance especially since he has absolutely no one to be accountable to, but himself. Not having a mother or larger family structure to depend on, forces him to meticulously plan his choices and time to weigh the outcomes. Because expressing unconditional love is a risk that might not be reciprocated, it is not necessarily a priority until he meets his wife. While care is required, love was not an available reality when growing up. Therefore, George programs himself by heavily relying on his intellect and ability to do physical work in maximizing his productivity for necessities like shelter, food and academia. Felling or receiving love, giving love and reciprocating it is not vital to his existence or lifestyle, which he believes until Ophelia's entrance. The tone in the last two sentences of the passage are deliberate and proud. As if wishing or praying is for the weak or unambitious, George declares that he is self-made and does not need a lucky charm or totem, nor the symbolism of Jesus Christ to survive in this world. The only thing that George Andrews believes in, is himself until his future wife walks into his office. Luck, magic and spirituality are a luxury that George could not always afford like the "lottery ticket" he references. Consequently, believing in things unseen costs more than what they are worth and comes with its own sets of disadvantages and losses. The symbolism of purchasing a lottery ticket is an

expensive risk, much like his views on consciously deciding to befriend, fall for, be in love with and remain loving Ophelia once they are married.

George dates a white woman before his courtship with Ophelia that she is aware of. However, while George begins taking Ophelia around New York City on their platonic weekend dates, it becomes apparent that he is still interested and invested in his five-year history with Shawn, described as a red head with freckles. Since George's relationship with Ophelia legitimately begins as a friendship, he feels comfortable rather than compelled in discussing his unresolved feelings for Shawn around her without fear of judgement. Such frank openness early in their conversations sets the stage for a strong foundation but is initially a cause of concern for Ophelia who worries that their bond might be compromised because of George's open feelings about a white woman. George claims that his attraction for Shawn is beyond skin deep:

> Shawn and I had been doing a lot of talking lately — serious talking — about making a go of it, once again. About this time, picking up enough speed to push ourselves on over the line, the stupid, senseless color line that was threatening to keep us away from what five years had built. We didn't know if we had the energy, but it was worth talking about. And it was comfortable being around her again, thinking of holding a body that you didn't have to prove anything to. No old ground to go over about who and what you were, no new moods or tics to learn, none to explain. Shawn was a safe haven. (Naylor 101)

Most striking is George's omission of what he values about a potential partner outside of his own comfort and emotional security. The only time the two are mentioned together is when he proclaims whether or not "we" or they have the energy to sustain a bi-racial relationship. Failure to emphasize the "we" in a prospective partnership further posits George as a proponent for individualism rather than diasporic connectivity. Speaking for her, he shares that neither is willing to commit to pushing themselves over the very real color line created and substantiated by societal standards and expectations. Referring to the color line as stupid is still an issue of contention and evidently with real consequences as neither him or Shawn have been able to fully confront, push forward or move beyond it despite its existence which will never cease. George's hesitancy is rooted in his embracing the familiar

and inherent fear of the unknown. He must negotiate his Western roots with temporary feelings of diasporic discomfort. While he does not have a five-year history with Ophelia, the aura surrounding her is new, vibrant, and effervescent much like his thoughts about the island she is from. Though he claims not to know if he has the energy to sustain an older more established relationship, he has not yet realized how much output he has already invested in his New York City jaunts with Ophelia and how she recenters him in ways he never thought imaginable. Admittedly the transformation in George is inextricably linked to his proximity to Ophelia who motivates but does not force him to push himself beyond his restrictive comfort zones while embracing new or foreign sensations. Much like his first reaction to encountering the island "I was so busy enjoying the change in you, I didn't notice it in myself" (Naylor 100). This shift in personal growth and insistence on embracing the strange uncertainty of the future posits George Andrews as one protagonist or hero and simultaneously the very force working against himself within the novel.

As an African American man, Andrews vehemently doubts his national ties to geographical roots, genetic connection to parentage and physical proximity to an upwardly mobile island owning matriarchal community. This in part is due to his unstable and uncentered sense of home while growing up in an orphanage amidst a consistently bustling metropolitan city. So, when he reaches adulthood, Manhattan, New York specifically becomes a stable and reliable home base. Unbeknownst to him, before meeting his wife Ophelia something is missing. Despite an enviable career, an Ivy League education at Columbia and a comfortable lifestyle, George fundamentally lacks a type of racial pride or cultural connection outside the city that Ophelia takes with her everywhere she travels. Ophelia does not only represent a romantic or sexual partnership but access to something only lineage, cultural and familial currency can afford. This type of exclusivity is not necessarily shut off from the world but hidden and not easily readable, seeable or recognizable to others from states outside of South Carolina and Georgia. And this reality is by design in an attempt to preserve the island whilst

keeping it all-black since its 1823 inception. Willow Springs does not exist to George's New York state of mind or sensibility until he meets Ophelia. While longing for ancestral routes, he still refuses to relinquish control once the southern homeland of Willow Springs actively summons him. Despite Andrews' fear of trusting what he cannot see, explain or rationalize, he attempts to distance himself from the pull of the island and all its magic more broadly. Despite his multiple attempts to withdraw from and disassociate, he is unable to and while he may not be born in Willow Springs, he leaves his own indelible legacy, similar to that of Bascombe Wade. For diaspora to continue flourishing in its productive fluidity, all its dispersed seeds must accept their global citizenship to an inherently African or transatlantic source. Naylor confirms that there is always space for men even among a kingdom of women.

Conclusion

This chapter confirms the fluidity of diaspora as cyclical and yet, an evolution of actual or imagined physical spaces on and off maps. More specifically, it tackles questions surrounding black geographies and the utility of cartographies—ranging from the colony of New York City to the South Carolina and Georgia Lowcountry. It begins by exploring intimate details of the island diaspora Naylor constructs through her experiences in New York to Christiansted, Saint Croix in the United States Virgin Islands. Additionally, it illustrates intimate linkages between the fictional sea island of Willow Springs and its inhabitants with powerful representations among real-life Gullah communities since the 1700's. Mother-cities like New York and motherlands like the hidden coastal region George is drawn to, guide him in constructing an idyllic home and family through the island. George was once a lost, wandering diasporic son in the beginning of the novel, but Willow Springs finds him. Ophelia is the conduit for such cultural transmission and personal transformation. A contemporary love story, George and Ophelia's dynamically complex quest in searching for and creating safe future spaces away from home begins with a European forefather and an African foremother who cross the Atlantic.

Figure 1. Map at the beginning of *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

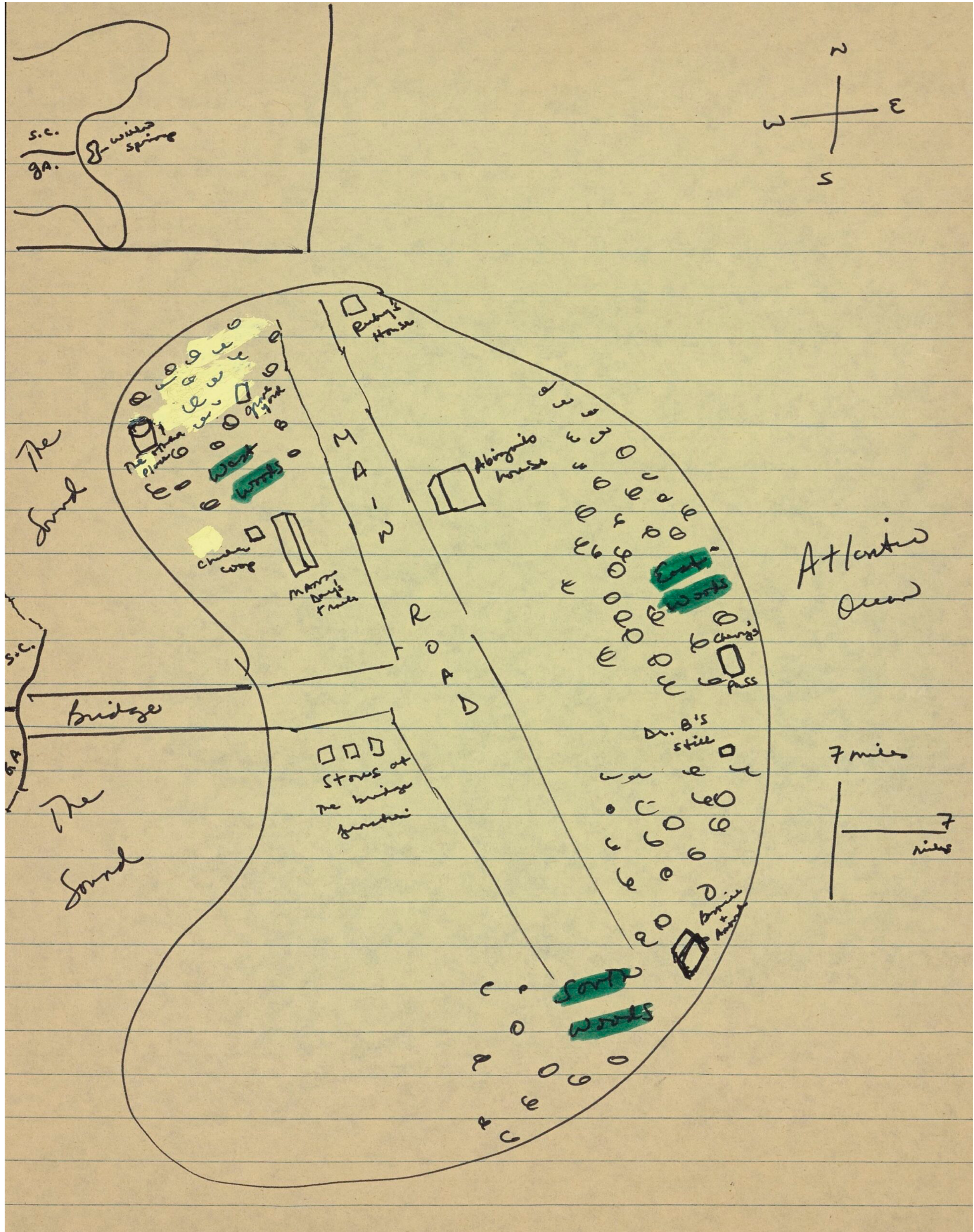

Figure 2. Map by Gloria Naylor. The Gloria Naylor Archive, Maps, Genealogies, and Notes, Box 19, Folder 12, Files 1-32. Ryan Matura Library, Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut.

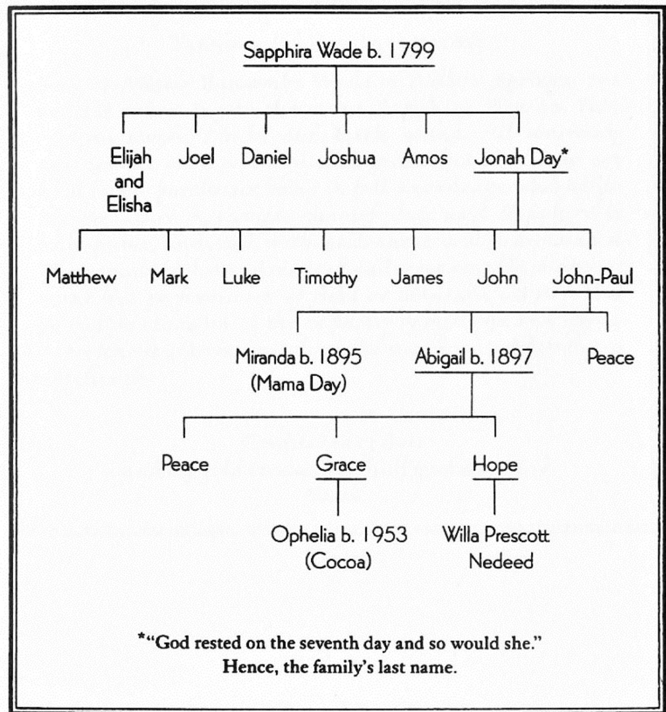

Figure 3. Family Tree on first page of *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

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Coda

This dissertation examines and invests in 20th century American literature through the proliferation of slavery both on land and at sea through contributing to the emerging field of Middle Passage Studies. The primary question I sought to answer guiding my work is: why do black women use recurrent themes of water and the body (bodies of and in water) when writing stories about transatlantic slavery? Rather than singularly focusing on answers to this initial question, it is more generative to imagine, ask and explore convergences of time and space in unpacking slavery's histories and the effects on our current lives (both waking and dreams) and our futures. How do black women authors discuss distinct horrors of the Middle Passage through abstraction? That is, how do these events inform ideas surrounding genocide—its sites, traumas, movements and transitions within the worlds of these four works? How are alternative futurities possible through strategically revisiting aspects of our unforgettable slave pasts? If freedom is a dream, how is actualization accessible and how does it become a livable space within the African diaspora?

Paule Marshall, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor all unearth and revive ideas of slavery at sea, saltwater slavery, transatlantic enslavement and the Black Atlantic to reanimate new ideas surrounding movement, memory, trauma, and a going or returning to Africa or a motherland, mother island or mother cities (not simply as a continent but a lifestyle, worldview and portal to accessible futures). Africa and its diaspora are very real and all four writers expand this idea of how and to whom it is accessible. Each black woman author suggests that Africa is plural and that Africas like the diaspora are fluid in that there is more than one and they are located everywhere. Africas then are representative of origin spaces or imagined home places anywhere on earth for black people, specifically black women. Each of these novels suggests that because African descended women create diaspora, that they take it with them wherever they go. It is everywhere where and who they are and their indelible and generative marks are on land, at sea and in the air.

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, *Kindred*, *Beloved* and *Mama Day* memory, trauma, atrocity and everyday life in the United States prompt constant yearnings, longings to escape or flee. While some women within the novels seek temporary escape or to simply slip under the radar by removing themselves from public spaces, others might not have these options, control or currency to abscond. Sometimes history seeks when we hide. Being black and living in the afterlife of slavery is apocalyptic and the necessity to return, if not imagine a pre-colonial world before the rupture is a perpetual trope throughout each work. Embarking on voluntary middle passages, engaging with homecoming, homegoing or heritage roots travel further inspire women within the novels to imagine alternative futures elsewhere. Some of these prospective home spaces or places of belonging are on remote islands in the Caribbean or situated in Southern California. Another retreat may arise from Kentucky waters not on the banks of the Ohio River. Others find refuge in populated or polluted postcolonial cities. Portals of protection or unconventional lifeways also appear on an island map in the middle of South Carolina and Georgia near the Atlantic Ocean. Each protagonist must return to sites of trauma, fully confronting their intimate connections with slavery while also searching for sources of embodying their liberation. Black women must continue defining their trajectories in uncovering or reimagining their own origin stories by oscillating between the past/present, enslavement/liberation, being American/African and the ultimate decision of staying here or going elsewhere. These entries to futurity engage diverse mediums and methods of transport that interrogate western logic, defy gravity, posit the Atlantic as an extension of the African diaspora and prioritize black women as a self-sustaining tribe of nation builders and new world makers.

Focusing on black Atlantic novels written by North American authors, I wonder how other diasporan women are expanding representations of slavery, both with 20th and 21st century texts. How are these narratives inspired by certain histories? What are the features, occasions and motivations for Canadian, Caribbean, West or South African literatures of slavery—in what ways do Middle Passage

appear and are they tangible or abstract? How do other writers continually locate areas of inspiration from Marshall, Butler, Morrison and Naylor in relation to the proxemics of slavery's hauntingly cyclical afterlives? In what ways do class or wealth (Avey Johnson) affect our movements and approaches to travel? Other than time or space travel and flying (Dana Franklin), how are black women transported to various sites of slavery or other worlds—do they return and if so, do they suffer different disabilities than before their arrivals/departures? In returning to a Motherland, as a maternal figure, diverse physical sites and sets of ideas (Beloved), what are other, newer or emerging home spaces to conceptualize? How might remote all-black cities, towns, nations and islands (Willow Springs in Mama Day) gesture towards the reclamation and reparations of stolen lands for descendants of the enslaved, both in the Unites States and abroad? Paule Marshall, Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor remind us that interrogating our pasts are as essential as moving forward. In actively doing this, we must always remember that everyone is African, not just black people—never forgetting that any or all futures begin across and by crossing the Atlantic.