

Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire: Narrative Past-Time as a Temporal Site of
Racialized Identity Deconstruction

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to the loving, supportive, empowering, and enduring legacy and memory of my mother, Cheryl Coleman.

Abstract

Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire:

Narrative Past-Time as a Temporal Site of Racialized Identity Deconstruction

My dissertation considers the structural displacement of linear time in four novels published during the 20th and 21st centuries by writers of the African Diaspora in the Americas. Through a theoretical framework of literary analysis that draws on post-structuralism and critical race theories, I argue that alterations of linear time in fiction breach the unity of narrative structures. These ruptures, which create what Jacques Derrida calls *temporalization*, allow characters and readers to consider how African identities, collective and individual, are produced and altered, and how these constructions affect ideas of present time and subjectivity in the texts. The Non-linear plots in these structural and metaphysical temporal sites deconstruct *racialized* and gendered identities; signs, symbols, and referents in the novels that are dismantled to reveal the arbitrary nature of time and its subsequent associations of meanings. These fictional configurations of time become politically and socially oppositional and help to recast Diaspora histories previously dominated by the West.

The interdisciplinary aesthetics of the African and African American Diaspora has always disrupted constructions of identity, reality, and time, especially when dominant narratives of national identity have rendered Africans and African Americans historically invisible. For example, Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction* demonstrates the "race of time" and how "time is raced"; Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* posits from a look to the past that the Atlantic Ocean has been a breach that created a more representative African Diaspora

identity; and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* imagines back to the African Atlantic Slave Trade when all texts and persons to whom she could return to have been obliterated. My dissertation contributes to these discussions through contending that the formation of time is simultaneously a structural device for textual analysis and a methodology for comprehending marginalized identities and experiences, both *inside* and *outside* of literature. The dissertation uses different types of texts, in addition to literature, which expands the importance of reading *past-time* to critically illuminate the real, political and social realities, and discourses of African Diaspora peoples.

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Break it Up, Break it Up, Break it Up, Break Down¹: Fictional Narrative Past-Time as a

Temporal Site of Racialized Identity Deconstruction

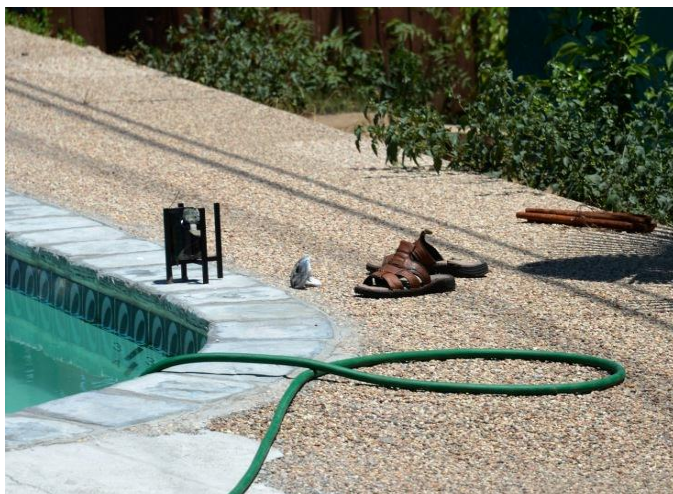


Photo Image 1: Rodney King's residence in Rialto, California
Photo taken by Kevork Djansezian

Modern time is, thus, time out of place. It refuses to account for the possibility that the present is nothing at all because all of its meanings are always somewhere else – waiting to be said, heard, written, acted on.

Heel up, wheel up,
bring it back, come rewind
Powerful impact, boom,
from the cannon...

-Busta Rhymes with Tribe Called Quest from the song "Scenario"³

Photo twenty-five of the *Time LightBox* photos of the week features an image taken by Getty photographer Kevork Djansezian.⁴ The top of the photo's contents reveals a sunny day reflected in a concrete step path and a brown fence lined with green foliage and leafy shadows. A sandy colored pebbled walkway dominates the middle of the picture as the walkway borders a white and cerulean ceramic swimming pool that peeks out from the bottom left of the image. A solitary pair of worn brown sandals faces the

¹ From Kurtis Blow's 1980 rap song "The Breaks," which Tricia Rose asserts "was about the seeming inevitability and hardships ... and the sheer pleasure of 'breaking it up and down' [and] ofbreaking free of social and psychological constrictions. Regardless of subject matter ... [the message] ... suggested that the power and presence of the image was possible only if the writer had escaped capture" (196). See Tricia Rose. *Black Noise* Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. Print. See Kurtis Blow. "The Breaks." *The LyricsDepot.com*. 2012. Web. 02 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.lyricsdepot.com/kurtis-blow/the-breaks.html>>.

³Tribe Called Quest. "Scenario." *The Low End Theory*. Jive, 2001. CD.

⁴ Kevork Djansezian. "Time LightBox: Pictures of the Week: June 15-22, #25." *Time LightBox*, 17 June 2012. Web. 01 Sept. 2012. <<http://lightbox.time.com/2012/06/22/pictures-of-the-week-june-15-22/#25>>.

pool. The left shoe is slightly up and pointed out and away from the right one, and an emerald hose in a single flat loop lays partially submerged in the blue water. There are no people pictured in the image. At first glance, the reader (viewer) is left to interpret the most obvious, surface and viewable narrative to ascribe meaning to the photograph; it's just a sunshiny day at a pool, and a person walked to the edge of the pool, removed his sandals and took a swim. Time, space, place, what happened and to whom, initially, have no real significance because the viewer does not have enough information by which to anchor a larger, more critical meaning, but the photograph like a written text, "as a medium," has the "capacity to offer an index, a sign of a "truly existing thing."⁵

Print twenty-five is just an image chronologically placed among fifty-three photos for the week, and sandwiched between the girl (her umbrella as the past and the fishermen and their boat as the future) is image twenty-five, the seemingly innocuous swimming pool on a clear day. In print twenty-four,⁶ "a girl tries to save her umbrella caught by the wind in Mumbai," and "Bangladeshi fishermen fix their boat in Teknaf" in print twenty-six.⁷ Photo twenty-five isn't that intriguing until the viewer's eyes catches the caption in small print beneath the snapshot, "... sandals are seen near where Rodney King was found dead in the bottom of the pool in Rialto, California."⁸ Neither a full view of the pool or a dense body at the base of the water are pictured, but after reading King's name in the photo's caption, time and the creation of meaning for the

⁵ Leigh Raiford. "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory." *History and Theory, Theme Issue 48* (2009): 112-129. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Sept. 2012.

⁶ Rafiq Maqbool. "Time LightBox: Pictures of the Week: June 15-2, #24." *Time LightBox*, 17 June 2012. Web. 01 Sept. 2012. <<http://lightbox.time.com/2012/06/22/pictures-of-the-week-june-15-22/#24>>.

⁷ Munir uz Zaman. "Time LightBox: Pictures of the Week: June 15-22, #26." *Time LightBox*, 17 June 2012. Web. 01 Sept. 2012. <<http://lightbox.time.com/2012/06/22/pictures-of-the-week-june-15-22/#26>>.

⁸ Kevork Djanssezian. "Time LightBox: Pictures of the Week: June 15-22, #25." *Time LightBox*, 17 June 2012. Web. 01 Sept. 2012. <<http://lightbox.time.com/2012/06/22/pictures-of-the-week-june-15-22/#25>>.

onlooker of the photo stops. The once cropped picture opens to the mind's eye to reveal the possibilities of a larger body of water with just a peripheral hint of a murky shadow moving at the bottom of the pool, beckoning the reader to return to the past in order to gain a better picture of the text and its subject not fully pictured in the content of the photo. After inserting the past of Rodney King, image twenty-five is no longer just a print arbitrarily squeezed between Mumbai and Bangladesh; the photo becomes a critical commentary of the constructed racialized⁹ individual and the collective American identity of Rodney King.

The name Rodney King catapults the reader to 1991 when a routine police stop on March 3rd was video-taped unbeknownst to the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).¹⁰ King, a black motorist, was stopped and beaten by at least four LAPD police officers while other LAPD police officers watched and failed to intervene.¹¹ The police officers hit and kicked King over fifty-six times to his head and body with their batons and feet. According to NBC, "King sustained serious internal injuries, including a broken

⁹The definition of a constructed racial identity is not "... 'given' in nature; [it] ... reflect[s] culturally constructed differences that maintain the prevailing ... distribution of power and privilege in a society, and [the constructed racial identity] changes in relation to changes in social, political, and economic life" (8). See Paula S. Rothenberg. "The Social Construction of Difference: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality." *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: an Integrated Study*. 7th ed. Ed. Paul S. Rothenberg. New York: St Martin's Press, 2007. 7-12. Racialization is "... to signify the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Racialization is an ideological process, a historically specific one. Racial ideology is constructed from pre-existing conceptual (or, if one prefers, 'discursive') elements and emerges from the struggles of competing political projects and ideas seeking to articulate similar elements differently" (18). See Michael Omi and Howard Winant. "Racial Formations." *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: an Integrated Study*. 7th ed. Ed. Paul S. Rothenberg. New York: St Martin's Press, 2007.13-22.

¹⁰Robert Reinhold. "U.S. Jury Indicts 4 Police Officers in King Beating." *New York Times* 06 Aug. 1992:A.1. *New York Times: ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 10 Sep. 2012.

¹¹Four officers were charged, but newspapers report that numerous additional LAPD officers were present at the scene but were unidentifiable; thus, they were not charged. See David Love. "Rodney King beating 20 years later: Can't we all just get along?" *the grio.com*. thegrio.com: NBCNews, 03 Mar. 2011. Web. 28 Aug. 2012.<<http://thegrio.com/2011/03/03/rodney-king-beating-20-years-later-cant-we-all-just-get-along/>>.

cheekbone and a broken right ankle, and received 20 stitches, including five inside of his mouth.... He [King] ... suffered 11 skull fractures, permanent brain damage, broken [bones and teeth], kidney damage [and] emotional and physical trauma.”¹² During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, King publically begged for peace by asking rioters in front of national news cameras if “we could just all get along?”¹³ Consequently, only two LAPD officers were convicted under federal law violations for King’s brutal beating, a third-party commission review found police brutality and failed leadership pervasive in the LAPD, and King was awarded millions of dollars in damages.¹⁴ Although King seemed to receive a little justice in terms of his monetary settlement, King, after all the trials and tribulations, continued to struggle with addiction and run-ins with the law.¹⁵ On June 17, 2012, the LAPD responded to a 911 call at the residential address of Rodney King and found a body at the bottom of the swimming pool. King was pronounced dead at the scene. The results of the autopsy showed that at the time of the drowning, King had alcohol, PCP, marijuana, and cocaine in his system. His death was ruled an accident.¹⁶

Dominant Western narratives, no matter how well-written and well-meaning, don’t often work to adequately represent the inequitable and disjointed narratives of marginalized subjects. When a traditional, linear, and chronological Western narrative is conveyed about a marginalized subject, because of oppression and inequity, there are

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴In their defense, the LAPD officers argued that excessive force was needed because Rodney King resisted arrest and was high on drugs. Eyewitness testimony contradicted the LAPD statements, and witnesses testified that “he [King] was lying on the ground, face down with his hands stretched out like a cross shape” while he was being beaten. See *ibid*.

¹⁵ Lou Cannon. “Rodney King Remembered.” *The National Review* 64.13 (2012): 22-25. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 29 Aug. 2012.

¹⁶ The Associated Press (2012, Aug 24). “California: Coroner Confirms King's Death as Accident.” *New York Times* 24 Aug. 2012: 16-A-16. *The New York Times: ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 03 Sept. 2012.

always equally different and valid narratives about that same subject silenced and yet to be told. King, as the subject, is not pictured in the *Time* photograph, which is the present moment of the text for the viewer, but King is none-the-less still present as a subject, signified, in the photo's narrative, which is meant to symbolize King's life and death, i.e., King's racialized identity, history, and existence. The relationships of meanings in this photo without any human being present in the photo's content attempts to symbolize and define the narrative of a dead human being, who just happened to be the forty-seven year old Black man who survived a brutal police beating that sparked a riot in one of the largest cities in America and made international headlines. In order to move beyond the symbol and referent to retrieve a more represented meaning for the text's subject, the different and often silenced narratives can be told, read, or viewed (interpreted) in ways that work to convey the duality and simultaneous complexity that is a constructed racial and marginalized identity.¹⁷ The duality and simultaneity of marginalized subjects existing in different worlds (dominant vs. marginalized times and spaces of meanings) create different ways being, thinking, and existing within the larger, dominant Western frame work.

The *Time* photograph is a text presented in linear order after King's death, whose viewing (reading) dictates King's actual absence, which is the absence of his lived marginalized reality from the image itself in order to construct a present time story that prioritizes the dominant narrative. The photo at first glance encourages only one way of

¹⁷ "The [racialized] sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing....," which Jacques Derrida similarly and linguistically argues stands "... equally for meaning or referent." See Jacques Derrida. "Difference." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. and Ed. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.

looking: Rodney King was a "... 'PCP-crazed giant' with 'superhuman strength,' 'impervious to pain,' '[a] cartoon African American menace...' and the shaken client trundled out before the cameras" is the initial and dominant look narrative.¹⁸ This type of "misreading" and misrepresentation works to perpetuate dominant power and the oppression of the marginalized subject; it fails to reflect the simultaneous and duality of multiple narratives that reflect multiple realities.¹⁹ In "An Issue of Time and Place: the Truth behind Korean Americans' Connection to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots," Angela E. Oh critiques the one-dimensional media assessment and coverage of the Rodney King beating and subsequent Los Angeles Riots. Oh called the "mainstream English-language news coverage..." a "perfect illustration of how people who occupy the same geographic space can live their lives in entirely different worlds."²⁰ In Oh's critique, the local and national media were quick to interpret the Los Angeles Riots and King as a subject within the traditionally scripted Western narrative of black urban villains versus the lighter (read whiter) Asian model-minority victims without any consideration to the generational equity issues and contradictions of urban American existence in translating and making transparent the significance, consequences, and lessons of the riots.²¹ As evidenced in Oh's critique, marginalized identities and experiences require different ways of looking,

¹⁸Ed Leibowitz. "Rodney's Rap: the Beating and Riots are Fading into History, but Rodney King's Life Remains a Series of Trials." *Los Angeles Times* 28 Mar 1999:12. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 23 Sept. 2012.

¹⁹Andrew D. Case and Carla D. Hunter. "Counterspaces: A Unit of Analysis for Understanding the Role of Settings in Marginalized Individuals' Adaptive Responses to Oppression." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50 1-2 (2012): 257-270. *JSTOR*. Web. 03 Oct. 2012.

²⁰Angela E. Oh "An Issue of Time and Place: the Truth behind Korean Americans' Connection to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots." *Harvard Journal of Asian American Policy Review* 19 (2010): 39-48. *Arts and Humanities Index*. Web. 19 Sept. 2012.

²¹Ronald Takaki writes about the myth of the Asian model minority, which works to perpetuate the oppression of Asian Americans and pit African Americans against Asian Americas. See Ronald Takaki. "The Harmful Myth of Asian Superiority." *New York Times* 16 June 1990: 21. *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*. Web. 25 Sept. 2012.

reading, writing, and understanding, which can be achieved through recognizing and accessing different sites, i.e., different locations, different spaces, different places, different speakers, different structures, different texts, and different ways of looking. One such productive and different location of adjusting the *gaze* is the critical consideration of time, but not time in the traditional and chronological sense.

A viewer can gaze the probability of a space and time beyond what the viewer is initially offered in the content of the present photograph in order to locate different sites of a constructed identity, especially when that identity is of the African and African American Diaspora, like Rodney King's.²² Time, in reality and in perception, is so much more complicated because its quantity, quality, and location are not singularly and easily fixed. Singularly present and future moments are a combination of cumulative opportunities and choices influenced by arbitrary, infinite, and interrelated past events, which include the location and questioning of time itself, literally and conceptually. The ability for a reader, a viewer, and a writer to delay or suspend time in the present moment to create a space or a location for the witnessing of the construction of a racialized subject identity often requires returning to a *past-time*. I define *past-time* as substance, symbols, signs, events, and experiences that take place at *an already happened event relative to a present time event or subject in the present time* that may influence the form, shaping, and content of present and future events, i.e., their consequences and their meanings. In

²² I define gaze as the viewer's ability to engage in "critical black memory," which is defined as "a mode of historical interpretation and political critique that has functioned as an important resource for framing and mobilizing African American social and political identities and movements. Critical black memory names, then, an ongoing, engaged practice through which a range of participants speak back to history and assess ongoing crises faced by black subjects. [It] ... is one of many tools New World blacks and African Americans in particular have employed as a response to the dislocation, subjection, and dehumanization that has marked their experience of modernity. [It] implies the negotiation, the use, of history for the present." Raiford, op. cit., p. 113-119.

past-time, forces acting upon the subject are historically, personally, socially, politically, and culturally fixed and layered, and those forces may be influenced by infinite and arbitrary equity constructions such as but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, language, age, nationality, space, and place. While the viewer's (reader's) intentional interaction with the present moment and time of the photo (text) waits, suspended in a time or in a gap or space of consideration and meaning, the reader and the viewer can take a journey into the past to consider the affect and effect of the past events, which created and creates the meanings and significance of the present subject in an existing (read present) text. Jacques Derrida calls this stopping of meaning, linguistically, a time, a delay, a putting off, or a detour that results in *temporization*. Temporization is a linguistic space of consideration that works to consider differences of meanings in language.²³ The same temporal space used to assess linguistic meaning and language can also be a space used to assess other meanings in literature, particularly fictional narratives whose action and plot are set in a *past-time*. In this temporal, *past-time* space, a critical reader has the opportunity to critically consider how racial identity is formed and how it affects the present time and subject of a text; thus, the reader can deconstruct a present racialized identity from information gathered in *past-time* event(s).²⁴ Critically considering a different time and space beyond the present time of a

²³It is what French linguist and philosopher Jacques Derrida, in his essay "Difference," calls a *detour* from the text. Derrida, in considering difference, is considering the linguistic difference of "a" versus "e" in the French words and definitions of difference, but Derrida as a deconstructionist is establishing a post structural theory that displaces meaning in any language or any other functions of meaning as fixed. Jacques Derrida. "Difference." *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. And Ed. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.

²⁴ "Deconstruction, one might say, allows the meanings that would otherwise be said to remain in their naturally loose state of deferral, of being always at a remove from any attempt to capture and organize them, of being never present. Deconstruction thus acknowledges the race of time. The time of modern

text can be a viewing that involves the consideration of other subjects and experiences not available in the present moment.

A *past-time* consideration of King's *Time* photo acts as an example and a catalyst to the reading of the fictional literary texts of my project. King died in the 21st century, a time where the majority of scholars and experts agree that race is not based in biology: not concurrent with intelligence, physiological ability and capability, and skin color.²⁵ This light bulb advancement of knowledge for all mankind about race still doesn't change the devastating consequences of race as a social and economic construction. The most severe and continued consequences of race as a social construction remain in its generational and cumulative oppression and physical realities like poverty and death. Ironically, this equalizing scientific breakthrough does little to deconstruct the real consequences of race; it only reveals the systemic and complex nature of racial identities and their constructions, especially as it relates to the compounding impact of race over time, collectively and individually.²⁶ This ironic complexity and systemic nature of racial oppression, in its ability to construct contemporary racialized identities, requires two different components: *past-time* can be structurally created in a fictional narrative, and

culture is historical time, in which everything depends on the possibility of running the past through the present in order to promise a 'better'[future than could ever 'be'"(221). Charles Lemert, op. cit. p. 221.

²⁵ *Race the Power of an Illusion: Episode I, the Difference between Us*. Dir. Christine Herbes-Sommers. California Newsreel, 2003. DVD.

²⁶ Despite living in a post-Civil Rights society, the wealth gap disparity between White, Blacks, and Latinos has widened over twenty years to double digits. This disparity gap is not only limited to wealth, it affects other social and economic issues like debt, education, and incarceration. African Americans, as a collective group, along with Hispanics, continue to experience huge disparities. Pew Research Center. *Twenty-to-One: Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs between Whites, Blacks, Hispanics*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Social and Demographic Trends, 26 Jul. 2011. Web. PDF file. 28 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/07/26/wealth-gaps-rise-to-record-highs-between-whites-blacks-hispanics/9/#chapter-8-wealth-gaps-within-racial-and-ethnic-groups>>. Andrew Hacker. *Two Nations: Black & White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.

past-time can be read into a narrative presenting itself as a present text. A viewer, independently as an interpreter (i.e., reader), can consider past events as they might relate to a presented, present subject in a present time of a text that does not explicitly subvert the traditional notion of a linear time, like the *Time* photo of King, or a reader can critically consider a text whose structure, in terms of plot development, moves action and characters to a past moment (time) within the text itself.

In my project, I analyze *past-time* as a literary structure and thematic plot device in the novels of four writers of the African and African American Diaspora: James Baldwin, Octavia Butler, Alexs Pate, and Nalo Hopkinson. The novels of these writers use the structure of *past-time* through time travel or narrative shifts as structural and oppositional thematic and plot components. In my project, I explore how literature plot movement to a *past-time* acts as a breach, structural and metaphysical, of self-discovery, which creates a rupture in identity experiences that has the ability to free the protagonists from racialized forms of oppression, personal and political. These breaches of linear time, as plot devices, develop action, conflict, and themes that ultimately question and deconstruct racialized and gendered identities within a dominant and linear Western paradigm.

The methodological framework of my project is primarily located in the close reading, literary analysis of the literature texts. Current events, history, memory, literature, multi-media images, and post-structural theories (as they may be useful to explaining and extracting meaning through the process of literary analysis) aid in the theoretical discussion of my project, but post-structural theories are not central to my

work (and do not hinder me from privileging the known histories, memories, experiences and voices of marginalized folks).²⁷ I am concerned that the hegemonies of traditional Western ways of reading literature texts, central to literary theory's language, usage and histories of origins and speakers, may obscure and silence the marginalized subjects (and their various epistemologies of opposition), whom my project privileges and directly aims to affirm and speak.²⁸ My positioned identities as scholar, student, writer, first-generation college educated, working class, mother, partnered, teacher, and African American serve as my lens of knowledge and experience that anchors and informs my critical readings and literary analysis of the texts. As Black feminist scholar and critic Barbara Christian asserts in her aesthetic grounding essay, "A Race for Theory," "I have no quarrel with those who wish to philosophize about how we know what we know."²⁹ Indeed, it is not my goal or desire to exclude or to create an essentialist project. Rather, I, as the critic, am working to center marginalized subjects (my readings, their texts, their identities, their voices, their narratives, and their experiences), which all too often are silenced and regulated to the fringes of dominant discourses and their various sites: print, multi-media, classrooms, and institutions.³⁰ Like the promise of light that a single light brings to a darkened cave, so, too, are the readings of these novels in my project. They are windows of opportunity that allow the understanding and the deconstruction of

²⁷ I define "...memory [as] an active process by which people recall, lay claim to, understand, and present the past." Raiford, op. cit., p. 119

²⁸ Barbara Christian writes about the hegemony of academic writing and literature of the historical other. Christian argues that theory can be prescriptive and silencing: "Because of the academic world's general ignorance about the literature of black people, and of women, whose work too has been discredited, it is not surprising that so many of our critics think that the position arguing that literature is political begins with these New Philosophers" (71). Barbara Christian. "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies, Inc.* 14.1 (1988): 67-79. *JSTOR*. Web. 02 Oct. 2012.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

oppressive identities and experiences in order to transform ways of reading and to transform the reader but only if readers are willing to step back and look differently to gaze the real picture, a different kind of light in the text. How might this *different* view of time apply to reconsidering the racialized subject, Rodney King, of the *Time* photo to better understand how gazing a *past-time* can be applied to reading a written text? In order to explore and to discover King's constructed identity and presence in the photograph, readers must stop processing meaning based upon the visual content of photograph that is only presented in the present.

The African and African American Diaspora tradition evidences that present, linear time as a reality and as a perception is not the only way of seeing and experiencing time.³¹ The structural framework of non-linear narratives, which leave the present time of the fictionalized work to move to a *past-time*, reveal and deconstruct a historical and collective racialized American identity within the literature aesthetic and within identity experiences of the African and African American Diaspora people. Identities of the African and African American Diaspora are anchored to the pasts that created them, and their continued existence is predicated in exhuming and understanding their origins:

...the unearthing and construction of counter narratives to restore the humanity of African descendant populations in the wake of erasures, omission, and silences as a consequence of imperial incursions and

³¹M. Jacqui Alexander in developing an African and African American aesthetic of time challenges a Western, linear, notion of time: "different epistemological, political, and cultural practices ... operate outside of colonial time". She further asserts that "...past, present, and future..." can be collapsed to understand the present, "now," moment (309). Alexander, M. Jacqui. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.

domination and slavery, has been the preoccupation of most Black writers and scholars in the US.³²

Racialized, foundational, and cumulative, cultural, and social identities and their arbitrary signs and symbol relationships of meanings were established in the past and continue to act upon the present. If the legacy of the Atlantic Slave Trade and slavery in the Americas still has a direct impact on the present day lives of its descendants, viewing the past as over and done with and as inaccessible is not possible. Because this past along with subsequent events has so determined racialized identities, it is hard to place those events autonomously in the past. Consider current and contemporary legal challenges to *past-time* historic Civil Rights legislation and ideals in America that worked to not only racialize American identities but also worked to promote legalized equity, which many thought at one time were (the Civil Rights laws) unchangeable: Voting Rights Act, a new Jim Crow, re-segregation of public schools, Affirmative Action, housing and lending laws.³³ Just as a viewer can deconstruct the narrative meanings of the photograph of Rodney King's location (read space) of his accidental and tragic death with a detoured narrative to past events that constructed King's identity and influenced his choices and death, a non-linear narrative is an oppositional act to a dominant, traditional, and Western narrative. These oppositional and non-learning narratives create a breach when they return to a past moment. I define "breach" as a space or a rupture in identity experience, where an opportunity for witnessing, understanding, self-reflection, and

³²Sandra Jackson and Julie Moody-Freeman. "The Black Imagination and the Genres: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative: Introduction." *The Black Imagination*. Ed. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman. New York: Peter Lang, 2011. Print.

³³Barbara S Gamble. "Putting Civil Rights to a Popular Vote." *American Journal of Political Science* 41.1 (1997):245-269. *JSTOR*.Web. 14 Sept. 2012.

reaching new, different meanings can occur. Consider the breach in the African American Diaspora subject context: the Atlantic Slave Trade, the institutions of slavery in the Americas, “Jim Crow, segregation, violence and repression, legacies of difference, notions of inferiority, and any type of experience which denotes ‘otherness.’”³⁴ These breaks of returning to the past, like repetition in hip-hop (a musical form of the African Diaspora), have a “rhythmic complexity ... [that] ... breaks [and suspends] time,” which Christopher Small notes “...dissolves the past and the future into one eternal present...”³⁵ Utilizing *past-time* as a critical reading of narrative structure and as methodology of ascertaining and comprehending marginalized identities and experiences of African and African American Diaspora people. The following literary review shows the epistemological function of *past-time* at the same time as it works to define and shape these *past-time* moments or breaches, which are but not limited to the spatial, the spiritual, the physical (the body), the emotional, the political, the sexual, and the social.

For example, Phillis Wheatley’s earliest poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America” is a first person narrative where the speaker looks back to the *past-time* outside of the poem in order to convey an understanding of the speaker (Wheatley) and her realities. The poem reference the horror of her kidnapping from Africa and from her family as a young girl. To understand the full significance of the present poem’s meaning in 1773, the reader had to understand Phillis Wheatley’s past narrative as a

³⁴ Jackson and Freeman, op. cit., p. 1

³⁵ Hip-hop and other forms of African Diaspora music reflect the aesthetic of breaks (breaches) in order to perform repetition in the spaces of musical ruptures, which can be read as going to a *past-time* moment. In this way, reading and understanding the structural components of hip-hop can be analogous to reading and understanding the structural (past) moments of a written text of the African Diaspora. Tricia Rose argues that “these features are not merely stylistic effects, they are aural manifestations of philosophical approaches to social environments” (67). Tricia Rose. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. Print.

kidnapped African child at the age of seven or eight who is losing her teeth.³⁶ Consider the early slave narratives. All of them are written after the act of slavery itself for its subjects (authors) but create a delay or temporization of the experience that allows readers to consider their narratives and their arguments for the abolition of slavery and freedom. Most of the African American slave narratives, like *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, are started in a present moment before shifting the narrative to the past in order to affect how readers view the institution of American slavery and the humanity of those enslaved in the present moment.

African American literature post slavery also subverts time in order to convey identity and experiences. In James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the preface tells that "the reader is given a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama."³⁷ Johnson's novel, written like an autobiography, works to show readers how race in America at the turn of the century is constructed. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston starts the novel's action at the end of the story by the protagonist, Janie, telling her best friend, Phoebe Watson, about what happened to her and Tea Cake while they were away; the entire novel is a retelling of events in the past. *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *the Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison all enter into past historical and psychological events to explain current tragedies and psychological conditions. *Flight to Canada* by Ismael Reed uses a time-traveling, neo-slave narrative to subvert traditional notions of linear time in order to express a literary breaking with social and racial identities and paradigms constructed by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

³⁶Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay. "Phillis Wheatley 1753?-1784)." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. 213-215. Print.

³⁷ibid.

Corregidora by Gayle Jones urges the protagonist to use memory and the past and evidence to anchor identity. John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* revisits fictional breaches of the real MOVE bombing in 1985 through the character Cudjoe who is fleeing the past. *The Known World* by Edward P Jones is historical fiction set in antebellum America, and its plot is centered to the views and identities of African Americans who own slaves. Ultimately, Jones' novel asks readers to reconsider the very systemic and raced notions of the motivations and methods perpetuation the institution of American Slavery, its participants, and its tie to an American racial identity and past that actively defined, at one time, successful US citizenship.

Critical work in this area is interdisciplinary and groundbreaking in its scholarship and structural format, being oppositional not only in its topic but also in its formation when considering these breaches in the African and African American Diaspora identities and experiences. These breaks are systemic to the very experience of African peoples in the Diaspora of the Americas, and the interdisciplinary aesthetics of the Africa and African American Diaspora has always disrupted constructions of identity, reality, and time, especially when dominant narratives of national identity have rendered Africans and African Americans historically and generationally invisible. My project contributes to these discussions through arguing that the formation of non-linear time in a novel of the African Diaspora is simultaneously a structural device for textual analysis and a methodology of ascertaining and comprehending marginalized identities and experiences outside of the text. The breaking of time in the text and the subjects of breaching

metaphorically and allegorically represents the physical, mental, and spatial events that affected, collectively, African and African American people.

This perspective of the breach as a delay is rooted in the African and African American experience and writings. The first breach is being kidnapped from Africa during the Middle Passage, and the experience of being oppressed in a new, strange land. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, originally published in 1903, Du Bois tries to convey the permanent results of this breaching on the identity and space on the spiritual and emotional psyche of American Blacks in America:

One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this margin he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost.³⁸

It is a breaching that would haunt Du Bois for the rest of his life. Writers of the African Diaspora in their various genres navigate the past to give voice to those people and their narratives that have been historically silenced and marginalized; they define the breaches and ruptures, which irrevocably shaped identities in those moments and shaped subsequent identities in the present. These writers define these breaches, renegotiate, and bear witness to their legacies and their present-day realities and consequences:

...works in the traditional disciplines of history, political science, and sociology and education, for example, as well as those produced by

³⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Signet, 1995. Print.

scholars in interdisciplinary fields like African American Studies, Africana Studies, African and Black Diaspora Studies, Atlantic Studies, Black and Women's Studies have set the record straight regarding the histories of Black experiences, nationally, globally and transnationally and have documented Black contributions to humanity...black experiences set in ... alternative pasts [are] no longer an aberrant pastime.³⁹

This discussion is pervasive and ongoing in the critical discussions of African and African Diaspora literature and identities. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois looks to the historical past of the American Civil War and the failure of Reconstruction to explain the challenges of the emerging African American identity subject relative to dominant and racist American narratives. *Black Reconstruction* "is a meditation on the off-center time of race" and the race of time.⁴⁰ Du Bois considers the spatial, violent, and political legacies and breaches of the Civil War, Reconstruction, economic depression, and subsequent Jim Crow. Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* revisits the spatial breach in the past of African American scholars, writers, and thinkers, and repositions them and their identities beyond the spatial borders of America. *The Black Atlantic* epistemologizes the Atlantic Ocean as spatial breach and location that contributed to the creation of an African Diaspora, not African American, identity. Gilroy challenges pedagogical creations and legacies of African American Studies, in their positions and interpretations, as essentialist, and uses the *past-time* travels of descendants of African slaves to Europe as impetus to subvert a purely

³⁹ Jackson and Moody-Freeman, op. cit. p. 1.

⁴⁰ Charles Lemert, op. cit. p. 222.

American identity and aesthetic.⁴¹ *Aberrations in Black* by Roderick A. Ferguson delves into the past canonical work of the sociology field and uses Black feminist models of discourse and critique as a window into the literary analysis of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison: all African American novelists who have fictional structures that use the time of the past to make visible the intersection and epistemologies of race, gender, sexual orientation, and silencing.⁴² Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration* documents the exodus of over five and a half million African Americans out of the southern confederate United States to northern and western points in the country in search of freedom, equity, and better lives for themselves and their children.⁴³ Wilkerson's text demonstrates that the spatial breach of the Atlantic slave trade did not stop at the auction block or at the plantation; it continued while peoples of the African Diaspora continued to move in search of opportunities and freedom.

When there is no historical, physical space and place, or bodies to return to because the violence, loss, and destruction from the Atlantic Slave Trade and its subsequent obliterating events, writers of the African Diaspora have created other time and spaces by which to enter into discourse to reveal meaning and identities. *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature (Perverse Modernities)* by

⁴¹Peter Erickson. Rev. of *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, by Paul Gilroy. *African American Review* 31.3 (1997): 506-508. JSTOR. Web. 29 Sept. 2012.

⁴² Dwight McBride. A. Rev. of *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, by Roderick A. Ferguson. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16.1 (2007): 120-123. JSTOR. Web. 29 Sept. 2012.

⁴³ Wilkerson's notes claim that the number of African Americans who left the south range from five to six million as researched by experts. Wilkerson puts the number at five and a half million for her book and calls the number "...conservative ... [and compiled] from data ... from Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) Tapes of U.S. Census figures for out-migration of African Americans from the former Confederate states..." (556). Isabel Wilkerson. *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: First Vintage Books, 2011. Print.

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley revisits the *past-time* and writings of Caribbean women writers to reclaim love and to challenge oppressive and dominant narratives of heteronormativity, sexual orientation, and gender constructions. Like Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Tinsley provides historical literary evidence renders visible the spatial and sexual boundaries of blackness, femininity, love, and queerness as a temporal site for relocation, speaking back, and boldly redefining the self.⁴⁴ Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* enters into the collective consciousness, spiritual and metaphysical, ways of knowing in order to navigate the dark void of loss that is too much when there is no record and no text. All of these critics and writers situate themselves outside of the literary text and outside of a linear Western notion of time and meaning in order to achieve their analysis.

In chapter one of my project, I consider the past time narrative structure of James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.⁴⁵ Published in 1953, Baldwin is forward looking in his use of time to challenge spiritual, sexual, and racial identities. Structurally, the novel suspends the action of a twenty-four hour period in order to travel the reader to three separate times in the past. The novel's present story, the story of John Grimes on his birthday, is delayed or detoured into three parts of the past: Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth. The actual 1935 "present day" action of novel is presented in Part One and Part Three, the bookends of the narrative. John Grimes' self-actualization in his own time

⁴⁴ "In queer renderings of postmodern geography, the notion of a body-centered identity gives way to a model that locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place and practice" (5). Judith Halberstam. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

⁴⁵James Baldwin. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

is deferred, and the reader's knowledge and understanding of the function and theme of Baldwin's non-linear novel is also deferred through literary plot device of flashbacks: traces of the characters' past experiences, choices and their consequences. Much of the scholarship written on Baldwin's novel focuses on identity as it relates to sexuality and race. My reading of this novel differs by focusing on gendered and racial identities and how those identities are complicated and deconstructed through the novel's structured plot movement, or use of *past-time*.

In chapter two, I review *Losing Absalom* by Alex Pate in the context of the contemporary discussion of African American male violence and death in urban America. The novel thematically reflects a resistance to the scripted individual and collective identity, which takes place along racial and generational lines.⁴⁶ The tension of Pate's novel tests Kwame Anthony Appiah's assertion that a new, autonomous identity cannot actually be created and sustained within a larger social setting. It is what Appiah in his essay "Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity," calls the "unsociability of individualism."⁴⁷ I consider Appiah's discussion of liberalism, identity and individualism through a textual analysis of *Losing Absalom*. Pate uses the novel's protagonist, Absalom, and Absalom's son, Sonny, and their memories as a temporal site to reconfigure a liberal unscripted, Black male American identity.

In chapter three, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler provides a lens by which readers learn about antebellum slavery in the US, and readers can also consider contemporary issues around silencing of past truths and competing narratives about US American slavery and

⁴⁶Alex D Pate. *Losing Absalom*. St. Paul: Coffee House Press, 2005. Print.

⁴⁷Kwame Anthony Appiah. "Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity." *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001):305-332. Print.

history. This time travel narrative has been the subject of many interdisciplinary interpretations.⁴⁸ The primary plot conflict of the novel revolves around an African American female protagonist, the American institution of slavery, and the legacy of American slavery in contemporary America. The novel's plot and characters time travel between the 19th and the 20th century. Most scholars focus on the novel's structure and its hyper-text functionality that navigates at least three literary placements: speculative fiction, neo-slave narrative, and contemporary time.⁴⁹ From *Sepia* to *The Journal of Negro Education*, the Bicentennial discourse of many in the African American community expressed the dichotomies of American independence and the civic enfranchisement of African Americans. Despite the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Women's Movements, African Americans, collectively, were still lacking in significant equity gains in education, housing, and employment; and systemic racism, stemming from the legacy of the institution of American slavery, was *still* at the core. Many social critics in the 1970s believed that the persistence of race problems in America was due to a lack of knowledge about and appreciation for the lived interdependence of African Americans and White Americans in the history of America. As a result, many critics concluded that the persistent race problems in America could only be overcome through facing the past head on with all its ugliness, especially the institution of American slavery. I argue that the temporal displacements of *Kindred* become a metaphor for

⁴⁸Frances Smith Foster. "Kindred." *The Oxford Companion African American Literature*. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 421-422. Print.

⁴⁹Missy Dehn Kubitschek. "What would a Writer be Doing Working out of a Slave Market: *Kindred* as Paradigm, *Kindred* in its Own Write?" *Claiming the Heritage: African American Women Novelists and History*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 24-51. Print.

African American consciousness regarding American history, for the entire American psyche toward the institution of American slavery and its contemporary consequences, and ultimately, a commentary on the Bicentennial celebration of American Independence.

The *Salt Roads* by Nalo Hopkinson is the focus of my final and fourth chapter. It is a non-linear and temporal tale of struggle, which connects the past with the present in order to imagine a future without financial, physical, spiritual and sexual restrictions. It is out of this spatial and temporal telling of tales woven together that a Goddess is born into a changing dynamic. The major characters of the novel are women of African descent bound together by their temporal experiences of oppression through gender, religion, class, and race. In concert with Gilroy's critique of a *Black Atlantic*, Judith Halberstam's *in A Queer Time and Place*, and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thieving Sugar*, I assert that Hopkinson's novel presents neither an African of the Americas or an African of the imagined past or ideal. *The Salt Road's* mode of connective identity correlates to slavery in its time, but it is not slavery to a specific institution or slavery to a specific temporal site. I argue that *The Salt Roads* provides other means of crossing and creating identities, such as spiritual and temporal displacements of any and all notions of Western time and human possibilities for existence. Time travel within the displaced times of *The Salt Roads* works to enrich the identities of its characters so that they are not merely defined by the patriarchal and oppressive marker of the Western slave trade or the geographical limitations of Africa, the Americas, and the Atlantic Ocean.

As a gateway to entering into the chapters of my dissertation, I want to return to the *Time* photograph that began this introduction. The photo of King evokes photographs

of the Ken Gonzales-Day's *Erased Lynching* series.⁵⁰ This absence of the dead subject raises the question of "...what happens when lynched bodies are removed from the lynching photograph?"⁵¹ Ken Gonzales-Day asks this question in order to document, witness, and to speak to "...victims ... [that] ... have been overlooked and expunged" from the present text and historical narrative.⁵² The viewer in seeing the constructed racial past of Rodney King juxtaposed to the present construction of King (as the presented subject of the photo) is able to critically identify and understand the arbitrary but powerful relationships between a subject's present meaning and the power of a past racialized identity creation and experience to act upon a subject's present realities.⁵³ We must now go were the *Time* photo in its content does not, so that which was once a peripheral and an obscured view becomes a panoramic view.⁵⁴

The panoramic view crescendos to a set pace like the separate movements of monochrome film slides, which transform into a movie once their frames reach maximum speed. The frames show King as one of five kids raised in a "raggedy mansion in Altadena," California, where he was lucky to get the last piece of bread left on the table at the end of the day or he went hungry.⁵⁵ King's life movie shows that his parents didn't

⁵⁰ Ken Gonzales' series documents and evidences the widespread and racially motivated lynching in the American West, of Latinos, Asians, and Native Americans. In many of the lynching photographs, the lynched bodies and/or perpetrators are not pictured. See Gonzales-Day, Ken. "Erased Lynching: a Series (2002-2011)." Ken Gonzales Day, 2002-2011. 03 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.kengonzalesday.com/projects/erasedlynching/index.htm>>.

⁵¹Raiford, op. cit., p. 127.

⁵²Raiford, op. cit., p. 127.

⁵³ Raiford, op. cit., p. 119.

⁵⁴ John Berger argues that "photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would reacquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments." Raiford, op. cit., p. 123.

⁵⁵Leibowitz, op. cit., p. 1-8.

have the leisure or economic ability to stress and support earning an education because they were too focused on survival. From the age of seven, King worked nights as a janitor with his alcoholic father while he struggled to stay awake during school.⁵⁶ King's father died of pneumonia, and King was forced to drop out of high school to support the family.⁵⁷ Before the age of twenty-one, King was already a felon and had spent time in jail.⁵⁸ When he was beaten on March 3, 1991, King said he "...was just glad...to have stopped where he did...because it wouldn't have been on tape, and nobody would have believed me."⁵⁹ The quote underscores King's own acknowledgement of his constructed identity and social position because he already knew that, even with the extent of his gross physical injuries, his ethos as a Black man and as a felon carried no value in his accusation against white police officers. Like many Americans of African descent, especial Black males, King inherited the constructed and generational legacies of the Atlantic Slave Trade, American Slavery, and American institutional racism and oppression.⁶⁰ Ultimately, King was a Black male who lived within a dominant system that had the power to shape and create his politically and socially emasculated identities and real-life lived experiences despite his own will.

Returning to and witnessing the racial *past-time* of King allows the viewer to fully deconstruct the racial epistemology of the presented King as an American racialized

⁵⁶Leibowitz, op. cit., p. 1-8.

⁵⁷Ibid, op. cit., p. 1-8.

⁵⁸Ibid, op. cit., p. 1-8.

⁵⁹Ibid, op. cit., p. 1-8.

⁶⁰Michelle Alexander argues that the American institutions of slavery and Jim Crow were replaced criminalization and incarceration, which overwhelmingly and disproportionately affect American males of color and is correlated with other historical, social, and political issues and events. Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010. Print.

subject, which the “photograph’s inadequacies” in present presentation and content fail to represent.⁶¹ A victim of racialized identity, King, like many males of color in urban America, lived a life of racialized and class violence whose choices, as a result of his constructed identities and opportunities, led to further oppression and his untimely death.⁶² Because of the *past-time* detour, the reader is better able to approach and understand the photograph’s contemporary narrative of June 17, 2012, in which King told a reporter that he “...didn’t go to school to be ‘Rodney King’.”⁶³ As my project considers the non-linear presentation of time in twentieth and twenty-first century literature texts, we must remember what is at stake: the ability to see and read, the ability to understand, and the ability to give equity to those voices, identities, and experiences, which are often, historically, silenced. A large dark mass shaped like an adult male body, now visible, has finally moved to the center of the *Time* photograph, which “stands at the crossroads of history and memory.”⁶⁴ Let us as readers now aware of the significance of *past-time*, our work, and my project, reenter the photo to take off our shoes, to jump into the water in order to retrieve King’s waterlogged body to start mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. His black body is our sacrifice, our close reading, and the price paid to gain entry into his *past-time* and to a greater, more accurate, understanding. For like the novelists of my project, we must bring that which we thought was dead and unattainable back to life.

⁶¹Raiford, op. cit., p. 127.

⁶²Consider the shooting death of Trayvon Martin who was mistaken for being life threatening because he was perceived as an African American male. See Mary E Weems. “For Trayvon Martin.” *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies* 12.5 (2012): 422-423. Academic Search Premier. Web. 04 Oct. 2012.

⁶³Toure. “Rodney King.” *Time* 180.1 (2012):1/2p. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 17 Sept. 2012.

⁶⁴Raiford, op. cit., p. 119.

You Can Run but You Can't Hide: the Push and Pull Factors⁶⁵ of the Sign, the Signifier,
and Past-Time in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*



Photo Image 2: Robert and Elora Coleman, St. Louis, Missouri, circa late 1930s – early 1940s (Personal, family photo)

But to look back from the stony plain along the road which led one to that place is not at all the same thing as walking on the road; the perspective, to say the very least, changes only with the journey; only when the road has, all abruptly and treacherously, and with an absoluteness that permits no argument, turned or dropped or risen is one able to see all that one could not have seen from any other place.

-James Baldwin⁶⁶

Sometimes it seems
We'll touch that dream
But things come slow or not at all
And the ones on top, won't make it stop
So convinced that they might fall
Let's love ourselves then we can't fail

-Lauryn Hill, "Everything is Everything"

When I ask my paternal grandfather, Frank, why he married my grandmother, Sarah, he always tells me the story of when, in his words, he was sitting behind the 40th Church pulpit one Sunday morning on Chicago's south side in the early 1940s. Frank was studying his way into becoming a church pastor, and like other deacons, he sat behind the pulpit with the preacher, facing the church congregation, while the church pastor preached fire and brimstone during Sunday service. Frank looked toward the sound of

⁶⁵ When referring to the reasons for the Great Migration of African Americans from the southern United States, "it is common to refer to those characteristics that motivate people to leave a place of origin as push factors, whereas the attractive characteristics of potential destinations are considered pull factors" (214). Steward E Tolnay. "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond." *Annual Review of Sociology* 29 (2003): 209-232. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Oct. 2012.

⁶⁶ James Baldwin. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. Knopf: New York, 1953. Print.

swinging heavy doors, and the most beautiful creature he had ever seen entered the sanctuary. He says that he inconspicuously leaned over, ignoring the word of God from the pastor's sermon, and whispered as best he could to a fellow deacon, "who is that?" From that moment on, Frank says it was over; he was completely and totally in love.

Like many African Americans in the early part of the twentieth century, my grandparents migrated to Chicago, Illinois from the southern United States.⁶⁷ My grandfather was born in 1925 and left his birth place of Money, Mississippi, a city east of the Tallahatchie River, as a very young man.⁶⁸ One day when Frank was fifteen years old, he says a White girl, visited him.⁶⁹ He can't remember her name, but he does remember that her car was blue. The girl had recently learned how to drive and was excited about a gift she received from her father. Frank says that the girl was close to his age, well meaning, and that she had known him all of her life. Elora, Frank's mother, was a long-term domestic servant to girl's family, and Frank was the first person the girl thought of to play show-and-tell with when she received her gramophone. The girl drove her father's car to Frank's house, which was in the *colored* part of town. The girl and Frank, just the two of them, spent what they thought was an afternoon of wonder east of the Mississippi Delta, taking turns cranking the arm of the gramophone and innocently listening to the

⁶⁷“Between 1870 and 1910 the South Atlantic states, especially Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, were the largest emigrating states (both to the North and to other parts of the South). [The states of] Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama blossomed into major emigrating states in the post-World War I period” (610). See William J Collins. “When the Tide Turned: Immigration and the Delay of the Great Migration.” *The Journal of Economic History* 57.3 (1997): 607-632. *JSTOR*. Web. 24 Oct. 2012. Isabel Wilkerson. *The Warmth of Other Suns: the Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Vintage Books: New York, 2010. Print.

⁶⁸Money, Mississippi is where the fourteen year old murdered body of Emmett Till was found tied to a cotton gin in the Tallahatchie River. See Valerie Smith. “Emmett Till's Ring.” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1/2 (2008): 151-161. *JSTOR*. 15 Nov. 2012.

⁶⁹Frank Coleman. Personal Interview. 24 Nov. 2011.

grainy music. At dusk, the girl said her goodbyes, and the cerulean car sped off with the girl and her gift inside. Later that night, after Elora arrived home from work, the White girl's father returned to the house in that same sapphire car. As a courtesy to Elora for all her years of faithful service, so the girl's father said, the father told Elora about her son's impending lynching that was guaranteed by nightfall if Frank didn't immediately leave Money and never come back.⁷⁰

Frank with his chocolate skin and young brown eyes fled his mother's home under the cover of darkness on foot with all the money Elora had saved hidden in their worn and only pillowcase. Granddaddy says that he and a family friend, a young new pastor, walked to the Tennessee state line where after a couple of days of watching and waiting they finally believed it safe for two young colored men to board a bus going north. "How much for a ticket to Chicago?" is what Frank and his friend asked the White bus driver, and "how much do you have?" is what the bus driver answered back. Days later, Frank and his pastor friend arrived in Chicago.⁷¹ Once there, Frank worked to pay his portion of the boarding room he shared with his older half-brother Robert, who was already living in Chicago via St. Louis from Mississippi for quite some time.⁷² Frank could read the *Bible*, so he joined a small sanctified storefront church, became of member

⁷⁰ Lynching and the threat of lynching were a major motivators for African Americas, especially males, to leave the southern United States for the north. See Steward E Tolnay and E M Beck. "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: the Market for Cotton and Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930." *American Sociological Review* 55.4 (1990): 526-539. *JSTOR*. Web. 06 Nov. 2012.

⁷¹"Chicago became both a major destination for many southern migrants, especially black migrants, and [Chicago became] the first in a series of northern destinations for many others" (217). Katherine J. Curtis White, and et al. "Race, Gender, and Marriage: Destination Selection during the Great Migration." *Demography* 42.2 (2005): 215-241. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 Nov. 2012.

⁷² "The selection of destinations was influenced by more than simple logistical convenience. Black migrants were more attracted to areas that offered stronger "ethnogenic" support for the African American community and eased the adjustment for newcomers. An example of ethnogenesis...includes the presence of African American churches. Later migration participants followed family members and friends who had migrated [to the north] previously." Tolnay, op. cit., p. 217.

of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC),⁷³ did not graduate from high school, served in World War II as a conscientious objector, worked for the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA), and the rest is history, so he says.⁷⁴

Granddaddy was and is always kind, giving, and patient. My childhood memories of my granddaddy are filled with his wise words about the inability to catch catfish during a really hot day because the fish are hot too, his never ending gifts of encyclopedias and maps, and his handwritten note that read “love is a gift from God” passed to me on the edge of a ripped newspaper during one of our many Sunday evenings of watching a *60 Minutes* investigation: this particular show was about sexuality and American culture.⁷⁵ Eventually, my grandfather would leave the pulpit, claiming that the church, as an organization, was too corrupt from what he had witnessed behind the pulpit. Never once while I was a child did my granddaddy speak to me or my siblings of being from Mississippi or of his life there; it has only been in my adulthood and in his old age that my grandfather has started to tell stories of Mississippi, his childhood, his family, and his subsequent adventure to Chicago as a young man. To me, his life before the narratives was analogous to a black and white photo frayed at the edges that at first glance, I thought only contained images visible to the naked eye. My grandfather’s

⁷³The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was established during the Great Depression in America as part of the New Deal to assist unemployed youth. My grandfather (Frank Coleman) was a member of the CCC in the city of Chicago, Illinois in Cook County. See Henry Coe Lanpher. “The Civilian Conservation Corps: Some Aspects of its Social Program for Unemployed Youth.” *Social Service Review* 10.4 (1936): 623-636. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Oct. 2012.

⁷⁴ “Over seventy-five percent of the churches in Chicago in 1938 were...storefront” churches (68). Storefront churches in major urban areas in the north helped newcomers from the rural south to better acclimate to urban life through allowing members an outlet, activities, and abilities to create new identities from the oppressed identities of the south and of the past. See Herbert Collins. “Store Front Churches.” *Negro American Literature Forum* 4.2 (1970): 64-68. *JSTOR*. Web. 08 Nov. 2012.

⁷⁵*60 Minutes*. CBS. New York. Television.

stories, once hidden and now revealed, augment the picture and my perception of my grandfather's past and present identity, which only fuels my knowledge, appreciation, and respect for him and his life. It is through his stories that I can better see my identity, my past, and my present, but my grandmother's story is affected by the same historical and racial dynamics but with different results.

Sarah Coleman's, my paternal grandmother, answer to the question of "why did you marry granddaddy" is always just a *little* different just like her past story is just a little different than my grandfather's. Beulah, at the age thirteen, gave birth to Sarah in 1927 in Osceola, Arkansas nine months subsequent to babysitting the young children of a well-known local piano player, Red, many years Beulah's senior.⁷⁶ Sarah, by the age of two, was ripped from Beulah and sent by her maternal family members to first Memphis then to Chicago from rural Arkansas to live as the single daughter of an infertile aunt and uncle.⁷⁷ As old folks say, Sarah was light and right,⁷⁸ knew her racialized beauty's purchase, and always tells me and my sibling her childhood stories filled with regularly pressed hair, manicured hands, silk stockings, and Shirley Temple dresses: things that

⁷⁶ In recent conversation, my father says that he (Red) spent time in jail for "what he did" to Beulah, but this "time spent in jail" is recent news to me or what I like to call a "change" in the narrative. My father only told me the jail part once I told him I was writing about this story. Neither my grandfather nor grandmother have mentioned that Red went to jail for impregnating Beulah because she was thirteen years old. Ronald Coleman. Personal Interview. 25 Nov. 2012.

⁷⁷ "Many of the migrants engaged in chain migration, often beginning in the rural South, moving to urban areas in the South, and then making their way to urban areas in the North." Katherine J. Curtis White, and et al., op. cit., p. 217.

⁷⁸ Sarah's skin complexion was light, which in the first half of the twentieth century afforded her economic, social, personal, and class mobility within a racialized society. There was no human relationship or connection, including the most intimate and personal relationships, that skin color did not affect. Mark E Hill. "Skin Color and the Perception of Attractiveness among African Americans: Does Gender Make a Difference?" *Social Psychology Quarterly* 65.1 (2002): 77-91. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Oct. 2012. Margaret L Hunter. "If You're Light You're Alright: Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color." *Gender and Society* 16.2 (2002): 175-193. *JSTOR*. Web. 29 Oct. 2012.

cost money.⁷⁹ Sarah graduated from Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable high school, worked for RR Donnelley printing company, and earned a post-Civil Rights job at the Chicago branch of the Federal Reserve Bank.⁸⁰ Grandmother is very proud of her ability to have passed the “paper bag” test and attributes most of her life success to being lighter than a brown sack.⁸¹ When I revisit with my grandmother her narratives, (my follow up questions asked through the privilege and hubris of my twenty-first century education), there is never any discussion or acknowledgement about the “rape” of her birth mother Beulah; how the image and icon of Shirley Temple might have problematized my grandmother’s perception of African American female femininity and beauty;⁸² why she chemically straightened my course dark hair when I was just six years old; why her son (my uncle) was told he was too dark to play outside in the summer day with his other siblings (whose complexions were lighter than his); why my grandmother whispered to my sister (whose complexion is lighter than mine) until her son was born that “there are no darkies in our family;” why my grandmother constantly lectured me that I was too dark to wear bright colors like red unlike my sister whose complexion is lighter than

⁷⁹ As a mega star of the Great Depression, Shirley Temple’s “presence could be purchased in Shirley Temple dolls, dresses, underwear, coats, hats, shoes, soap, books, tableware, and similar items” (18). John F Kasson. “Shirley Temple’s Paradoxical Smile.” *American Art* 25.3 (2011): 16-19. *JSTOR*. Web. 30 Oct. 2012.

⁸⁰ Federal Public Work Funds allowed for the completion of Du Sable high school that opened in 1935 in Chicago, Illinois. There was a direct connection to public education for African Americans in Chicago, Cook County, Illinois and the Great Migration. Michael W Homel. “The Politics of Public Education in Black Chicago, 1910-1941.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 45.2(1976): 179-191. *JSTOR*. Web. 01 Nov. 2012.

⁸¹ Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity consider the racial construction of skin color among African Americans, its origin, history, and economic impact (endnote #7) (704). Arthur H Goldsmith, Darrick Hamilton, and William Darity Jr. “From Dark to Light: Skin Color and Wages among African-Americans.” *The Journal of Human Resources* 42.4 (2007): 701-738. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

⁸² Ann duCille. “The Shirley Temple of My Familiar.” *Transition* 73 (1997): 10-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 01 Nov. 2012.

mine; why she was convinced that Stedman didn't and won't marry Oprah because her complexion is darker than his (like she personally knows them); and why when she met my Tanzanian husband, she accused me of really liking *those* Africans, and when I responded to her that although she was born in Arkansas that she was most likely a direct descendant of west African slaves, her answer was a long stare of confusion with the subsequent soft and long pronunciation of the word "nooooooo." Finally, when I ask my grandmother why she married granddaddy, there is never any mention of love or attractiveness. "I knew that he would be a good provider," she says with utter finality, as if that is enough and better and greater than love. I guess for an African American woman coming of age in 1930s and 40s Chicago, even one who was considered attractive, marrying a good provider was more than enough. "You can run, but you can't hide," my granddaddy always says, and my grandmother, although well meaning, taught me to hate my own skin color and complexion, as if I were an antebellum slave picking cotton in the field because I was too dark to be up at the big house.

Although Chicago, Illinois was a primary destination that affected my family experience directly, Harlem, New York was the destination of choice for African Americans leaving the South in search of better opportunities during the great migration. In his introduction to the ground breaking 1925 anthology, *The New Negro*, Alain Locke names Harlem as the destination of American Blacks as they fled "...from [a] medieval America to [a] modern [America]." Locke writes that "the migrant masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdled several generations of experience at a leap."⁸³ Freed Blacks

⁸³ Alain Locke. "The New Negro." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 2004. 984-993. Print.

and their descendants in the nineteenth century were expected to leap from their social and political identity and condition of the eighteenth century to the “freedom” of the late nineteenth century overnight. Jumping generations conveys the challenges and tenacity of Blacks who migrated to the North in search of better opportunities for themselves and their family subsequent family members. Blacks who were descendants of freed slaves through the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the US Constitution became free and enfranchised citizens (at least men) overnight:

Up to the present one may adequately describe the Negro’s “inner objectives” as an attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective.... And certainly, if in our lifetime the Negro Should not be able to celebrate his full initiation into American democracy he can at least, on the warrant of these things, celebrate the attainment of a significant and satisfying new phase of group development, and with it a spiritual Coming of Age.⁸⁴

With the new challenges of freedom, education, Jim Crow and opportunity, Blacks migrating north had to make up or catch up in their life times and through their individual self-reliance and hard work over the compounded and cumulative disadvantages created by over three hundred years of slavery, disenfranchisement, and oppression that had affected not only them but their immediate ancestors. This expectation, physically and emotionally, alone is a form of time travel, as Blacks were expected and desired to achieve something that seemed to defy the very laws of physics itself. Locke conveys the *temporalization* of time and space in the experience of African Americans migrating from

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 984-993.

the Southern United States to the urban Northern United States. Physically and psychologically, African Americans must perform a sort of time travel during the great migration, and the great migration becomes a sort of worm hole that Blacks enter in the south and exit in the north. After Emancipation Proclamation, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, African Americans are faced with the challenge of trying to play catch up in an American citizenship race that has been taking place for over three hundred years without them, in order to move into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* by James Baldwin considers how the social, political, geographical and spiritual dynamics of the great migration impact familial relationships, personal and sexual identities, self-actualization, and spirituality.

Go Tell it on the Mountain, published in 1953 by Knopf, is James Baldwin's first novel and was greeted with mixed reviews.⁸⁵ Some reviewers believed that the novel was promising but not well rounded. Other reviewers asserted that the novel was a sociological work, but most critics agreed that Baldwin was a writer with promise and that his narrative tried to shed light on the African American experience, identity, and religion in the United States of America.⁸⁶ The novel has an intense focus on the spiritual, physical, and psychological experiences of the Grimes family. The story takes places in Harlem, New York and in the American south. The structure of the novel works to create a space or temporalization through the novel's non-linear presentation of action. Within these temporal spaces, the novel's structure is presented in three parts: Part One: The

⁸⁵ Richard K Barksdale. "Temple of the Fire Baptized." *Phylon (1940-1956)* 14.3 (1953): 326-327. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

⁸⁶ John T Shawcross considers the early reception and critical review of Baldwin's first novel. See John T Shawcross. "Joy and Sadness: James Baldwin, Novelist." *Callaloo* 18 (1983): 100-111. *JSTOR*. Web. 06 Nov. 2012.

Seventh Day; Part Two: Prayers of the Saints; and Part Three: The Threshing Floor. John as the oldest of five children has one brother, Roy, and two younger sisters Sarah and Ruth. Part One and Three of the novel take place in the present time of the novel in Harlem, New York, which is 1935 where John is the protagonist and the primary character of the novel. Part Two of the novel is separated into three parts and takes place in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the geographical locations of the American south and New York City. Part Two provides the reader with the past stories of John's immediate family members: "Florence's Prayer" is the story of his paternal aunt Florence Grimes; Gabriel's Prayer provides the past story of John's stepfather, Gabriel; and Elizabeth's Prayer details the story of John's mother Elizabeth and his birth father, Richard. Although all these characters are connected to John through their family relationships, these characters, including John, are connected by their shared identities and experiences as American, a constructed racial identity of Black, Christians, and by geography (space and place).

During John's time in the church and on the floor in prayer and possessed by the holy spirit, the present or linear time of the novel is *deferred* or delayed to narrate certain events in a past-time of three characters in "Prayers of the Saints," Gabriel, John's stepfather; Florence, John's paternal aunt; and Elizabeth, John's mother. The narratives of these three characters are temporal and spatial as they take place in a different time and geographical location than the novel's present action. These shifts in narrative time act as a foil in the structural development of the story and in the thematic development of the novel's meanings. John Grimes' self-actualization in his own time, the novel's present

time, is *deferred*, and the reader's knowledge and understanding of the function and theme of Baldwin's non-linear novel are also deferred through the literary plot device of flashbacks: *traces* of the characters' past experiences, choices, and their consequences.

Both the reader and John Grimes become the observers and occupy the same time and space through an empirical and temporal wandering of the text's structure. The "Prayers of the Saints" section narrates the characters' various racial hardships in the South and their individual and subsequent decisions to leave the South to migrate north.

The actual "present" time action of the novel spans a twenty-four hour cycle in the day of John Grimes' birthday. A fictional birth date of any Saturday in March 1935 is given, and in "reality," there was a riot in Harlem in 1935 (Baldwin 18). During the riot, three African Americans lost their lives, and over two-million dollars of damage resulted. The riot was a result of the resentment that Black New Yorkers felt because of their experience with racism during the Great Depression: disproportionate rates of unemployment, poverty, poor housing, and death.⁸⁷ The fictional Saturday of the novel becomes a sign of John's fourteenth birthday, but it is also a sign for a racialized America juxtaposed to the African American individual. This dichotomy of past, present, individual, and collective creates a synthesis, which simultaneously allows the interpretation/reading of the text and the social, historical, and political commentary on the lived experiences of the individual and collective African American identity outside of the text. John's birthday in the novel is a day that John will be "saved" and "born again" into "power [that] would possess him. He [John] would sing and cry as they did

⁸⁷John Hope Franklin, and Alfred A Moss. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*. 7th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994. (400) Print.

now, and dance before his King” into an autonomous knowledge and acceptance of Christ, but both John and the reader will have to go to church (Baldwin 15).

Like my family’s and other African Americans move to urban cities in the North, John Grimes and his family represent succeeding generations of African Americans that originally migrated out of the South escaping racial violence and oppression. A move to the north was a promise of opportunity. Despite a move to the North, most African American families did not escape racism carried down from the legacy of the institution of American slavery. This failure to escape, despite major spatial movement and relocation, creates an ironic distortion of time, space, and place. For African Americans moving North during the Great Migration, the cities of the North were spatially different, the life was different, the jobs were different, but the racism was the same, particularly in terms of housing, employment, and education. The inability to break out of racism in the North becomes a compounding breach for the newly arrived African Americans, which prevents the previous ruptures, i.e., wounds and breaches, of the institution of American slavery and the subsequent life in the South from healing. The challenges and frustration that resulted because of the inability for a northern location to change American racism and the experiences of African Americans is also conveyed in Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*.⁸⁸ Through the irony of not finding racial equality in the North, the characters in Baldwin’s text become archetypes for African Americans and their experiences in America.

⁸⁸ Lorraine Hansberry. “A Raisin in the Sun.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y McKay. New York: Norton, 2014. 1771-1830.

Although the novel was first published in 1953, it is set in 1935 Harlem, New York, and its action focuses on characters, all of whom are African American. White characters are directly absent from the novel's narrative structure, but the paradigm of American White supremacy is a catalyst for the major conflicts and the emotional, physical, and spiritual condition of the characters in the novel. The external dynamics of American racial construction is assumed through the racial construction of time, identity, and geography within the all Black family and church congregations: in the north and in the south; in the past and in the present. The characters in the novel are immigrants from the South, or in the case of the children, except for John, they are only one generation removed. Ironically, the physical removal of the Black body from the South never removes the Black bodies, the characters, from the legacy (i.e., the past), the touch, of racism. Consider the narrator's description of the futility of cleaning the apartment carpet, which is symbolic of African Americans and their racialized condition:

He felt that should he sweep it forever, the clouds of dust would not diminish, the rug would not be clean. It became in his imagination his impossible, lifelong task, his hard trail, like that of a man he had read about somewhere, whose curse it was to push a boulder up a steep hill, only to have the giant who guarded the hill roll the boulder down again – and so on, forever, throughout eternity. (Baldwin 26)

Shifting to the North from the South would not result in freedom and success for African Americans, who are symbolized in the dirty carpet that has covered and warmed the floor and feet (American prosperity, equity, and freedom) that pass over it even though it is

just a dirty carpet. To attempt to clean the carpet or to change the “curse” of African American identity is equivalent to the catharsis of watching Greek tragedy to which the ending is well known. Consider Countee Cullen’s 1925 poem, “Yet do I Marvel,” written while Cullen lived in Harlem that considers the same racial quandary. The poem, speaking in the voice of an African American, tells the story of Tantalus and Sisyphus and laments, “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing/to make a poet black and bid him sing!”⁸⁹ The Sisyphus reference suggests that John might avoid the eternal damnation and ineffectiveness of doing the same action over and over again without producing a different result by choosing a different path, by choosing himself and his “wild...individual existence.”⁹⁰

How racism can destroy intimate relationships, especially how African Americans view themselves and others within intimate relationships, is central to the novel’s theme. This structure and conflict demonstrate how the culture of America racism, as a legacy of American slavery, in its insipidity, permeates the most intimate and personal relationships, so it would it would seem that there is never a possibility of escape. The parents, Elizabeth and Gabriel, even with their best intentions visit the same racism, which victimized them, upon their children. This tragic irony occurs because the characters have a strong intention and desire to break out of the cycle of generational oppression, but they never quite make it because they are unable to realize that the racism is internalized, even in their relationship with God is poisoned by internalized self-hatred as a symptom of the systemic disease of slavery.

⁸⁹Countee Cullen “Yet do I Marvel.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay. New York; Norton, 2004. 1341.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Gabriel marries Deborah, his first wife, not for love but because he believes that marrying her will uplift his image in the eyes of others. Gabriel's planned act of mercy causes him to hate and lie to his wife, especially when he finally realizes that his own vanity wasn't enough to save his marriage or to make him happy:

They sat in the back, rigid and uncomfortable, like sisters of sin, like a living defiance of the drab sanctity of the saints. Deborah turned to look at them, and in that moment Gabriel saw, as though for the first time, how black and bony his wife of his was, and how wholly undesirable. Deborah looked at him with a watchful silence in her look; he felt the hand that held his Bible begin to sweat and tremble; he thought of the joyless groaning of their marriage bed; and he hated her. (Baldwin 118)

As the characters work harder to release themselves from the chains of internalized racism, they only work to reinforce and perpetuate the very internal oppression they are trying to flee. The characters then enact racism upon each other, which can be defined as self-hatred and/or a lack of self-love. Ironically, if one is unable to love oneself then one cannot successfully identify love and give love to others. Gabriel's affair with Esther shows his inability to recognize love and love others, but the affair with Esther also demonstrates how Gabriel hurts others with his own self-loathing. Although Esther is having an affair with a married man of the church, her character is the most free, next to Richard, as she lives in a space where she is not controlled by what others think of her. Esther is open with her sexuality and with her love without shame. It is only Gabriel who manages to visit self-hatred upon Esther when she tells him that she is pregnant with

Royal, Gabriel's son born out of wedlock. Gabriel rejects Esther calling her a whore, and Esther proudly defends herself because she loves her self and conveys a moment of clarity in the text by revealing the ugly truth about the character Gabriel:

I ain't ashamed of it – I'm ashamed of you – you done made me feel as shame I ain't never felt before. I shamed before my God – to let somebody make me cheap, like you done done. (Baldwin 133).

Esther's disgrace does not reside in her affair or sex with Gabriel, her disgrace resides in how Gabriel, as a man, makes her feel because he does not have the integrity or self-love to do the right thing. Gabriel abandons Esther and their son, and he lies to Deborah about Royal. The consequences of Gabriel's actions are severe as subsequently, Esther dies and then Royal. The novel suggests that maybe the lives of Esther and Royal could have been better or different if Gabriel would have made a more loving, honest, and unselfish choice.

The generational and continuous legacy of American slavery and its effect upon the African American individual is reinforced in 1935 and in 1955 by both external and internal forces. The external forces were the systematic Supreme Court decisions that gave rise to Jim Crow after the failure of Radical Reconstruction and the institutional racism in employment, housing, and education that newly arriving African Americans from the South found in northern cities. The internal forces are the psychological (internal) damage that African Americans visit upon themselves, their loved ones, and their communities because of their internalized self-hatred. John never lived in the South, he never worked on a plantation, he was never beaten by a White man, but the subsequent

treatment that he receives from his African American stepfather works to scar him as if he had been a slave whose back was lashed repeatedly by a slicing and curling whip. The narrator tells readers that Gabriel told John that “his face was the face of Satan” (Baldwin 27). How can we critically begin to discuss the implications of racism, when internalized racism results in racism and its dehumanizing effects being perpetuated by those with the least amount of power, especially African American children? Love is distorted to become emotional and physical violence; Elizabeth, John’s mother, tells John that his “Daddy beats” him “because he love[s]” him (Baldwin 23). Like a child, John “had not felt the wound, but only the agony, had not felt the fall, but only the fear” (Baldwin 193). Perpetuated internalized racism is the worst type of abuse because it is familiar and intimate; it comes from and is reinforced by those John trusts and loves, and in this way it is passed down from one generation to the next, even when the succeeding generations (children) were not directly slaves and did not live or grow up in the American South. Because African Americans migrated to the North from the South without change, one could argue that the past of American slavery and Jim Crow did nothing to change with the passage of time. Despite the 13th, 14th, 15th US Constitutional Amendments and moving away from the South, African Americans found no racial relief. According to John T. Shawcross, in his essay “Joy and Sadness: James Baldwin, Novelist,” time, in a Western sense, moved on for American Whites, but the collective condition of African Americans, in terms of equality, remained still as if African Americans were still living before the Civil War.

Go Tell it on the Mountain relates a narrative about black people in Harlem and the South, but it is about people and their past, present, future, their hopes and dreams, their successes and frustrations, and their inner selves and the world outside.⁹¹ The psychological and physical condition of African Americans in 1935 and in 1953 is a result of temporization because equality for African Americans and the characters in the book is being deferred: deferred in 1935, deferred in 1953, and still deferred in 2013. Andrew Hacker's makes a similar point about deferred equality for Black Americans despite the movement of time in his book *Two Nations: Black & White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*:

But as much as anything, being “black” in America bears the mark of slavery. Even after emancipation, citizens who had been slaves still found themselves consigned to a subordinate status. Put most simply, the ideology that had provided the rationale for slavery did not disappear. Blacks continued to be seen as an inferior species, not only unsuited for equality but not even meriting a chance to show their worth. Immigrants only hours off the boat, while often subjected to scorn, were—and still are—allowed to assert their superiority to black Americans.⁹²

How ironic that the text's mutability for readers might be its representation of the effects of generational oppression. The pain and suffering result because the characters still think and believe that they can pursue and achieve the American dream (the sign) if they just work hard enough and believe enough in God.

⁹¹ Shawcross, op. cit., p. 102.

⁹² Andrew Hacker. *Two Nations: Black & White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print. 18.

“Florence’s Prayer” through the juxtaposition of Florence’s past and present demonstrates the “intersectionality” and compound nature of racial oppression as it relates to gender identity and construction. On John’s birthday in 1935, Florence is a sixty year old heterosexual African American woman facing death with nothing but “hatred and bitterness weighing [in her heart] like granite, and [her] pride refused to abdicate from the throne it had held so long” (Baldwin 66). It is the church song and her prayer that are the trace that triggers Florence into her past. She was born in 1875 in the South and is one generation removed from Emancipation. Florence is living and being raised in the height and horror of the Jim Crow south: especially the sexual violence. Her friend, three years her senior, and Gabriel’s first wife, Deborah, at age “sixteen... had been taken away into the fields the night before by many white men, where they did things to her to make her cry and bleed” (Baldwin 69). Deborah is left barren and, compounded with her role as a servant, fuels Florence’s hatred of men and her desire to go north. The reader sees that for Florence “neither love nor humility had led her to the altar, but only fear” (Baldwin 66). The narrator notes that Florence’s mother “had been born, innumerable years ago, during slavery, on a plantation in another state” (Baldwin 69). Florence’s mother tells stories of slavery and being emancipated. The stories of her mother fuse freedom with the gendered roles of domesticity, and as a result, the stories spur Florence’s interest in freedom beyond servitude and beyond living in the South:

Many of the stories her mother told meant nothing to Florence; she knew them for what they were, tales told by an old black woman in a cabin in the evening to distract her children from their cold and hunger.

But the story of this day she was never to forget; it was a day for which she lived. (Baldwin 69)

The mother's cries almost hint that the mother understands the tragedy that awaits Florence: "She was not weeping for her daughter's future; she was weeping for the past, and weeping in an anguish in which Florence had no part" (Baldwin 69). It would seem that it is only on the grandmother's death bed that she fully understands the power and trap of the past to reach into the future and present movements act upon and affect her daughter Florence. Florence was not a slave like her mother, but she experiences the results of slavery nonetheless. The mother's experience post emancipation has taught her that signs and symbols are not always what they seem. By the time Florence is in Harlem and in church with John on his birthday, her husband, Frank, is dead, and she is childless. Florence's status as widow and childless in 1935 Harlem and her status as young unmarried girl in the late nineteenth century waiting to leave her family for the North, are all deviations from what was expected of women. Historically, it is the multiple and impossible identities of Christian, maid, sister, daughter, sex object, nurse, plantation worker, domestic, auntie, and finally, dying old woman, that place bitterness in her heart and fuel her human desire, at least in her youth, for something better:

And this became Florence's deep ambition; to walk out one morning through the cabin door, never to return. Her father, whom she scarcely remembered had departed that way one morning not many months after the birth of Gabriel. (Baldwin 72)

The character Florence, as an archetype for the African American experience, represents the intersections of race and gender. Consider how her mother's experience of slavery, from the past, impacted the lives of Florence and Gabriel:

On this plantation she had grown up as one of the field workers, for she was very tall and strong; and by and by she had married and raised children, all of whom had been taken from her, one by sickness and two by auction; and one, whom she had not been allowed to call her own, had been raised in the master's house. (Baldwin 69-70)

In the article "Mammies, Matriarchs, and other Controlling Images," Patricia Hill Collins notes that "the first controlling image applied to US Black women in that of the mammy—the faithful, obedient domestic service."⁹³ In one generation, Florence equates her leaving to go North to her mother leaving the plantation upon the news of emancipation. Florence's subject position as woman is as oppressive as slavery, especially when her brother Gabriel was favored because he was a man:

Florence was a girl, and would be and by be married, and have children of her own, and all the duties of a woman; and this being so, her life in the cabin was the best possible preparation for her future life. But Gabriel was a man; he would go out one day into the world to do a man's work... Education that Florence desired. (Baldwin 72)

One system of oppression replaces another, perpetuated by people who says they love you. As a female reader, I want to have hope and sympathy for her character, but she

⁹³ Patricia Hill Collins. "Mammies, Matriarchs, and other Controlling Images." *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 69-96.

doesn't learn. Florence manages to leave the South for the North, which is bold and courageous, but when she meets Frank, she tries to oppress him as she was oppressed: "Uplift meetings where they heard speeches by prominent Negroes about the future and duties of the Negro race. And this had given her, in the beginning of their marriage, the impression that she controlled him" (Baldwin 82). Of course, it is too late because Florence realizes that her belief was "entirely and disastrously false" (Baldwin 82). The question to consider is if her desire for control, which I call the perpetuation of oppression, unconscious and unintentional. Ironically, Frank is not as desperate as she, as he does not accept this behavior, and contrary to her expectation that he will stay, he leaves. It is only in this temporal space created by the narrator that she, kneeling on the floor praying at the age of sixty, is able to see the error of her ways.

The structure of *Go Tell it on the Mountain* conveys difference: (a different more realistic narrative of struggle and oppression) through deferring the misleading sign of the present. A linear or a traditional Westernized structure of storytelling for the novel could not have encompassed this meaning, as Western culture struggles with the notion of time and space as a non-chronological concept and construct. Western linear stories work to convey only signs, which obscure what is absent. Often, the experiences of marginalized people, in this case African Americans, are challenging to convey and understand in its entirety and racial constructions' ability to completely permeate every facet of people's lives. In "Counterspaces: A Unit of Analysis for Understanding the Role of Settings in Marginalized Individuals' Adaptive Responses to Oppression," Case and Hunter note that "oppression has the potential to limit marginalized individuals in the social, political, and

economic domains of their lives, while simultaneously exacting a psychological toll on their well-being.”⁹⁴ Both John Grimes and the readers have a *desire* and *will* to be fulfilled, which they are willing to suspend for the fulfillment and pay off of what will come at the end of the text. The reader wants to reach the end of the book and all of what “the end of a book” entails, and John Grimes want to reach a moment of self-actualization where he is free of the destructive history, religion, present, and future of his elders. John is not an autonomous figure who exists in a vacuum. Like all humans, much of his circumstance is determined by what has come before him, i.e., his parents, his race, his class, etc. This represents what John and all humans cannot control. This difference influences and offers consequences to succeeding generations, who exist in different times, spaces and places, regardless of their ignorance and choice.

The temporal unity of the text (its structure) is a “unity of chance,” which reflects the reality and irony of generational oppression. Its unity is only held together by the desire of readers to obtain what is completely *absent* from John Grimes’ knowledge, completely absent from the readers’ knowledge, but has the power to great affect John if he fails to identify it so that he can extract himself from it. If John Grimes and the novel’s readers are moving toward an end, the threshing floor, which separates a seed from a harvested plant, separates knowledge from ignorance, and separates John from the clutches of history doomed to repeat itself, the text’s end is reached through separating the *sign* from what the sign represents: John’s present time from the past *time* of Gabriel, Elizabeth, and

⁹⁴Andrew D. Case, and Carla D. Hunter. “Counterspaces: A Unit of Analysis for Understanding the Role of Settings in Marginalized Individuals’ Adaptive Response to Oppression.” *American Journal Community Psychology* 50.1-2 (2012): 257-270. *JSTOR*. 13 Nov. 2012.

Florence. This separation, structurally and thematically, allows John's experience and life to be changed and thus possibly different:

the darkness of his sin was in the hardheartedness with which he resisted God's power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's fathers. He would have another life. (Baldwin 19)

The structural chain of two recursive and simultaneous but different space and time narratives allows the text to take account of space and time as *the thing*, which the sign, i.e., the characters in the present represent. The structural unity of the novel allows the reader and the character John to move beyond the sign to the see what the sign represents. The thing itself, what the sign represents, is the flashback, *the trace*, which the novel gives the reader; thus, it gives the trace to John. The representation is the revelation of Gabriel's hypocrisy and oppression and John's opportunity to avoid the pitfalls of committing the same hypocrisy through his own oppression. As things change, they remain the same. Gabriel and John made choices in different times and spaces, but ironically, their choices as African American men, living in America, are the same. Because of issues of oppression and equity, time stands still, and their choices remain the same.

In the novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, the protagonist John experiences the conflict and the fear of an awakening sexuality. Although homosexuality is not named

explicitly in the text, the tension of homosexuality and homoeroticism is implicit to John's experience; John "wanted to be with these boys in the street, heedless and thoughtless, wearing out his treacherous and bewildering body" (Baldwin 30). Although the reader understands how John's awakening sexual conflict is viewed as sinful by the oppressive and patriarchal African American Christian religion of the text, the encounters between the character Elisha and John are written in such an expressive and loving tone that a queer reading of the text calls for the consideration of the religious and racial prejudices against sexuality and sexual orientation and the intersections of race. Stanley Macebuh argues that this, Baldwin's first and autobiographical novel, presents meaningful and "different dimensions of love."⁹⁵ John's love, his love of Elisha, are written as simple, understated encounters charged with the language of love, innocence, and eroticism: "his thighs moved terribly against the clothes of his suit, his heels beat on the floor, and his fists moved beside his body as though he were beating his own drum" (Baldwin 16). At one point, John and Elisha playfully wrestle each other. According to critics, the wrestling of the characters convey a homoerotic sex scene that is much more than just wrestling:

No homosexual attraction is ever admitted, or perhaps ever realized by, either John or Elisha: however, the wrestling match, written with an undeniable overtone of sexual attraction, makes it clear that, even if subconsciously, this is a key ingredient in their relationships. The

⁹⁵Stanley Macebuh. *James Baldwin: A Critical Study*. New York: The Third Press, 1973. Print. 63.

wrestling match has long been a significant device for underscoring covert homosexual attraction (e.g., Lawrence's *Women in Love*).⁹⁶

John "turns...to the older boy Elisha in what is clearly a subconscious homosexual yearning."⁹⁷ Because homosexuality in an oppressive context violates directly Gabriel's (John's step-father's) view of God and religion, John "watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak."⁹⁸ Not only did John experience the tensions of sexual awakening, he, like many who challenge gender "normativity," is oppressed to silence. In his father's view, John's homoerotic sexual awakening is something that results in eternal damnation, separating him forever from Nature and from God.

Through the trace of the characters' past, the text argues that this belief in the sign is a false construct because the collective experience of oppression (coded as failure) of African American people in America is not systemically within African Americans. The major characters internalize all failures as personal failure and look to heaven, religion, and God for peace and joy – all acts of deferment. Salvation and equality can only come through death but never in life. The true nature of American identity for these African American characters is absent. John's feat and the readers, through temporization, is to see what the sign represents in order to gain new knowledge, true equality and a new identity, which can only come from inside of John. Consider John's thoughts when he is on the threshing floor at the end of the novel: "All niggers had been cursed, the ironic

⁹⁶James R Giles. "Religious Alienation and "Homosexual Consciousness" in *City of the Night and Go Tell It on the Mountain*." *College English* 36.3 (1974): 369-380. Print. 378.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁹⁸ Baldwin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

voice reminded him, all niggers had come from this most undutiful of Noah's son" (Baldwin 197). In consideration of this epiphany, John realizes that he has the power to change his position only with the change of his perspective: how he perceives himself relative to time, particularly the past. John must deny the sarcastic voice, as the voice that refuses to recognize difference and the significance of the impact of time and space on meaning. John must change the meanings he has been given by the world and even by his family, the people closest to him. John's strength becomes his ability to defer his fulfillment and desire for autonomy and self-actualization until he understands the connection between what is or *seems to be* absent and what is present: "Then John knew that a curse was renewed from moment to moment, from father to son. Time was indifferent, like snow and ice; but the heart, crazed wanderer in the driving waste, carried the curse forever" (Baldwin 198).


The structure and conflict of novel resists a chronological beginning, middle and end. Instead, the novel's structure and conflict seeks recourse. The "present" time of the novel is "deferred" in order for the reader and the protagonist, John Grimes, to attain knowledge and change. This deferring of fulfillment to reach a goal can easily be compared to what Derrida calls a strategy that orients tactics to reach a final goal, theme, mastery or *reappropriation* of the development of the field.⁹⁹ This can only happen through empirical wandering, which is the readers' observations and experiences of the characters' memory, trace or past. John and the reader work to reappropriate or develop an identity, a future (Derrida's field). I can't say if that identity is American, African

⁹⁹Jacques Derrida. "Difference." *Margins of Philosophy*. Tras. and Ed. Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. Print. 7

American, man, human, etc. This recourse culminates with epiphanies for the readers and the protagonist at the end of the text where John completes his spiritual and psychological separation on the threshing floor of the church. This recourse considers at least four placements: time, space, place and perception, which manifests the power of the past to act upon the present in the past's apparent "absence" or release. For African Americans living in the early part of the second half of the 20th century, like the Grimes family, this the past acts directly upon the present of 1935, 1953 and the twenty-first century if recent statistics regarding race and disparity of income, segregation and home ownership in America are any indication of "change" or no change despite the signs.

Oops Out of Time: the Collective and Individual Sites of Memory that work to Challenge
the Individual versus the Scripted Collective African American Male Identity in Alexs

Pate's Losing Absalom

	<p>This is LeAlan Jones on November 19, 1996. I hope I survive. I hope survive. I hope I survive.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Le Alan Jones¹⁰⁰</p> <p>And escape is not effected through a bitter railing against this trap; it is as though this very striving were the only motion needed to spring the trap upon us. We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-James Baldwin¹⁰¹</p> <p>A fiction writer's responsibility covers not only what he presents as the facts of a given story but what he chooses to stir up as their implications; in the end, these implications, too, become facts, in the larger, fictional sense.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Eudora Welty¹⁰²</p>
<p>Photo Image 3: Cheryl (mother) and Ronald Coleman (son) at Ronald's high school graduation in 1996. (Personal, family photo)</p>	

When Nathaniel Jackson, a black man, was shot “while standing outside a grocery store” on Chicago’s west side on December 28, Chicago’s homicide rate reached 500 for the year of 2012.¹⁰³ The number made national news, and pundits and experts alike

¹⁰⁰ LeAlan Jones and Lloyd Newman with David Isay. *Our America: Life and Death on the South Side of Chicago*. Scribner: New York, 1997. Print. 200.

¹⁰¹ James Baldwin. “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. Penguin Putnam, Literary Classics: New York, 1998. 11-18. Print.

¹⁰² Eudora Welty. “Is Phoenix Jackson’s Grandson Really Dead?” *On Writing*. The Modern Library: New York, 2002. 89-93. Print.

¹⁰³ Mark Guarino. “Chicago Registers its 500th Homicide of 2012: the Highest Number Since 2008.” *The Christian Science Monitor* 29 Dec. 2013: N/A. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Jan. 2013.

worked to deconstruct the increasing trend of inner-city gun violence and the deaths of young Black and Latino males in inner cities plaguing America. The media reports made it seem as if those acts of violence were recent with an immediate and urgent need to make changes in order to save valued lives. A review of Chicago's past revealed that gun deaths, whether armed or unarmed, were not new to young men of color in the history of Chicago and America:¹⁰⁴ "from 1990-94, Chicago averaged 900 murders a year" with the highest being 928 deaths in 1991.¹⁰⁵ No national exposés were done, no national panels or committees were convened, and no major federal laws were permanently changed until the unthinkable and horrible tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut where on December 14, 2012, a gunman opened fire and took the lives of twenty-six people, twenty of them children.¹⁰⁶

The death rate of young Black and Latino males has been seemingly a constant trend since the late 1980's, particularly in the city that I was born and raised in, Chicago, Illinois.¹⁰⁷ I grew up the second oldest of five amid White flight and south side neighborhood gang violence caused by segregation, poverty, drugs,¹⁰⁸ and gang control disputes over territory.¹⁰⁹ Like many African Americans living in inner city Chicago, I

¹⁰⁴ "...A violent incident between two young black men is about six times more likely to involve a gun than a violent incident between two young white men"(1241). See Richard B. Felson and Noah Painter-Davis. "Another Cost of Being a Young Black Male; Race, Weaponry, and Lethal Outcomes in Assaults." *Social Science Research* 41(2012): 1241-1253. *JSTOR*. Web. 04 Jan. 2013.

¹⁰⁵ William Bratton. "Cross Country: the Real Story of Chicago's A Bloody Summer." *The Wall Street Journal* 21 Jul. 2013:A.11. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 18 Jan. 2013. Also see Guarino, op. cit., p. N/A

¹⁰⁶"Governor Quinn Proclaims "Day of Mourning" in Honor of Sandy Hook Elementary School Victims: News Feed." *M2 Presswire* 21 Dec. 2012: N/A. *ProQuest Newsstand* 18 Jan. 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Blacks and Latinos make up significantly less of Chicago's population, but Blacks and Latinos represent the majority of homicide deaths in the city. See Guarino, op. cit., p. N/A.

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Reardon. "Everyone Pays the Price for Crime in the Ghetto: a Series." *Chicago Tribune* 17 Sept. 1985: N/A. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 12 Jan. 2013.

¹⁰⁹ Wilkerson, Isabel. "Crack Hits Chicago, Along with a Wave of Killing." *The New York Times* 24 Sep. 1991: A.1. *JSTOR* Web 14 Jan. 2013.

and my siblings attended Catholic schools, elementary and secondary. Many African Americans living in Chicago and other northern urban areas embraced parochial education as a shield from the violence plaguing their neighborhoods and local public schools.¹¹⁰ Catholic schools represented an educational opportunity and route toward a better life.¹¹¹ St. John de la Salle was my elementary school, and it was my and my older sister's job to safely walk ourselves and chaperone our younger three siblings to and from St. John's every day.¹¹² It was only a six city blocks walk: one block north, two blocks west, and one more block north, and we were there; but in Chicago, a lot can happen in a city block.

My mother and I and my older sister would role play in case my sister and I were approached by gang members between home and school and asked the unlucky question: "hey girl...what do you ride?" "The CTA" (the Chicago Transit Authority – the local bus) is what my mother repeatedly taught us to answer. My mother knew that providing the wrong answer to that gang loyalty and turf question was a matter of life and death. In

¹¹⁰The effects of crime in Chicago "...turn many of Chicago's public schools into places where the fear of crime and injury is routine for students and teachers and cause many parents – white and black – to move their children to private schools or move their families to the suburbs." See Reardon, op. cit., p. N/A

¹¹¹ "Chicago has the largest Catholic school system in the nation." African Americans in Chicago post the Great Migration have had a deep and rich connection and history to Catholic educational institutions and parishes, especially in inner city neighborhoods that were first integrated and subsequently became re-segregated because of White flight. These Chicago neighborhoods consequently became Black and/or Latino because of the Whites moving out of the neighborhoods the 1960s and 70s. Even today, over 22 percent of "enrolled students at elementary and secondary schools combined" are African American although only "3.8 percent of Chicago Blacks are worshipping Catholics, according to the Archdiocese of Chicago." I and my siblings in the religious tradition of my maternal family and in the tenants of the Roman Catholic faith are fifth-generation Catholics. Stacie Williams. "Blacks Embrace Catholic Education." *Chicago Defender* 17 (2004): N/A. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Jan. 2013. Timothy B. Neary. "Black-Belt Catholic Space: African-American Parishes in Interwar Chicago." *The Catholic University of America Press* 18.4 (2000): 76-91. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013. See Julia Lieblich. "Cardinal's Letter Prods Catholics to Confront Problems of Racism." *Chicago Tribune* 5 Apr. 201: 8. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 20 Jan. 2013.

¹¹² St. John de la Salle. Elementary School, Chicago, Illinois. <http://www.saintjohndelasalle.org/> 12 Jan. 2013.

my mother's constructed social, gendered, and economic condition as single, Black, female, mother, and working poor with five kids, Cheryl Coleman was not in a position to be physically with us if and when that question came. Having to be at work an entire hour before school started, Cheryl left her five children alone in the house every week day, three of them below the age of ten. My mother walked one city block north to board a CTA bus at the corner in order to take the "L" train from 95th and State Street to ensure that she arrived to her job in the downtown Chicago Loop area on time. After my mother left, my older sister and/or I made sure everyone ate and dressed. We ushered everyone out of the house, and she or I locked up the house by 7:30AM, and we made our way to school walking one block north, two blocks west, and one more block north, to arrive fifteen minutes before the elementary school day began. At three in the evening, we were dismissed from school, and we walked home, hand and hand, and waited patiently alone, usually watching television, until my mother would arrive shortly after six. My mother's walk from the CTA bus stop was on our corner and just a walk one block south.

My oldest sister and I were never asked the question of what we rode, and to my knowledge, we were never approached by a gang or gang members inquiring of our neighborhood loyalties. Unlike Little Red Riding Hood, my sister and I always stayed on the path, at least the path we could see as best we could, which led us to school every week day during the school year. We didn't visually fit the part. Our second-hand multi-colored blue plaid jumpers worn on top of our over-bleached and frayed white blouses, whose shoulders and arm creases and flat wide lapels were ironed and starched into complete submission, provided some protection. When I was thirteen and in eighth grade,

my sister had already been gone a year earlier for high school, and then, I left for high school too, graduating to leave my two younger sisters and five-year-old only brother behind to walk the path, one block north, two blocks west, and just one more block north, alone. Finally, I kept on leaving. I left the state to attend college and never returned to Chicago to live again.

In 1996, my brother, Ronald, graduated from Brother Rice, an all-boy (predominantly White) Catholic preparatory high school in the southwestern suburbs of Chicago.¹¹³ During his graduation ceremony, my mother whispered to me that my brother was only one of three black young men who would be graduating that day. My mother went on to explain that there had been seven Black boys in my brother's class when he started as a freshman. Over a period of four years, four of the seven young Black men, who started at the school as freshmen, became tragic victims of gun violence. All four men were shot on separate occasions at various places on the south side of Chicago: three of the young men died, and the fourth young man survived his wounds but left the school. Contrary to popular stereotypes, the young men that died had not been involved with gangs and did not own and use guns, but like many Black male victims of gun violence, they were simply young innocent men merely in the wrong place at the wrong time.¹¹⁴ Such was the reality for young Black males in living in Chicago and in other American urban areas when my brother was a high school student.¹¹⁵ Chicago's current homicide

¹¹³ My brother, Ronald Coleman, says that there were about 1500 students, total, in the high school and that the non-white students in his freshman class totaled less than fifteen. Ronald Coleman. Personal Interview. 25 Jan. 2013.

¹¹⁴ Felson and Painter-Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 1241-1242.

¹¹⁵ Although the crime rate was declining nationally and in Chicago, "789 people were killed in" Chicago in 1996 (6). This rate is still higher than the Chicago homicide rate in 2012. Andrew Martin. "Crime Rate

rate and the high profile shooting deaths of Trayvon Martin¹¹⁶ and Jordan Russell Davis¹¹⁷ just to name two, is unfortunately, still, evidence that the reality for young men of color in most major inner cities in America, even today, is death by gun violence.¹¹⁸

Until my brother's high school graduation, I had never really given much thought to his actual lived experiences as a young Black man growing up in the inner city of Chicago. My constructed and intersectional positions as Black, female, working-poor, and "educated," revealed my utter desensitization to the harsh consequences and realities of my brother's oppression. Like most well-meaning Americans, I couldn't see or understand the collectively determined identity that my brother led as a Black man nor

Continued Dip in Most of Chicago." *Chicago Tribune* 19 Jan. 1997: 4C, 1:6. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 22 Jan. 2013.

¹¹⁶ On February 26, 2012, an unarmed 17 year old African American male, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in Florida. Zimmerman, a part of the neighborhood watch, claims that the shooting was done in self-defense, even after Zimmerman had been advised by 911 operators not to physically approach Martin. Ruth Daniel. "Save Some Outrage for Florida's Lawmakers." *St. Petersburg Times*. 25 Mar. 2011:1. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 21. Jan. 2013.

¹¹⁷ On November 23, 2012, unarmed 17 year old Jordan Russell Davis was shot dead by 45 year old Michael David Dunn. Dunn claims that the shooting was in self-defense and that Davis and his four friends, also young Black men, were playing their music too loud while sitting in their car in a public parking lot of a gas station. Susan Jacobson. "After Complaint of Loud Music, Fatal Shots." *Orlando Sentinel* 27 Nov. 2012:NA. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 23. Jan. 2013.

¹¹⁸ "...the youth violence epidemic in the United States reached its peak in 1993, when there were 3,758 homicides for the age cohort 14 to 19; African American males represented only 8% of this population but accounted for 51% of these homicides (National Center for Health Statistics [NCHS] 2004). With 1993 as the baseline for the peak of homicides involving African American males ages 14 to 19, in the next 10 years, the homicide rates decreased. Notwithstanding this fact, the number of homicides during these years remained consistently high for Black youth and still reflected epidemic proportions. From 2002 through 2005, African American males were 8% of the youth population in the 14 to 19 age group but accounted for 44% to 49% of the total number of homicides (NCHS 2008). For African American male juveniles, a disturbing new trend of increasing homicide rates began to emerge from 2002 to 2007. Homicides involving Black male juveniles as victims rose by 31%, and Black male juvenile perpetrators of homicides increased by 43% (Fox and Swatt 2008). Those killed by the use of firearms escalated at an even greater rate. Gun killings rose by 54% for young Black male victims and by 47% for young Black male perpetrators (Fox and Swatt 2008). The decreasing trend for African American male youth homicides that was witnessed between 1993 and 2002 reversed.... The magnitude of African American male youth violence as a national public health issue cannot be overstated" (691). Wesley W. Bryant. "Internalized Racism's Association with African American Male Youth's Propensity for Violence." *Journal of Black Studies* 42.4 (2011): 690-707. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Dec. 2012.

his oppression that was socially and culturally constructed in such a way that it became normalized (expected) within American society and culture.¹¹⁹

Media images since the beginning of time have normalized the American identities of Black men as marginal and violent with devastating consequences.¹²⁰ I had been too steeped in my own normalized oppression that was routine in my life as a young Black girl growing up on Chicago's south side and now as an African American woman working to move through historically and predominately oppressed spaces.¹²¹ These same power dynamics for my brother created constructed but completely different collective identities with different realities and consequences with very different and more dangerous risks and outcomes simply because of his gendered position as male. In that moment after my mother's words during Ronald's graduation, a bubble burst in my brain, connecting my cognitive ability to my spirit and to my unconditional and protective love for my baby brother. I was stunned by my own ignorance, selfishness,

¹¹⁹ In defining a collective African American identity for the purposes of this project, I synthesize Ron Eyerman's discussion of collective identity and Kwame Anthony Appiah's definition of collective identity. Eyerman argues that collective identity is created through shared experiences specific to memory and historic events that affected and may continue to affect a specific group. For African Americans, Eyerman notes that this collective identity is generally based in the experiences and effects of the institution of American slavery and its subsequent historic events. This shared "site" creates a shared narrative, which weaves the collective identity. The collective identity can influence the individual identity, which, theoretically, is formed separately from the collective identity because of the individual identity's "free choice" in the context of what Appiah calls a liberal democracy. The competing or complementarily relationship between the collective and the individual identity, ideally, is the paradox between the two, especially if the collective identity is stronger and exerts its power over the individual identity's ability to choose and form free of the influences of the collective identity, especially if the collective identity has been formed by hegemonic, pervasive, and prevailing forces (such as institutions and national cultures and practices) of oppression. See Kwame Anthony Appiah. "Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity." *Critical Inquiry* 27.2(2001): 305-332. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Sept. 2011. Ron Eyerman. "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory." *Acta Sociologica* 47.2 (2004): 159-169. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

¹²⁰ "Black men are stereotypically defined as intimidating, aggressive, or even hostile" in the media (10). Vanessa Hazell and Juanne Clarke. "Race and Gender in the Media." *Journal of Black Studies* 39.1 (2008): 5-21. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Jan. 2013.

¹²¹ Andrew D Case, and Carla D Hunter. "Counterspaces: A Unit of Analysis for Understanding the Role of Settings in marginalized Individuals' Adaptive Responses to Oppression." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 50.1-2 (2012): 257-270. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2012.

and lack of critical thinking around my brother's lived experiences. I was more stunned that my brother had "made it," once I realized the tremendous odds and how close gun violence and death had come to him simply because of the intersections of his American racial identity as Black, his gendered identity as male, and his special (geography) location as urban. As a result, my brother lost his classmates, my brother lost his friends, and maybe my brother might have even lost himself and his innocence in the struggle to resist and to stay alive.¹²²

On that warm day in the spring of 1996 on Chicago's southwest side, my brother was a young Black man with a high school diploma, a young Black man without a felony,¹²³ a young Black man who did not use or sell drugs, a young Black man who had not committed suicide,¹²⁴ and a young Black man who was not in a gang. My brother was on his way to college, and most importantly, my brother was alive, but was he free? In an effort to understand, acknowledge, and express my brother's life challenges and success, I turned to the only medium I trusted to navigate the complex and contradictory humanity: literature. I wrote and published a poem for my brother: "Chicago on the Day

¹²² "Multiple indicators of health and well-being continue to suggest that this segment of the population [African American males] are confronted by a host of environmental, psychological, and social challenges" at a disproportionate rate than their male counterparts of other races and at any age, starting from birth (265). David B Miller, and M. Daniel Bennett. "Special Issue: Challenges, Disparities and Experiences of African American Males." *Research on Social Work Practice* 21.3 (2011): 265-268. *JSTOR*. 12 Dec. 2012.

¹²³ From the "War on Drugs" started in the 1980s under Ronald Reagan, Black men across the United States are more likely to be incarcerated because of a drug related offense. The War on Drugs allowed for changes in laws and perceptions, which increased the incarceration rate of Black and Latino men. Their status as felons, not only leads to a life entrapped within a penal system but it justifies their "legal" disenfranchisement as US citizens. Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.

¹²⁴ From 1980 to 2008, suicide was the "third leading cause of death among African American males ages 15 to 24 (134). Joseph Williams. "Suicide Watch." *Essence* 38.12 (2008): 134. *JSTOR*. Web. 10 Jan. 2013.

Brother Increases his Chances of Reaching Age 21.”¹²⁵ I wanted to sympathize. I wanted to say “I love you.” I wanted to say I understand, I get it, and I respect you and support you in trying to get through it and live. My brother Ronald is still alive, but for him, it is an everyday struggle as an African American man living in America. I will never know if my poem achieved all those things, but I watched my brother leave Chicago at the end of the month of August directly following his graduation in 1996. Within the first two weeks of September of that same year, rapper Tupac Shakur would die: shot dead in Las Vegas, Nevada. All of Tupac’s fame and fortune couldn’t save him from the fated script of his collective identity as a young Black male living in America¹²⁶ Almost seventeen years later, my brother has yet to return to Chicago, and I realized that he never will returned to Chicago because he does not want to literally die, at least not die at the barrel of a gun. Although he might struggle with an intellectual, spiritual and critical death that is the byproduct of his survival. In the words of African American male novelist Alexis Pate, my brother in leaving Chicago and never coming back, is attempting to avoid “...incompleteness... by completing his own journey” as well as he can.¹²⁷

Do my brother and other Black males have access to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”¹²⁸ if the person (American citizen) he/they was/are attempting to be and

¹²⁵ *Bum Rush the Page: a Def Poetry Jam*. Ed. Tony Medina and Louis Reyes Rivera. New York: Random House, 2001. 142-143.

¹²⁶ “Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories.” Appiah, *op. cit.* p. 326

¹²⁷ Alexis Pate. “The Invisible Black Family Man.” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 4 (1994): 76-77. JSTOR. Web. 4 Dec. 2012.

¹²⁸ Appiah argues that the ideas promised in the *American Declaration of Independence* of 1776 are central to America’s (USA) fulfillment and promise of equality to all citizens. Without the fulfillment of these ideas, the very fabric of a liberal democracy is jeopardized. Appiah., *op. cit.* p. 307.

become as an individual is dominated by a collective identity? I use Kwame Anthony Appiah's definition of liberty in the tradition of its origin in Enlightenment definitions of liberalism that facilitated the American Revolution and the subsequent United States of America. Appiah asserts that one cannot achieve democracy without liberalism and that liberty cannot be achieved without individuals having the freedom within a democracy to choose and do as they please. If African American males do not have the freedom to choose and do as they please because of oppression (yes this is complicated considering the history of American slavery, Jim Crow, and other de facto and de jure institutions and practices of American inequity), then can American Black males ever develop an individual identity within America; can they really participate in and benefit from American democracy and the American dream? Did my brother, Nathaniel Jackson, Trayvon Martin,¹²⁹ and Jordan Russell Davis¹³⁰ believe that they had equity access to their own self-actualization or was their self-actualization and abilities to have an individual identity dominated by a scripted, collective, and restrictive American collective narrative identity? Alexis Pate says, no; "so many African-American men die

¹²⁹Unarmed 17 year old Trayvon Martin, an African American male, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman. Zimmerman, part of the local neighborhood watch, claimed that he acted in self-defense, but Zimmerman was advised by 911 operators not to approach Martin. See Ruth Daniel. "Save Some Outrage for Florida's Lawmakers." *St. Petersburg Times* 25 Mar. 2011:1. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 21. Jan. 2013.

¹³⁰Jordan Russell Davis, an unarmed 17 year old African American male, was shot dead by Michael David Dunn. Davis and three of his friends were sitting in their vehicle parked in the public parking lot of a gas station in Jacksonville Florida. Dunn claims that their music was too loud, and after an exchange of words over turning down the music, Dunn claims that he felt threatened and shot eight to nine times into the vehicle killing Davis in self-defense. No other guns besides Dunn's were located at the crime scene. Susan Jacobson. "After Complaint of Loud Music, Fatal Shots." *Orland Sentinel* 27 Nov.2012:NA. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 23. Jan. 2013.

knowing [that] their journey was derailed, upset, sabotaged, and scuttled by the society into which they were born.”¹³¹

Where are the sites and locations where the access to freedom is denied because the collective identity, the stereotyped narrative, overrides individual identity? The past in a novel can take readers to sites when history and present time in “real life” works to obscure or fails to reveal the places where the collective identity triumphs over the individual. The novel through moving plot, action, and characters into the past through character memory, flashbacks, or non-linear time can take readers to any site or location to reimagine and reconsider the effects of those breaches and ruptures on the individual identity. Consider how Toni Morrison uses the novel *Beloved* to go back in past to the Middle Passage and to the southern plantation in order to explain the pain of 19th century African Americans who “escaped” slavery.¹³² The African American literary tradition is rich with novelists using the past and non-linear plots of fiction in order to create an identity or explain circumstances that the oppression of American reality does allow. We know the collective story, but do we know the individual stories? These sites are known through memory and collective experiences that African Americans choose to acknowledge as part of a larger cultural narrative that involves nationality, ethnicity, and race. These historic events are but not limited to American slavery, the *Dred Scott Decision*, the Civil War, the 13th Amendment, the 14th Amendment, the 15th Amendment, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, the Great Migrations, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights

¹³¹ Pate, op. cit., p. 76.

¹³² In the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the characters has flashbacks of slavery in order to make sense of their present time, free as fugitive slaves in Ohio. See Toni Morrison. *Beloved*. Plume: New York, 1987. Print.

Act of 1964, and the Civil Rights Movement to name a few. These historic events are placed as a specific site, date or location in the past, but their impact continues to reverberate upon the realities of those identities living in the present. Their impact is the frame that contextualizes the contemporary picture of life for African American males living in America.

Like my brother, the African American protagonist male character in *Losing Absalom*, Sonny Goodman, leaves his birthplace, the inner city of Philadelphia, for Minneapolis never to return in an attempt to save his life. Through the novel, author Alexs Pate takes readers back to collective sites in the past. Those sites are revisited and re-imagined (written) through the very individual and personal experiences of familial relationships, sex, gender, love, class, violence, geography (space and place) and (sickness) dying and death. Instead of an eighteen year old boy graduating from a Chicago high school in an attempt to save his life in 1996, Pate's fiction characters becomes allegories for the American Black male experiences. Sonny Goodman's fictional story is set in North Philly in 1989. Pate's characters are brought back together by the dying patriarch of the Goodman family. The fictional character Sonny, reluctantly, returns to Philly. Sonny's fictional journey is augmented by the all too real national headlines and realities of the shooting and death of Black men in urban America, which has been epidemic for at least twenty years and systemic to Black male identity since America's inception. In *Losing Absalom*, the protagonist Sonny Goodman struggles between his collective-identity, as an African American man, versus what he individually attempts to become as an independent human being, and he loses.

Pate's debut novel published in 1994 by Coffee House Press, *Losing Absalom*, was qualified as a "watershed tribute to the much-maligned African American male" by *The Library Journal*.¹³³ The journal defined the pervasive identity of the Black American male as one that was much maligned in American society and culture. The Black male identity in Pate's novel creates the social context into which the book is read and critiqued. The novel is set in 1989 in the inner city of Philadelphia at the height of urban violence fueled by poverty and drugs; the news media argued that the violent crime trend in Philadelphia was a national trend because the same types of violent crimes, usually involving guns, primarily affected and involved African American and poor victims and was on the rise in other states.¹³⁴ The plot of the novel centers on the dying father, Absalom Goodman, and his wife, Gwen, and their two children, Sonny and Rainy. Absalom is an African American male. Absalom is not only an African American male, he is a Black male who has relocated from the southern US, a former slave state, to the north, as part of the historic Great Migration in search of a better life and opportunities for himself and his family. The narrator tells readers the South "had made [Absalom] feel dirty; the south...told him he was dumb and that he stank," so Absalom and Gwen left the south in order to experience a better life (Pate *Losing* 20). He and Gwen are first generation Philadelphians living on Whither Street, but they are "both children of Africans, children of slaves" (Pate *Losing* 29). Because Absalom's illness and impending death is the conflict that facilitates the action in the novel, Absalom's identities as

133 "Review of Alexs Pates' *Losing Absalom*." *Library Journal* 1 Oct. 1994:47. Print.

134 Debbie Howlett. "Philadelphia Reflects Trend of Urban Violence." *USA TODAY* 9 Mar. 1994: 03A. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 22 Jan. 2013. John Valorizi. "New Killing Fields: US Cities Battle Wave of Violence." *The Vancouver Sun* 29 Jan. 1991: A3. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 22 Jan. 2013.

American, Black, male, father, husband, and working class are central to reading meaning into the text.

Like Nathaniel Hawthorne's character Young Goodman Brown is an archetype for the early Puritan or Puritan-influenced American man and the challenges of religious and social hypocrisy that bear on freedom, so, too, is the character Absalom an archetype of African American men.¹³⁵ The character of Absalom represents Black male American identities and experiences, particularly those experiences that were experienced by the hopeful generation of the Great Migration. That generation, like the parents of John in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, navigate the numerous challenges to individual liberty and freedom that always, no matter what they do, stem from race.¹³⁶ Absalom's impending death is the catalyst for his family's evaluation of their lives, their choices, and the consequences of those choices juxtaposed to their collective identities. In an interview with Katherine Link, Pate provides his reasons for writing black male protagonists into the American novel:

In this world, growing up in this country as an African American trying to be yourself is a very difficult thing because there are these expectations. Some of them have to do with racial stereotypes, and some have to do with the negative history of racism in this country. A dimension of that is the way in which black men are looked at. It's the gaze they receive. It's like 'What do you see when you see a black man? How open are you to

¹³⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne. "Young Goodman Brown." *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Short Stories*. New York: Vintage Classics, 2011. 193-205. Print.

¹³⁶ James Baldwin. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. New York: Knopf, 1953. Print.

them? Do you see someone you welcome, or someone you are afraid of?

Do you expect them to be smart and articulate, or do you expect them to be slow and unintelligible?’¹³⁷

Pate’s words to Link reveal that as the writer, Pate, is trying to shape the identity choices of his character as purely human (individual) as separate from the negative stereotypes (collective) that can be a part of identification. The separation that is often not possible in real life is possible in the world of fiction. Pate self-identifies as a Black American, and as such, he admits to actively “engaging narratives of self-construction in the face of racism.”¹³⁸ The use of literature, as a method to subvert different times and spaces becomes Pate’s methodology for telling a story that validates a certain, racial experience that is specific to Pate’s own life (time and space) and specific to a larger narrative or arc of the Black, male experience in urban America. In the action of the story, the narrative also uses the past or memory in order to explain the present time. This use and respect for the past and what events happened in the past that affect the present and future are not always valued in reality and measured as a part of the human experience that affects how people move and live in the world.

Pate was raised in North Philadelphia, and like the character, Sonny, in the novel, Pate experienced the rejection caused by American racism but still “...believed in the American Dream.”¹³⁹ When thinking about the limitations of life in North Philly, the character Sonny says that he “...had broken free, thanks in part to his mother, and

¹³⁷ Katherine, Link. “Illuminating the Darkened Corridors: An Interview with Alexs Pate.” *African American Review* 36.4 (2002): 597-609. Print. (602)

¹³⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah. “Liberalism, Individuality, and Identity.” *Critical Inquiry* 27.2 (2001): 305-332. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Sept. 2011. 327.

¹³⁹ Link, op. cit., p. 597.

climbed aboard the modern underground-railroad, otherwise called education” (Pate *Losing* 3). The character’s memory of the past admits to having to create a different identity other than what was initially made available to him. By achieving some authenticity, the character was able to avoid the trap of “...gangs, drugs, and the increasing disintegration of life” that was dominantly available to him as a Black man living in an “eastern” American “city” (Pate *Losing* 3). When working to find a middle ground for considering “authenticity,” Appiah finds “a reasonable middle view that constructing an identity is good but that the identity must make some kind of sense.”¹⁴⁰ By writing an autobiographical novel, Pate is working to make sense of the world and the time of the text, but Pate is also working to make sense of his own world (in reality) as a Black American male. As a result, the novel uses memory and the past as a flashback (plot and conflict) device for the characters. Pate uses memory to revisit the past to return to a particular site of identity in order to create a new one. When asked if he was driven to define the contemporary Black man, Pate responds:

Yes, I think that I am a part of developing a new breed of black writers – writers who are consciously trying to continue the exploration of the depth of African American presence. We are mindful of the external, cosmetic details of African American life. We live in black skin. We listen to black music. But our goal, really, is to illuminate the darkened corridors, unlock the locked doors, and reveal the challenges that lie before us. This is what

¹⁴⁰ Appiah, op. cit., p. 324.

people who are striving to achieve and maintain the quality of their humanity must do.¹⁴¹

Pate's use of "we" and "us" is establishing a certain community or social group, as the idealized reader and the context for the experience. Appiah argues that the self is always at odds in what he calls the "unsociability of the liberal self." Pate's literary device of memory juxtaposed to admitted archetype characters reveals that not only is the liberal individual split with the social (institution), the individual is also split within self, and memory is a representation of that split. Is there anything more personal than memory? Is memory constituted outside of self as in Appiah's options for identity within liberalism? The word "humanity" in Pate's comments could be easily replaced with "dignity" or "liberty." The way to achieve dignity and/or liberty not experienced in the past and in the present is to rewrite those experiences (memories) and provide dignity and liberty to them by providing another, different point of view through an individualized narrative, which essentially is a different story and a different time. In some ways this notion is hopeful, in that it presents a positive reality, but it is also disheartening as it implying that Black men might be only able to achieve individual identity (self-actualization, freedom, and liberty) within the pages of a book (fiction) and never in the lived real world.

What happens if memory is also present because the past never seems to change? There is movement of literal time but not an improvement in the circumstances of Black men. For an American, who is non-White living within in a paradigm where the racial color of White is the mark of solidarity, the non-White or Black identity of individualism

¹⁴¹ Link, op. cit., 599.

is put in a state of perpetual failure. Unless he is Michael Jackson, the Black male can never change his skin color to achieve the appropriate, right and White identity. In this case, African American males can never achieve liberalism because their identity is dependent upon their being a White, male dominant identity. Even when assimilating, the non-White is always on the outside of identity. The novel and other mediums of art might represent the only place where temporization can be achieved. As Appiah points out, liberalism can function because it provides opportunities for being in the world that marks identity. But, I wonder if liberalism can ever be achieved in a society that privileges race or any difference over the normative as part of the national, collective identity unless one is able to give up a narrative of race for another, different or better narrative that escapes the limits (time, space and place) of the racial narrative? Pate's novel provides a space that, normally, does not present itself in "reality."

As a black man living in North Philly, Absalom has little access to power, and this lack of power is reflected in his comatose state throughout the entire text. If "race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies," the black body, Absalom's body, is less functional because of its status in a racialized world.¹⁴² The physical and mental limitation of Absalom's coma, as a medical condition, is a metaphor for the state of oppression that results from White supremacy. A person in a coma is unable to participate in creating his own identities, collective or individual. Appiah calls this the "value of solidarity" in

¹⁴² Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print. 123.

creating a collective identity.¹⁴³ Solidarity can only be achieved through participation; reciprocity becomes the evidence of belonging to a group. If so, what happens when race or skin color is the sign of reciprocity that leads to solidarity? What happens when one's race prevent reciprocity completely? It would seem that the African American male is unable to be fully developed into the Western model of liberty and citizenship. The narrator of an autobiographical novel, in this case Pate, is left to use his memory to become the narrator of his own life experiences. The novel through its narration does the work of reciprocity in order to create an identity. The solidarity is created through the readers' suspending their disbelief to give Pate permission to fictionalize a new identity and experience that is reconfigured in the new site of memory. A person in a coma or whose individuality is oppressed cannot participate can only rely upon his already lived (failed) individual experiences and desires: memory.

Ironically, the comatose state, a purgatory between life and death, is the only state that allows Absalom freedom and access to liberalism not attained in his life. Absalom's memory creates a liberal identity through a reflection of his own lived experiences, which Appiah places at the "heart of human life."¹⁴⁴ Reliving memorized past experiences with knowledge not had at the time of the original experience itself, reconfigures a site of collective identity and the claiming of an individual American self. This only happens because Absalom is able to differentiate his identity expectations from the collective expectations (read as possibly false) of others. Paradoxically, this recognition can only happen when he is walking in the shadow of death. His social status as Black, male, and

¹⁴³ Appiah, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

working class does not allow him the luxury or opportunity to voice these experiences, which are a part of his silent identity, until he is immobilized by the cancer that is killing him. Even in his voicing, Absalom is still speaking at a physically disadvantaged position. Even Absalom's son, Sonny, who is educated and has left the "ghetto," still fulfills the dominant and stereotypical narrative of Black male American identity. Sonny is shot to death because of drugs: "the bullets hit him sharply, tearing into his right temple and lower left side" (Pate *Losing* 201). There is no generational escape in Pate's narrative. There is no promise fulfilled from the Great Migration that the succeeding generation would do better. Sonny is dead, Rainy is selling crack cocaine, and Pate's answer to the question of hope for the Black male, which includes the male's family, is "no" when agency can only be achieved through memory and mortality.

The racism and disenfranchisement, which create Absalom's identity that Pate opts to show in the novel is Absalom's own Black image of White supremacy and not reality's. This twist can only be revealed by the character's memory, but this reconfiguration does not happen at the time of the actual event (conversations with the character Sy). Through memory, Absalom revisits his relationship and conversations with his White boss, Sy Bonansky. Absalom is a truck driver for Sy Bonansky's bakery. The narrator reveals that "Sy would literally follow Absalom's every movement, no matter how many times Absalom had to go back and forth from the kitchen to the dock, or even into the back of the truck" (Pate *Losing* 49) Absalom wants to ask Sy, "What the hell do you keep following me around for," but because of the power differential, Absalom never does (Pate *Losing* 49). The reader anticipates that Sy is the bad character

and that Sy will do something unfair and unjust to Absalom. The reader is taken by surprise because the familiar narrative is not rewarded by the novel's action. Absalom's expected identity of Sy is not the identity revealed by the novel, but it is the identity anticipated by the reader because the reader and Absalom expect Sy to be a racist. Pate anticipates the social collective identity (time and space) of the readers. Along with Absalom, the readers are implicated because their expectations confirm their participation and perpetuation of this American racial system of collective identity creation and fulfillment. The narrator reveals that Sy really "had never known a black man before ... and from the first day that Absalom had come to work ... Sy had liked him [Absalom]" (Pate *Losing* 49).

Absalom works for Sy for eleven years, and their relationship is one of hopeful expectations and regretful fulfillment of collective, racialized assumptions that colonize their individualism. Bonansky's is a family owned bakery, and Sy represents generational ownership and American progress. Sy, as a white archetype, is the allegorical male counterpart of American White male privilege and success juxtaposed to an American Black archetype male identity, Absalom, who represents an experience of oppression and economic challenges. Sy represents the myth of the American "boot strap," which saw the post-World War II "melting pot" of European immigrants, who socially, nationally, and economically advanced to American Whiteness, while Americans of color were marginalized through various institutional practices of racism: housing, employment, education, etc.¹⁴⁵ The change of time and Civil Rights did not

¹⁴⁵ "The House We Live In: Episode 3" *Race the Power of an Illusion*. Producer, Larry Adelman. California Newsreel, 2003. DVD.

afford Americans of color the same advancements as their White American counterparts. Both Sy and Absalom live in the same city (place), but because of social and collective expectations, they have different opportunities and identities (time and space). The novel, the text's narrator, must do the work of reconfiguring Absalom's assumptions and individual identity in that moment juxtaposed (in conflict with) to Absalom's individual response to collective expectations of synthesizing Sy's individual Whiteness with American collective Whiteness. It is a moment (chance or choice) wholly in Absalom's choice to see himself within his perceived expectations of Sy's privilege.

Bell hooks in her book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, tackles such a hard and internal question: "images may be constructed by white people who have not been? Check the text divested of racism, or by people of color/black people who may see the world through the lens of white supremacy – internalized racism."¹⁴⁶ Absalom's reflection on his memory experience with Sy imposes a curious site of self-responsibility and an opportunity to maybe break free of the self-imposed barriers that prevent him from connecting to Sy. Absalom works to deconstruct the racialized identities that prohibited their communication:

It wasn't race as much as it was economics. Yes, he knew very well that there were white people out there who would hurt him. But most of his interactions with them came from the cab of his truck or when he was delivering food to them. Besides, he wasn't angry at them. His anger was

¹⁴⁶ Bell Hooks. "Introduction: Revolutionary Attitudes in *Blacks Looks: Race and Representation* (1992)." *African American Literary Criticism 1773 to 2000*. Ed. Hazel Arnett Ervin. New York: Twayne, 1999. 349-352. Print. 350.

for something or somebody he couldn't identify but which stood between him and a sense of self-completion. (Pate *Losing* 52).

Their ability to connect could be key to their abilities to create better individualized identities and also an opportunity to see how they are the same, that they have more in common with each other than they could possibly imagine, and maybe how their ability to connect could be a metaphor for an acknowledge interdependence that works to eliminate prejudice and racism, i.e., misconceived notions of each other's scripted and collective identities. Appiah calls this the interdependence in individual identity formation. Although Absalom is responding to Sy, Absalom is taking responsibility, in memory, for how he reads Sy's expectations of him as a black male. Absalom uses his own collective expectations of Sy's White identity to create his own individual and possibly racist identity of his Black racialized self. Absalom's mistrust of Sy is the fulfillment of collective scripted behavior. It is the moment that Baldwin writes about in his essay "Everybody's Protest Novel," when he writes "...it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed."¹⁴⁷ The conflict is heavily ironic because the narrator reveals the thoughts of both characters to the readers. The readers are left to watch Absalom and Sy like two actors in a Greek tragedy while the dramatic irony unfolds. No matter how much the Greek Chorus or the audience was the end of the play to be different, they know that the tragic victims of hubris can only have one, the scripted and same, ending. The reader knows that if both Sy and Absalom could move past their scripted expectations of each other, they could probably be the best of friends because they have more in common than what they do not have in common.

¹⁴⁷ Baldwin, op. cit., p. 20.

By not revealing this, Pate is saying that it is possible for us to get out of these roles, but that Americans, because we are so locked within our national identity and narrative, will never have the ability to achieve. The message is a sad one. If so, are inequalities and other types of oppression a “natural” by product of liberalism?

The geographical context of North Philly is described as an island of Whites who are resisting “White flight.” White flight happens as a result of the integration of northern, American cities, and the novel emphasizes that there are only a few whites who do not flee the inner city of Philadelphia. Absalom has “... grown up in the South, and [he] could work with white men but wasn’t able to feel relaxed around them” (Pate *Losing* 50). Because Absalom assumes that Sy is fulfilling the scripted narrative of whiteness, Absalom “had [negative] suspicions” (Pate *Losing* 49). The racialized reader and Absalom assume that it is because of Sy’s distrust and stereotyping of Absalom as a Black man. We, the reader, and Absalom, expect a certain identity role of Sy as a White, male. The reader and Absalom participate in an expected racial identity that should lead to a racial act of an assertion of power against Absalom or a rejection of Absalom by Sy. It is such a contradiction to think that people are more comfortable with expecting the worse from each other in identity formation than expecting the unexpected, which could actually be better. It is a site that implicates all parties involved: White and non-White, and the powerful and powerless. Pate considers this responsibility when talking about the notion of not having a fixed home, an intangible site of belonging:

the repositioning of African American men in our society. I don’t ever feel “expected,” if you get my meaning. I, too often, feel like my presence

is either demonized, or gratuitously accommodated. I want to belong, but I don't often feel like I belong anywhere. Now I have to admit that this may be a particularly personal feeling, but I can't help but write about it.¹⁴⁸

In his reflection, Pate is taking personal responsibility for what he perceives as a perception of him as a Black male in the larger world out of his control. Home is analogous to safety and a safe identity of opportunity and possibility. In a philosophical liberal context, Absalom like Pate relinquishes his "free self" to fulfill what he thinks is the expected and appropriate behavior required in a situation where he, the Black male employee, and Sy, the white male employer, are fated to fulfill racially scripted narratives of an ingratiating less powerful, black man to a powerful, White male boss.

In considering the outcome of Sy's and Absalom's eleven-year relationship and dialogue, they are prevented from developing and growing because they cannot move beyond the material provided by the collective (society). Ironically, the novel's narrator informs readers that the protagonist Absalom "tried his best not see [the] skin color" of his white boss, but it did not happen that way ((Pate *Losing* 54). The reader learns that a culmination of their eleven-year discussion is instantly discarded for the collective predictability and comfort of meaning gathered from the Philadelphia riots, which were in response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The narrator tells readers that "Absalom felt no desire to join them [the blacks rioting] but he understood it [the violence and destruction of the riots]" (Pate *Losing* 52). In response, Sy believes that they "... are just criminals" (Pate *Losing* 52). Sy's inability to empathize with the

¹⁴⁸ Link, op. cit., p. 603.

destruction of property and the looting of the rioters is an inability to recognize a new and different identity that Absalom is trying to create: “Sy could not find words. He’d never gotten that close to this Absalom. This Absalom was almost trembling with anger. This Absalom made him feel uncomfortable” (Pate *Losing* 53). This Absalom is the black individual identity in the face of liberalism of 1968 American, and Sy’s inability to see, accept and possibly allow this Absalom, angry, as an option of existence, breaks the bridge that was developing between Sy and Absalom. This inability to communicate and understand the other because of larger social issues and actions of others stops and ends their liberalism right in its tracks. The true Absalom in that moment is the shadow of oppression that most Americans, oppressed and oppressors, don’t want to see.

A philosophical foundation of liberalism works to construct a society where two facets of identity can be created: individual and collective.¹⁴⁹ Those dual notions challenge conventional definitions of time and space. American identity, in its broadest and most general meaning, is complex and hard to define, especially American identities that are not male, White, upper class, native speakers of English and straight. W.E. B. Du Bois settled upon “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk* when trying to pinpoint an individual Black American identity within a dominant, non-Black collective identity. Although Appiah extends the definition of “identity” quite extensively in his essay, I define *identity* as memory and traces that create a *self*. This self has a collective and personal (socially important features) dimension, which focuses on the

¹⁴⁹ Appiah, op. cit., p. 329.

“...interdependence of self-creation and sociability.”¹⁵⁰ Appiah extends the development of identity and consciousness as constituted outside of the self:

... collective identities ... are responses to something outside ourselves.

They are the products of histories, and our engagement with them invokes capacities that are not under our control. But they are also social, not just in the sense that they involve others, but also because they are constituted in part by socially transmitted conceptions of how a proper person of that identity behaves. In constructing an identity one draws, among other things, on the kinds of person available in ones’ society.¹⁵¹

From a historical view, Du Bois’ double consciousness can be extended to an agency (choice) of the Black self with an awareness of the acting “other,” which is also a part of the self. Double consciousness becomes a fulfillment of an availability of gazes (identities) among an option of gazes (identities). Du Bois’ Black American identity fulfills the expectation of his/her concept of American Whiteness, which is created outside of the time and space of the Black self. If a philosophical, liberal individualism is both collective and dependent upon choices available in any given paradigm to any individual within a state or society, can any identity, even Black identity, be pure and autonomous?

Appiah makes the case in his essay that all identities mirror and fulfill the image of another’s (the collective’s) expectations outside of the individual self. In Appiah’s discussion of identity and individualism, all participants share in the responsibility of

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 320.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 326.

creating expectations and roles, even in situations that are arbitrary and unequal. All players choose their parts based upon the parts that are available. A synthesis of Appiah's and Du Bois' theories of identity is that the willing performer, aware of his or her flawless performance, performs without any detection by the audience. If both the powerful and the powerless are willing participants in the creation of their individualism and identity (liberalism), how is the construction of the individual and identity, between seemingly unequal and different people within the same social or national context, negotiated in situations of race? Appiah argues that "someone who adopts an identity as a black... [is] ... responding to a fact ... from outside the self."¹⁵² If the formation of individual and collective identities are interdependent to establish mutually beneficial relationships and meanings, what happens if a Black or White American tries to break free of a liberal identity construction? What happens when a Black person wants to break free of her or his time and space?

Appiah would argue that breaking free is impossible. He believes that "... life is ... [created] out of the materials that history has given."¹⁵³ It would seem that people within a liberal society are stuck in time with the previous narratives of their ancestors. Within Appiah's assertions, it is impossible for the individual to exist without fulfilling the expectation of the collective identity, especially if no such different identity exists in the society for him/her to choose. Individuals are not really individuals because they must select roles that are scripted identities: what you believe, how people will see you, etc. According to Appiah, "collective identities, in short provide what we might call

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 323.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 325.

scripts, narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories.”¹⁵⁴ The character Absalom is, admittedly by Pate, an archetype of the individual and collective Black male experience in 20th century America. I argue that Pate’s novel, although hopeful in moments, argues that breaking free is impossible too when considering the physical status of the two primary African American male characters by the end of the novel. Absalom is still in the hospital and dying, and his only son, Sonny has been shot dead. Literally and thematically, the Goodman’s, the Black good men, have no future in text. Consider the current political and social realities for Black men in American, Pate’s novel also conveys that the future for Black men in reality is bleak.



Like Absalom’s death, which never happens in the action of the novel, the hope that Gwen and Rainy have for Absalom’s life represents a collective hope for liberalism if Absalom (or Black people collectively) can just hang on long enough. The narrators says that Gwen “could never feel whole again, because [Sonny] had always been an important part of her and he was now gone forever. But she was there fighting for everything that remained” (Pate *Losing* 202). Ironically, Absalom’s physical condition, his illness, represents the price that he has paid for his hard life and internalized oppression like African American who disproportionately have disparities in health and life expectancy, which many experts attribute to the intersections of poverty and oppression. Absalom lives but his son, Sonny, dies. Pate’s novel is saying that we (Americans, Blacks) can’t afford to continue to live with these abnormalities of difference and equity. Ideally, the character Sonny has done everything right. He is educated, his has a good job in corporate America, and he lives in a “safe” city in the

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 326.

mid-west, but this was still not enough to keep him safe as a Black man in American. The experience of Pate's African American male characters questions the very promises of liberalism and democracy in American. From the experiences of Pate's characters, liberalism cannot be synonymous with freedom, as it is so often heralded within the American Western narrative. Can Americans ever be free of these roles or are they systemic, good and bad, to liberalism and to an American identity (time, space and place)? Appiah believes that "dialogue shapes identities we develop as we grow up, but the very material out of which we make it is provided, in part, by our society...."¹⁵⁵ This means that no matter how hard the individual strives, his/her identity will always be limited by the collective society: if not by what they themselves actually do, but by the very perceptions and expectations of others within the society. Unfortunately, the hard life of Absalom, the death of Sonny, and the tragic realities of education and other equity disparities for African American males in America say otherwise.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 352.

Putting Your Business in the Street: Dana's Archetypal Synthesis of American
Antebellum Slavery between the Past and the Present in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

 <p>Photo Image 4: <i>The Moral Arc of History Ideally Bends towards Justice but Just as Soon as not Curves Back around toward Barbarism, Sadism, and Unrestrained Chaos</i> is the title of this Kara Walker painting, which is currently on display at the Newark New Jersey Library.¹⁵⁶ Photo taken by Robert Sciamino</p>	<p>American “slavery is the site of racial terror out of which black collective memory has tried to forge a counter memory and oppositional culture.”</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Herman Gray¹⁵⁷</p> <p>We have an opportunity...of moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and cast, and create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the New World. But the price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-James Baldwin¹⁵⁸</p>
 <p>Photo Image 5: Newark New Jersey “Library patrons sit under a piece of artwork by Kara Walker, covered by a zebra-print cloth, which was recently hung on a wall at the Newark Library. The drawing was covered after employees of the library stated they did not like the image, which shows a slave performing oral sex.”¹⁵⁹ Photo taken by Robert Sciamino.</p>	<p>People don't learn everything about the times that came before them...Why should they?</p> <p style="text-align: right;">-Dana from <i>Kindred</i>, Octavia Butler¹⁶⁰</p>

¹⁵⁶Barry Carter of *The Star-Ledger*. “Censorship or Common Decency? Newark Library Covers Up Controversial Artwork.” *NJ.com*. NJ.com: New Jersey’s Source for News, Information, and Interaction (powered by 12 New Jersey Newspapers). 2 Dec. 2012. Barry Carter and Robert Sciamino (photographer) of *The Star-Ledger*. “Controversial Painting in Newark Library is Bared Once Again.” *NJ.com*. NJ.com: New Jersey’s Source for News, Information, and Interaction (powered by 12 New Jersey Newspapers). 20 Jan. 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Herman Gray “notes in his own discussion of Kara Walker’s work” (189). See Roderick A. Ferguson. “A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: the Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History.” *American Quarterly* 61.1(2009): 185-192. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

¹⁵⁸ James Baldwin. “The Creative Process.” *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. The Library of America: New York, 1998. Print. 669-672.

¹⁵⁹Carter and Sciamino, op. cit. p. NA.

Encountering a huge painting of filled with naked black and white bodies, violently and sexually portrayed, amid fire, a masked man, and a burning cross hanging on the wall of your local public library is probably not the image you want to see during the Holiday season. In December of 2012, the public library in Newark, New Jersey covered the visual art of world renowned artist Kara Walker. Walker's piece, a painting titled "The Moral Arc of History Ideally Bends towards Justice but Just as Soon as not Curves Back around toward Barbarism, Sadism, and Unrestrained Chaos," shows graphic images of American slavery and racism.¹⁶¹ The library patrons complained about the images and were "specifically troubled by the image of a white man holding the head of a nude black woman – apparently a slave - to his groin. One library associate called the visual disgusting."¹⁶² There were no discussions of the historical accuracy of the painting's images, and Walker's painting was covered up by the head librarian. By January 20 of the New Year, the image was uncovered.¹⁶³

Kara Walker, an African American, visual artist and her work are not without controversy. Early in her career, Walker's work was boycotted by fellow African American artists because of what was thought to be the "inappropriateness" of her content, but despite her naysayers, Walker established her career with an explosion, and her early work, the provocative silhouettes that primarily reimagined antebellum narratives of slavery, race, physical sex, violence, and gender, earned her top honors in

¹⁶⁰ Octavia Butler. *Kindred*. New York: Beacon Press, 1979. Print. 63.

¹⁶¹ Victoria Cavaliere. "Large Drawing in Newark Library Depicting Troubling Images of Racism is Revealed Again to the Public after Critics Back Down." *New York Daily News*. New York Daily News, 23 Jan. 2013. Web. 2 Feb. 2013.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, p. N/A

¹⁶³ Barry Carter, op. cit. p. N/A.

the world of art and culture. Walker received the MacArthur “genius” grant and many other prestigious awards. In April of 2007, I gave a lecture at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota on a series of silhouettes titled, “The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (1995).” The installation boldly reimagines Stowe’s characters from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the installation, Walker uses her large black-paper silhouettes to reveal the hidden and oppressive narratives and identities of domesticity and Black femininity as culturally manifested in Stowe’s text. In Walker’s images, the narrative and identities are inside the dark spaces created through the physical and psychological abuses of slavery and oppression; “the silhouette is a black space that you [can] project your desires into. It can be positive or negative. It’s just a hole in a piece of paper, and it’s the inside of that hole.”¹⁶⁴ In many ways, Kara Walker’s visual images do the work that neo-slave narrative novel, *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed, does when he uses his novel to speak back and signify to Stowe and her work. In *Flight to Canada*, the character Uncle Tom flies in jet plane with Abraham Lincoln as a way to challenge Stowe’s emasculating constructions of African American male identity.

When Baldwin writes that “it is a sentimental error, therefore, to believe that the past is dead,” artists like Reed and Walker boldly go back to the past in ways that avoid sentimentality.¹⁶⁵ These artists return to the past with great risk, as often the stories they tell and show are full of taboos and the unspeakable things, even if they are historically accurate. Roderick A. Ferguson in his article “A Special Place with the Order of

¹⁶⁴ Roderick A. Ferguson. “A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History.” *American Quarterly* 61.1 (2009): 185-192. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Dec. 2012. 186.

¹⁶⁵ James Baldwin. “Many Thousands Gone.” *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York: The Library of America, 1998. 22. Print.

Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History” writes that history, particularly African American history, is about being eligible to participate in the larger American narratives and discourses. If one dares to “refer to any specific acts or events that account for the shadows that make up the unspeakable and its terrifying range,” the artist/writer like Walker “risks...their claim on history and its promises of membership; it means forfeiting our claim on politics as well.”¹⁶⁶ Artists like Kara Walker speak the unspeakable truth that many Americans, regardless of race, think should not be said, written, shown, or remembered. In the novel *Kindred*, author Octavia Butler uses time-travel and the displacement of linear time without care to membership in the collective, palatable, American history narrative to speak the unspeakable.

Octavia Butler stated in an interview with Randal Kenan for the *Callaloo* literary journal that she wrote *Kindred* as a “kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed. [Butler] wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery.”¹⁶⁷ Published in 1979, three years after the Bicentennial celebration of America’s independence, the novel “evades genre labeling.”¹⁶⁸ *Kindred* is Butler’s fourth novel published as a mainstream novel, and it is Butler’s first book that is not part of a series.¹⁶⁹ *Kindred* is a neo-slave narrative because the primary plot conflict of the novel revolves around the American institution of slavery, the perpetrators of the American institution of slavery, various slave perspective(s), and

¹⁶⁶ Ferguson, op. cit., p. 187.

¹⁶⁷ Randal Kenan. “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 14.2 (1991): 495-504. Print.

¹⁶⁸ Frances Smith Foster. “*Kindred*.” *The Oxford Companion African American Literature*. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris, eds. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 421-422. Print.

¹⁶⁹ Daniel Jones. “Octavia Butler.” *Contemporary Author: New Revision Series, Volume 73*. Ed. John D. Jorgensen. Detroit: The Gale Group, 1999. 83-86. Print.

the legacy of American slavery in contemporary America. *Kindred* is a historical novel set in both 1976, the year of the Bicentennial, and in the 19th century during American slavery. *Kindred* is a speculative novel because the novel's plot and characters time travel between the two centuries. With the combination of speculative fiction, slave narrative, and historical placement, Butler's *Kindred* breaks new literary ground. Sandra Govan in her article "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel," asserts that *Kindred* "links science fiction to the African American slavery experience via the slave narrative"¹⁷⁰ while navigating at least three literary placements: speculative fiction, neo-slave narrative, and contemporary time "to explore history, the process of excavation, and the subsequent interpretation of historical knowledge."¹⁷¹ *Kindred* juxtaposes 19th century and 20th century social structures, highlighting issues of race, gender, sex, violence, and education and emphasizes psychological, physical, and social relationships.¹⁷² The experiences and relationships of *Kindred*'s protagonist, Edana (Dana) Franklin, become a metaphor for African American consciousness about history and a metaphor for the entire American psyche toward American slavery.

Because of the "prologue," the "epilogue" and the novel's past-tense, first-person narrator, the reader receives a "truth" story told after it has already happened. The story is told to readers after Dana had already incorporated her time travel slavery experience into her 1976 contemporary identity. Because the story is "retold" after the "prologue,"

¹⁷⁰Sandra Govan. "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel." *Melus: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 13.1&2 (1986): 79-96. Print.

¹⁷¹Missy Dehn Kubitschek. "What would a Writer be Doing Working out of a Slave Market: *Kindred* as Paradigm, *Kindred* in its Own Write?" *Claiming the Heritage: African American Women Novelists and History*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991. 24-51. Print.

¹⁷²Foster, op. cit., p. 421.

the reader receives the “truth” that could never really be told to the “deputies,” i.e., the people with more power and authority in society than Dana and her White American husband, Kevin. It is a truth, Dana’s truth, that if told could find one “locked up – in a mental hospital” (Butler 11). The interdependent, intimate, and truthful relationships and experiences of the novel’s characters create a structural, literary, and historical irony that becomes Butler’s commentary on the racial health of contemporary America. Butler’s structural format of the novel allows readers to have an intimate experience and gain what feels (reads) like first-hand knowledge of an often silenced American history experience, slavery. The story feels intimate and first-hand because it is told through the convention of a first-person narrator. Similar to the first-person narrator of non-fiction American slave narratives, the first-person narrator of *Kindred* is rhetorically and emotionally persuasive, but because the novel *Kindred* is a work of fiction not written during the time of American slavery, it is categorized as a neo-slave narratives like *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed, *The Known World* by Edward P Jones, *Dessa Rose* by Sherley A Williams, and *Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale* by Charles Johnson. Neo-slave narratives like *Kindred* work to subvert linear time to reconstruct a new, present, and more comprehensive American contemporary identities within the cumulative legacies of American slavery because it is only through the subversion of time that writers are able to retrieve a more truthful or inclusive experiences and narratives and their mutability throughout time. A thematic part of Butler’s text is making the present, contemporary time of her characters dependent upon the past. Just as the present is interdependent upon the past, so, too, are the characters in *Kindred*.

The character Dana and her story courageously navigate and expose the intimate interconnectedness of the past and the present before she introduces her first time-travel experience to the reader: “the trouble began long before June 9, 1976” (Butler 12). Dana’s time travel becomes a structural representation for the interdependent relationships between the past and present, between slavery and freedom, and between Whites and African Americans. Dana travels back to a location, a Maryland plantation, outside of Baltimore that directly relates to her family’s experience in the 19th century. According to Kubitschek, “*Kindred*’s central narrative details the growth of Dana’s emotional understanding of slavery; its [slavery’s] frame, prologue and epilogue indicates the importance of that understanding to the construction of a contemporary identity.”¹⁷³ The first-person narrator informs the reader that Dana’s connection takes place before the present time and action of the actual novel because of her African American heritage, her ethnicity. Dana links genetically and collectively to the institution of American Slavery as an African American. Additionally, Butler takes Dana directly back to 1815 because Dana’s identity of 1976 is interdependent upon her experiencing American slavery in the 19th century. Dana, when explaining her first experience to Kevin, compares her knowledge of slavery to what she reads and views on TV: “I don’t know. As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it was, it’s beginning to recede from me somehow. It’s becoming like something I saw on television or read about -- like something I got second hand” (Butler 17). Butler lets the reader know that Dana’s present knowledge, the knowledge of herself as an African American and of the American institution of slavery, is insufficient because it is based primarily on collective myths, connotations, and current

¹⁷³ Kubitschek, op. cit., p. 25.

media. Like most Americans, Dana's initial knowledge of American slavery and the larger and equally important context of American history are derived from contemporary American media sources, which are more interested in telling a good story and entertaining viewers rather than telling, investigating, or researching the actual history (i.e., the truth) that presents verifiable historical record. The historical record with its factual details is often viewed as unpalatable for polite and public discourse like the antebellum images in the visual work of Kara Walker. *Kindred's* use of the past and history does what Roderick A. Ferguson claims that Kara Walker's work does; "it opposes this poetics of evasion with an aesthetics of engagement and confrontation and looks bold-faced at those elements to which African American history has turned its back" (188).¹⁷⁴ As a result, Dana when trying to convince Kevin that she actually time traveled says "But it was real! I was there!" Dana asks Kevin "do you believe it yet?" and Kevin responds "It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts" (Butler 16). The first-person narrated neo-slave narrative from the starts says that facts are important when trying to unearth, understand, and learn from past, historic events, even when those facts might make recipients in the present-day uncomfortable. Although Butler admits in an interview that she "cleans up" the details of slavery after doing extensive research so that people would read the text without being too disgusted,¹⁷⁵ the reader trusts that, from this point on, Dana will experience historical slavery in her time travel journeys.

¹⁷⁴ Ferguson, op. cit. p. 186.

¹⁷⁵ Kenan, op. cit. p. 497.

Although Dana is not a slave, she is still put within the power paradigm of slavery because a little boy, Rufus, not Dana, an independent adult woman, controls her time, her geographical travel, and her body. Dana does not travel between 1976 and the 19th century by her own free will. Dana's absence of free will is analogous to the absence of choice that Africans and African Americans experienced within the American institution of slavery and similar to experiences of oppression in contemporary American society and culture. Much like the racist legacies of American slavery on contemporary American society, Rufus's brushes with death in the past control Dana's present contemporary life and physical space similar to her life in the past. From the beginning of the novel's action, the reader knows that Dana's journey is a journey that she has not freely chosen and a journey that she cannot control. Dana's lack of power over her body, her time, and her spatial area is Dana's first lesson in understanding slavery, empathetically and sympathetically, and slavery's direct connection and legacy to contemporary American society and culture. The character Dana analyzes her connection to Rufus and why she is traveling in time:

So he [Rufus] had called me. I was certain now. The boy drew me to him somehow when he got himself into more trouble than he could handle. How he did it, I didn't know. He apparently didn't even know he was doing it. There had to be some kind of reason for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn't. But then, neither would anything else. What we had was something new, something that didn't

even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from our being related. Still, now I had a special reason for being glad I had been able to save him. After all [...] after all, what would have happened to me, to my mother's family, if I hadn't saved him?
(Butler 28-29)

This conflict allows Dana to experience a psychological and physical contradiction of slavery that occurs between the master and the slave through no will of their own: "If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (Butler 28-29). What is the historical, emotional, and psychological impact of having no free will over one's body? How can one identify and measure the violation of this type of exploitation? Patricia Hill Collins in "Black Women's Love Relationships," explains that slavery corrupts and distorts those sources of power within oppressed groups that provide energy for change. To them, freedom from slavery meant not only the absence of capricious masters and endless work but regaining the power to love anything you chose' ... slavery inhibited ...[ones'] ability to have 'a big love,' whether for children, for friends, for each other, or for principles such as justice. Both saw that systems of oppression [like slavery] ... control the "permission for desire" – in other words, they harness the power of deep feelings to the exigencies of domination.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nded. New York: Routledge, 2000. 149. Print.

Dana's understanding of this violation and its impact on understanding contemporary racial identities and relationships starts with her direct relationships and experiences with other slaves. Kubitschek considers this point when referring to Dana: "*Kindred's* central narrative details the growth of Dana's emotional understanding of slavery; its frame...indicates the importance of that understanding to the construction of a contemporary identity."¹⁷⁷ This paradigm defines the characters of the novel and acts as the major force impacting the character's attitudes and behaviors.

Dana's encounter with Rufus Weylin represents genetic and historical connections systemic to the past and contemporary relationship of White and African Americans. The major conflict and irony of the novel is that, despite a legacy of historical ignorance and racism borne out of the institution of American slavery, Dana must connect to the past through travel, and she connects to Rufus Weylin. Rufus Weylin is Dana's White maternal ancestor by blood, and Rufus Weylin, through his father Tom Weylin, is also the slave owner of Dana (while she is in the past) and her maternal family. Although Dana dislikes Rufus Weylin, she must protect him in order to secure her own survival and future in the present, contemporary times. The irony is that the relationship is damaging to both Rufus and Dana; thus, the relationship, despite the power differential is damaging to both White and African Americans. It is a past, a connection and a responsibility that cannot be quantified or escaped: Benjamin Robertson in "Some Matching Strangeness" considers this very irony:

Just as the accumulation of years is not sufficient to define history as progress, the division of blood cannot divorce Dana from her ancestor

¹⁷⁷ Kubitschek, op. cit. p.25.

Rufus and the past in which he exists. . . . Blood is thus bound up in its specific embodiment, and no matter how little blood we may inherit from any given ancestor, that blood, and that history – whether modified, repressed, celebrated, etc. – remains there nonetheless. No matter how distant her past seems as a result of the accumulation of years, and no matter the textual and representational claims that erase her from history, Dana’s body remembers her ancestor. Thus we find in *Kindred*, in the words of Lisa A. Long, ‘a nation of individuals bound by blood, unable to escape the history encoded in their bodies.’¹⁷⁸

Through Dana’s physical direct contact (beyond blood lineage) in the past with Rufus, Dana confronts the intricate racial, sexual, roles and identity legacies of slavery, the institution and its culture. In the 1970s and today, African and White Americans are unequal socially and economically, but their futures are inextricably linked in order for all Americans to thrive and survive within this liberal democracy project called the United States of America. Dana’s future is dependent upon Hagar’s birth; the Weylin plantation’s future is dependent upon the slaves, and the slaves are necessarily dependent upon their White masters. The building of America was dependent on years of free labor during slavery. This paradox not only reflects Dana’s relationships, it impacts most African Americans since they have the blood of White slave owners in their genetic ancestry. This ancestry is without choice and a direct result of the exertion of power. On the surface, Dana’s immediate responsibility is saving Rufus in order to save herself, but

¹⁷⁸ Benjamin Robertson. “Some Matching Strangeness: Biology, Politics, and History in Butler’s *Kindred*.” *Science Fiction Studies* 37.3 (2010): 362-381. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Jan. 2013. 373.

the thematic reading of the novel's sub-text reveals to the reader that Dana's goal is to place her contemporary self into the mind-set of the 19th century slave.

The rape of the African American female in *Kindred* is common in the experience of slavery, but the novel *Kindred* conflates the very real violence of rape with the impossibility of interracial love and African American female slave's sexual agency.¹⁷⁹ In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, Harriet A Jacobs explains in detail the sexual violence of pursuit and ownership for the female slave. Jacobs' master pursues her, and she writes in her slave narrative that she "had hitherto succeeded in eluding my master, though a razor was often held to my throat to force me to change this line of policy." Jacob's narrative is relenting in its portrayal of the lack of power slaves have over their bodies, especially female slaves, but Jacob triumphs because she is able to deny her master, Dr. Flint, the one thing that she does have control over: her heart.¹⁸⁰ Dana notes to herself, after being brought back the 19th century to save Rufus after his attack on Isaac and Alice, that "there was no shame in raping an African American woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (Butler 124). Dana's paradox is the paradox of America racial restrictions. There are two White male love interests in the novel, her White husband Kevin in 1979, and Rufus, her maternal relative of the 19th century. If contemporary America's refusal to accept a rape, sexual relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings is any example, it is a paradox that America still struggles against. Interracial sexual relationships, interracial children, and rape within the

¹⁷⁹ Harriet A Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself*. Ed. Jean Fagan Yelling. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987. Print.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.32.

institution of American slavery exemplify exploitation and the misuse of power.

Consider Govan's interpretation:

Casual sexual liaisons between White men and African American women were permissible, but intermarriage was not. White men were expected to be rakes, or at least their licentiousness was tacitly condoned; White women were expected to be chaste (certainly they dare not openly consort with African American men the way their husbands, fathers, sons took liberties with African American women); and African American women, of course, were often treated as mere sexual vessels.¹⁸¹

Dana's direct lineage is a result of her grandmother being a mere sexual vessel of Rufus.

Dana's relationship with Rufus is at the core of the power relationships between African Americans and American Whites, but it also acts as the seeds of contemporary notions of Black female agency, sexuality, consent, and desire between Black women and White men. This conflict is problematic in theory as it is in the novel. Because Dana is empathetic to Rufus, the reader is empathetic as well. Does Rufus really love Alice? Is it that bad? With these questions, the reader is implicated in the normalized violence of the rape of Black women but in that normalization the origins of ideas around Black women's sexuality and agency that continue to restrict if not challenge their identities and power. Patricia Hill Collins, in "Black Women's Love Relationships" considers the paradox:

At the same time, even under slavery, to characterize interracial sex purely in terms of the victimization of Black women would be a distortion,

¹⁸¹ Govan, op. cit. p. 92.

because such depictions strip Black women of agency. Many Black women successfully resisted sexual assault while others cut bargains with their masters. More difficult to deal with, however, is the fact that even within these power differentials, genuine affection characterized some sexual relationships between Black women and White men. This history of sexual abuse contributes to a contemporary double standard where Black women who date and marry White men are often accused of losing their Black identity. Within this context, Black women who do engage in relationships with White men encounter Black community norms that question their commitment to Blackness.¹⁸²

Being related by blood and interdependent, emotionally or physically, to someone who oppresses creates psychological tension in Dana, in African Americans and in other Americans. Alice is raped by Rufus, but she is still connected to her four children, two of whom she loses. She loves her children because they are a part of her, but the children are also a result of rape and racial exploitation. Dana expresses her emotional confusion to Carrie over Rufus's selling of Tess:

“I was beginning to feel like a traitor,” I said. “Guilty for saving him. Now...I don't know what to feel. Somehow, I always seem to forgive him for what he does to me. I can't hate him the way I should until I see him doing things to other people.” I shook my head. “I guess I can see why there are those here who think I'm more White than African American.”

(Butler 224)

¹⁸² Collins, op. cit. p. 162-163.

Of course Dana feels conflict. Dana kept Rufus alive for her own survival in the twentieth century, but because Rufus is alive, he is able to abuse other slaves. Rufus is a constructed racist as a result of the system of slavery taught to him first hand by his father. Rufus does have moments of humanity and kindness. Most importantly, Rufus is Dana's blood relative. No matter how severely he acts, Dana cannot change her blood bond to Rufus. Not only do these facts confuse Dana on a personal level, they confuse the American psyche as well. The interracial narrative of America is reflected in skin color, like the character Carrie's, but it, "the mixing of the races," is never spoken of verbally or candidly in mainstream contemporary discourse. Although American Whites have absolute power over slaves during slavery, African Americans and Whites are still bound, genetically, through rape. This bind contradicts the power relationship. According to Christine Levecq in her article, "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*," "the relationship that evolves between Dana and her White ancestor Rufus shows clearly the oscillations of power and powerlessness that for Butler constitute the substance of history."¹⁸³ Dana not only keeps Rufus alive, but she aids him in raping her ancestor Alice to ensure the birth of Hagar. Alice's rape, like Tess' and Sarah's, is a reflection of the power that Dana experiences first-hand when Rufus attempts to rape her. When Dana becomes the target of Rufus' attention after the suicide of Alice, Dana sees the nature of the rape or "love" of Alice or all African American women in slavery. Butler presents this sexual-power conflict through Dana's encounter with the patrollers intending to rape Alice's mother.

¹⁸³ Christine Levecq. "Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*." *Contemporary Literature* 41.3 (2000): 525-553. Print.

According to Sandra Govan, “Degradation, brutality, powerlessness, the commonplace violence directed against African American men and women could be no more sharply delineated.”¹⁸⁴ It is important to note that in 1976, Dana is in an interracial relationship. Her husband, Kevin, is White, but Govan adds that in 1976, the marriage of Kevin and Dana “[...] is legally recognized [but it] must withstand some subtle societal disapproval.”¹⁸⁵

The novel highlights the paradox of interracial love and the institution of slavery. Dana, as the first-person narrator, repeatedly considers the possibility that Rufus actually loves Alice, but Rufus is restricted by the larger social and economic expectations of southern slave holding culture, the institution of American slavery, and the constructions of sexuality and domesticity. In addition, Dana has to be warned by the other slaves that Rufus “is meaner than he seemed to be” (Butler 186). In this way, Dana, the novel’s unreliable narrator, has a blind spot for Rufus or has an inability herself, even as a African American free woman and as an African American slave, to see that true love for Alice or herself from Rufus is impossible because of Rufus’ constructed identities as White, male, and slave owner as taught and inherited to him by his father, Tom Weylin:

Strangely, they seemed to like him [Rufus], hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time. This confused me because I [Dana] felt just about the same mixture of emotions for him myself. I had thought my feelings were complicated because he and I had such a strange

¹⁸⁴ Govan, op. cit., p. 90.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 92.

relationship. But then, slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships.

(Butler 230)

The narrator's attempts at empathy for Rufus and his lamenting and his expressed loneliness to Dana after Alice's suicide allows novel to reveal Rufus' victimization by the system of slavery just like Alice's, although Rufus' suicide looks completely different. Alice hanged herself in the barn, which ideally was a quick action once she secured the noose around her neck and jumped. Rufus has a noose around his neck that is equally as lethal, yet it is intangible and has been around his neck his since his birth for his entire life. The noose of Rufus' identity has slowly choked the life out of him, cinching around his neck with every action of control, power, and hatred that he makes against his slaves, his White mother Margaret Weylin, and any other person he assumes that he has power and authority over. Rufus' noose continues to close until it is his last act of control and violence in the novel that leads to the final cinch; Rufus' is metaphorically hanged by Dana literally stabbing him to death in self-defense after he attempts to rape her in a desperate show of control, power, and atrophied love.

In some ways, Rufus' death reveals the ultimate trick or illusion of the system of American antebellum slavery and its subsequent and historical consequences and paradigms. By appearance at first view, the system of slavery and racial hierarchy seems as if there are obvious winners and losers, but, after a closer inspection, Dana can see that the system itself actually kills everyone, White and African American. The demise of the slaves is more visible and explicit in that their demise is always public and on display. Slaves are bought and sold, they are owned, shackled, beaten, sold, raped, and they work

within public spheres that even invade what should be intimate and private. However, Rufus and his parents seem to show the same exploitation and abuse from inside, an implicit and slow atrophy and death nonetheless. The system of slavery does not allow for the possibility of love, at least not a healthy love:

Given the history of sexual abuse of Black women by White men, individual Black women who choose White partners become reminders of a difficult history for Black women as a collectivity. Such individual liaisons aggravate a collective sore spot because they recall historical master/slave relationships. Any sexual encounters between two parties where one has so much control over the other could never be fully consensual, even if the slave appeared to agree. Structural power differences of this magnitude limit the subordinate's power to give free consent or refusal.¹⁸⁶

The character Dana describes Rufus as “he spoke out of love for the girl—a destructive love, but a love, nevertheless” (Butler 147). For Alice’s part she tells Dana that “My stomach just turns every time he puts his hands on me” (Butler 180)! When Dana travels back for the last time and finds that Alice has committed suicide, Rufus handles a gun, as if he, too, is going to commit suicide. This is a White male, slave owner, admitting, at least through this action that he has experienced a loss that he cannot live without. Of course, Butler conflates this with Rufus’ violence against Dana. The reader feels sympathy for Rufus, but Rufus’ actions can easily be read as someone with power being mad because his power has been denied to him or subverted. Rufus understand that

¹⁸⁶ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

interracial love is possible in the future, in Dana's world. When Dana begs Rufus to leave Alice alone, Rufus responds by saying "I know you, Dana. You want Kevin the way I want Alice....Maybe I can't ever have that – both wanting, both loving. But I'm not going to give up what I can have" (Butler 163). This reflects the environment of slavery that did not allow Rufus to love Alice, even if he wanted to. Is it Rufus' character flaw that asserts the desire to claim the physical if he can't claim Alice's heart. In claiming the physical, the only relationship that Rufus can have with Alice is that of her rapist:

These scenes hover around the edges of the inarticulable physical trauma of rape, marking both rape's (and by extension history's) shadowy presence and its inevitable absence. The fact that neither protagonist is literally raped in the novels makes rape's reality both every-present and at the same time ancillary to the plot. In the comfortable rape scripts of slavery white men rape black women – such acts were routine in slave times, most would agree. And the sexual and racial hierarchies these rapes reinscribe do not challenge cultural norms that persist to the present. The novels show that historical "rapes" are not isolated incidents of sexual imagery, but are indelibly linked to contemporary examinations of the violence inherent in American heterosexuality and race in these novels. Thus the history of sexual violence is not "history" at all – slavery may have ended, but the sexual exploitation of African Americana women has not.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Lisa A Long. "A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*." *College English* 64.4 (2002): 459-483. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Dec. 2012. 465.

Dana's experiences and relationships with the Weylin slaves create a new, contemporary identity for Dana. She dresses as a man, speaks as an educated African American person, and eventually is allowed to teach some of the Weylin slaves how to read. This is a new identity for Dana because she is an African American person living in slavery as a result of the novel's time travel, but she is not a slave. The resolution of the novel rests on Dana's ability to be her contemporary self during 19th century American slavery. According to Levecq, "Butler can be said to embrace both aims simultaneously. *Kindred* questions all forms of historical knowledge by demonstrating the inescapable shaping or silencing of the past by perception, ideology, and language."¹⁸⁸ The reader is not shocked when Dana loses a physical part of herself to represent the inability of contemporary African American to escape the legacy of slavery.

Dana's relationship to Sarah helps her develop an understanding of the "slave mentality" and notions of shame and "acceptable behavior." Butler tells in an interview with Kenan that since her mother did domestic work for Whites, writing *Kindred* is a way of empathizing and making visible her mother's invisible experiences.¹⁸⁹ Butler observes in another *Callaloo* interview that coming out of the African American Power Movements; most African Americans were ashamed of the passively perceived behavior of their ancestors. In the interview, Butler quotes a young African American male:

"I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." When he said us he meant African American people, and when he said old

¹⁸⁸ Levecqu, op. cit. p. 527-528.

¹⁸⁹ Kenan, op. cit. p. 496.

people he meant older African American people. That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred*. I've carried that comment with me for thirty years.¹⁹⁰

Sarah, the cook, reflects the stereotypical portrayal of the African American female house servant. Ignorantly, someone like Sarah is perceived, by the contemporary African American reader unknowledgeable of the historic record of slavery, as passive, weak and accepting of slavery:

She had done the safe thing - had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. (Butler 145)

Sarah's presence requires readers to consider what is really meant to *survive* the institution of slavery, just to live each day. The reader must consider what was demanded of Sarah, the psychological abuse of rape and having one's children sold in order to live. Knowledge and experiences like Sarah's are required of Dana to live wholly in 1976. By extension, the text suggests that this knowledge should be required of all African Americans in order for them to be successful in the contemporary struggle

¹⁹⁰ Charles H Rowell. “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 20:1 (1997): 47-66. Print.

for equality and identity. Later, after Dana encounters Alice and receives her second whipping, Dana experiences comfort by a sense of moral superiority until she sees Alice (Butler 145). Sarah is a survivor, and the reader's attitude toward Sarah shifts by the end of the text. Sarah is strong, and through Carrie, the reader knows that she enables generations of African Americans to continue to the present time. Dana mirrors Sarah toward the end of the text when she cooks dinner and gives the serving children orders. This taking-on of Sarah's responsibilities, when Carrie delivers the baby, represents Dana's psychological transformation toward Sarah and other slaves. Dana's transformation may represent Butler's final understanding and appreciation of her mother's invisibility. Through understanding Sarah, Dana gains historical knowledge, and "her growing understanding of slavery redefines the concepts of self and community by clarifying their mutually creative processes."¹⁹¹ Dana's realization is analogous to the collective and modern struggle of African Americans living in 1976 America, who after the Civil Rights Movement were still trying to make peace with the past in order to live in the present and to prepare for the future.

The character Sarah begs the question about what, in modern times, is left over from slavery: the modern legacy of race and racism. Does having survived slavery without killing themselves or being killed as Alice was, make slaves somehow bad? In Dana's initial meeting with Sarah, Dana poses a key question: why hasn't Sarah tried to poison Weylin? At this moment, Dana is judging the past from the unsympathetic and ignorant eye of the contemporary African American. Later in the text, Sarah represents and enables Dana's connection to the other slaves (except Alice). Sarah allows Dana to

¹⁹¹ Kubitschek, op. cit., p. 29.

develop credibility among the slaves by accepting her and giving her work. Sarah “schools” Dana on how to survive on the plantation. All of Sarah’s children, except Carrie, are sold into slavery. Dana notes “how amazing that Weylin had sold her children and still kept her to cook his meals. How amazing that he was still alive” (Butler 76). The reader understands that slavery’s survival is also about maintaining community and being subversive by being overtly complicit. Sarah’s character also represents the myriad psychological challenges of slavery, including the destruction of self and identity through the destruction of the family unit and gender roles.

Dana uses work to integrate herself into solid relationships with the slaves. Although most of her work is easier than that of the slaves in the field, she manages to find the loyal support of Alice and Carrie. Later, Liza is beaten for snitching on Dana’s attempt to flee north, and this action represents Dana’s acceptance (although she is often viewed as White for her dress, manner and speech). It is Dana’s work and skin color that ultimately solidify her position as slave; after all, this is how slaves are classified; hence, the legacy of racism still exists after the abolition of slavery because constructed race tied to skin color still exists.

The political and social situation in 1976 makes it necessary for Dana to understand and experience the paradigm of slavery. Kubitschek asserts that the theme of the entire novel “is the necessity of confrontation with history and the rarity of that process in contemporary America.”¹⁹² A contemporary reader might question the necessity of Dana’s character and her conflict. In response, readers must consider Dana’s circumstances. She works in a job that she refers to as the “slave market,” and both

¹⁹² Kubitschek, op. cit., p. 26.

Kevin, her White husband, and her relatives disapprove of Dana's interracial relationship. Although contemporary industry and technology have changed in America, with Dana's job situation and family, the reader can wonder how many contemporary attitudes toward race have changed in America by the celebration of the Bicentennial. According to *Crisis* magazine, the Bicentennial celebration of 1976 was "designated by the Federal Government as the period in which to observe and to celebrate the two hundredth anniversary of the United States."¹⁹³ From Beatrice Pringle, the editor of *Sepia*¹⁹⁴ to *The Journal of Negro Education*,¹⁹⁵ many in the African American intellectual community expressed the contradictions of American independence and African Americans' place in the America of 1976. In 1976, African Americans were collectively still lacking equality and equal access in education, housing and employment; racism, stemming from the legacy of American slavery, was at the core. When Rufus and Dana are afraid of being caught eating together, which was totally forbidden in the antebellum South, Dana says "I put down my biscuit and reined in whatever part of my mind I'd left in 1976" (Butler 134).

Many critics at the time felt that the nation's 22-million-plus African Americans (at the time) should not celebrate the historic marker, but other critics felt celebrating became an opportunity for African Americans to claim their place in America and to educate others about their role in American history and their rights to equality and the

¹⁹³ "A Bicentennial Perspective." Editorial. *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 83.1 (1976): 5-6. Print.

¹⁹⁴ Beatrice Pringle. "On the Bicentennial." *Sepia* 25.7 (1976) : 5. Print.

¹⁹⁵ Samuel L. Banks. "Guest Editorial: The Bicentennial and the Urban Condition: An African American Perspective." *The Journal of Negro Education: A Howard University Quarterly Review of Issues Incident to the Education of African American People* 45.2 (1976): 111-116. Print.

American dream.¹⁹⁶ Numerous editorials and articles published, ironically, echoed Frederick Douglass' July 5th 1852 speech: "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"¹⁹⁷ It seemed that even a century after the life and words of Douglass, descendants of West African slaves in America were still in search of the elusive democracy and equality promised in the *Declaration of Independence*. Resistance to celebrating the Bicentennial was understandable considering the questionable gains of the Civil Rights Movement, the disappointments of the Black Power Movement and the gender and class challenges of the Women's Movement. For many African Americans living in 1976, the promise of the American dream was still just a promise. Vivian W. Henderson, in a special 1976 issue of *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, considered the collective state of African Americans in his article, "Economic Dimensions of the Continuing Dream:"

No problem in the United States has been more persistent than the race problems; it has been the focal point of the country's most penetrating failure; it has been the country's most obvious failure in terms of fulfilling dreams and ideals contained in principles of democracy set forth as the time of the founding of the Republic.¹⁹⁸

The persistence of race problems as America's most obvious failure in 1976 was probably due *in part* to a collective lack of education, knowledge and appreciation for and about the lived interdependence of African and White Americans within the narratives of American history, culture and identity. Before Dana time travels, she

¹⁹⁶ "A Bicentennial..." op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁹⁷ Patricia Bizzell, and Bruce Herzberg, ed. *Negotiating Difference: Cultural Case Studies for Composition*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995. 208-231. Print.

¹⁹⁸ Vivian W Henderson. "Economic Dimensions of the Continuing Dream." *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 83.1 (1976): 20-26. Print.

reveals that she “was working out of a casual labor agency” that she and other workers called the “slave market” (Butler 52). It is in this job that she meets a fellow worker (or slave) Kevin Franklin, who is white. Kevin and Dana are referred to as the weirdest looking couple, and when Dana time-travels for the first time, she and Kevin argue about the “facts” of slavery. Dana tells Kevin that “I know what I saw, and what I did – my facts. They’re no crazier than yours” (Butler 16). Their interracial relationship, their weirdness as a couple and their disputes over the facts metaphorically represent the collective ignorance that most Americans have regarding the institution of slavery and basic humanity within the institution. This lack of awareness of the significance of the events of the past perpetuates continued social and economic inequity within America because most Americans of all colors, although well meaning, in general fail to recognize and understand the systemic, cumulative and contemporary effects of institutional racism.

This lack of appreciation for the interdependence and the culmination of past events and present-day racial problems in America can only be overcome through comprehensively facing the American past, head on, with all its beauty and ugliness, especially the institution of American slavery (among other institutional practices) and its subsequent events that have worked historically, generationally, socially, and economically to marginalize Americans. It is this ugliness even within the beauty, which must be viewed head-on in “an unflinching assessment,” that writer and social critic James Baldwin writes that Americans must face in order to eliminate social issues that continue to plague American society and culture.¹⁹⁹ In an interview with the *Michigan Chronicle*, Butler expresses her intent as an author: “What I try to do is take a necessary

¹⁹⁹ Baldwin, op. cit., p. 672.

look at the conditions we face today [...] I'm no prophet."²⁰⁰ While a prophet looks into the future for an understanding of the present, Butler through the novel *Kindred* looks into and uses the past. The past in the novel *Kindred* captures a greater understanding, guidance and wisdom about racism and other constructed hierarchies of oppression, which in turn act as a social commentary about the issues of equity facing present-day African Americans and the larger American society.

Commentary critical of the Bicentennial indicates that the legacy of American slavery is alive and well, negatively impacting the physical and psychological progress of African Americans. Learned Hand, as quoted by Benjamin Quarles in the article "Founding People and Immigrants: An African American Bicentennial Perspective," asserts that "the best way to celebrate the Bicentennial [...] is to probe afresh our past so that we may discover who we really are rather than who we hoped or fancied we were."²⁰¹ Rufus calls Dana back on July 4th. Dana calls it "some kind of reverse symbolism," and the reader knows Dana's story is allegorically and metaphorically linked to America's promise of independence for all its citizens (Butler 243). Through killing Rufus, Dana regains power and knowledge and solidifies her contemporary identity that is new with knowledge and experience:

Dana loses exactly that part of her arm that Rufus is still touching as she fatally stabs him - the dead past has claimed a part of the living. On the other hand, Dana and Kevin have acquired understanding of the past, not

²⁰⁰ Robert E. McTyre. "Octavia Butler: African American American's First Lady of Science Fiction." *Michigan Chronicle* 26 April 1994: 1-C. Print.

²⁰¹ Benjamin Quarles. "Founding People and Immigrants: An African American Bicentennial Perspective." *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races* 82.7 (1975): 244-248. Print.

as some procession of abstracts like “slavery” and “westward expansion,”
but as a collection of known individuals’ experiences.²⁰²

The loss of her arm becomes a physical representation of her new identity as an “African American” woman living in contemporary 1976 America. Dana probes her past and fittingly emerges with permanent scars and maiming. Dana’s maiming is analogous to African Americans who psychologically maintain collective scars through the social and generational consequences of slavery: prejudice and racism. With these scars that record the narrative experiences of her ancestors, Dana’s revised self in the present is a complex synthesis that refuses to suppress the past. Dana has a better sense of self-actualization in her present world through fully acknowledging and experiences the narrative of her ancestors; she is able to create a synthesis of experience. Dana is ready to accept the celebration of the Bicentennial; she is armed with the personal knowledge and conviction to work toward creating a better and all-inclusive future celebration of the fourth of July in American without the contradictions that were so obviously stricken from Jefferson’s draft of *The Declaration of Independence*.²⁰³ If Dana can face her American ancestry and identity, maybe other Americans, of all races, will one day experience the courage to do the same.

²⁰² Kubitschek, op. cit. p. 26.

²⁰³ Thomas Jefferson made explicit and implicit references to slavery, the slave trade and other topics when creating the early drafts of the *Declaration of Independence*. The slavery references along with other references were omitted from the final draft. Bizzell, op. cit. p. 208-231.

Tika Solo Too long²⁰⁴: Intersections of Gender, Race, Sexual Orientation and Place in the

African Diaspora Identities in *The Salt Roads* by Nalo Hopkinson



Photo Image 6: Jakadrien Turner 205 Photograph taken by Mike Fuentes - Photographer/AP Photo

There are a variety of legitimate reasons why somebody might not appear to be a US citizen at first glance.

-Stephen Yale-Loehr²⁰⁶

She [Jakadrien Turner] wishes for a “time machine” to rewind all the bad things that she did wrong. I’M NEVER GOING TO BE HAPPY HERE, she writes (Facebook post at 10:44AM July 28, 2011).

-*Huffington post.com*²⁰⁷

Yes, take us there. I like the branch of that story, where its forks will lead.

-*The Salt Roads*, Nalo Hopkinson²⁰⁸

On January 6, 2012, fifteen year old Jakadrien Lorece Turner was put on a plane in Colombia and sent back to her home, her birth state of Texas, in the United States

²⁰⁴ This is the name that Jakadrien used on *Facebook* while she was living and working in Colombia. Jakadrien “occasionally referenced her life in Houston and Dallas and [her] efforts to learn Spanish.” Ms. Turner’s *Facebook* posts never mention any desire or attempts to return to the United States, and her post “complained of boredom and unhappiness in Colombia.” Alyssa Newcomb, and Erin McLaughlin. “American Teen Departed to Colombia is on a Plane Heading Home.” *abcnews.go.com*. ABC News, 6 Jan. 2012. Web. 2013.

²⁰⁵ Katti Gray and (Mike Fuentes - Photographer/AP Photo). “Jakadrien Turner: Deported Texas Teen Returns to U.S.” *abcnews.go.com*. ABC News, 7 Jan. 2012. Web. 1 Feb. 2013.

²⁰⁶ “Texas Teen Deported to Colombia Reunited with Mom.” *Gainesville Sun* 6 Jan. 2012: N/A. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 2 Feb. 2013.

²⁰⁷ “Jakadrien Turner, Missing Dallas Tenn. Was Mistakenly Deported to Colombia by Authorities (Video).” *Huffingtonpost.com*. Huffington Post, 6 Jan. 2012. Web. 18 Feb. 2013.

²⁰⁸ Nalo Hopkinson *The Salt Roads*. New York: Warner Books, 2003. 228.

(US). According to widely reported and popular news reports, Jakadrien's family claimed that she ran away from her grandmother's home at the age 13 or 14 in November of 2010. While living and working on the streets in Houston as a "runaway," Jakadrien was arrested for shoplifting, a misdemeanor theft, and provided the arresting police officers with the identity alias "Tika Lanay Cortez." Despite the negative search results of Cortez's name being "run through a database to determine if she [Cortez] was wanted by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] officials, a Houston sheriff's office employee recommended that an immigration detainer be put on fourteen-year old Jakadrien."²⁰⁹ The country sheriff's office in Houston transferred Ms. Turner's physical custody to ICE, and ICE claims that Jakadrien during ICE interviews staunchly maintained that her identity was Cortez. As a result, Jakadrien was fingerprinted by ICE, and her prints were run through their databases with also no matching results. Although Ms. Turner's actual fingerprints were not a fingerprint match with Tika Lanay Cortez or any other person (non US national) within the ICE databases, ICE insists that the name Tika Lanay Cortez was a name linked to a female Colombian national born in 1990 and that Jakadrien Turner was positively identified as this person.²¹⁰ ICE's confirmation of Jakadrien as an alien residing illegally in the US facilitated a legal and physical chain of events:

an US immigration judge ordered [Jakadrien] back to Colombia; at the request of US officials, a representative from the Colombian consulate [in Texas] issued Jakadrien a travel document and temporary [Colombian]

²⁰⁹ "Texas Teen....," op. cit., p. N/A.

²¹⁰ Juan C Llorca, and Linda B. Stewart. "Texas Teen Runaway Who was Deported to Colombia is Returned to the U.S." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 07 Jan. 2012: A.4. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 11 Feb. 2013.

passport [for travel and entry into] Columbia; Jakadrien was deported from the US and put on a flight to [Bogota,] Colombia; and [Jakadrien, a fourteen-year old girl,] was given Colombian citizenship upon her arrival in [Colombia].²¹¹

According to news reports, the family had no idea of Turner's location or whereabouts, and they could never imagine that Jakadrien had been stripped of her US citizenship and deported to a developing country in South America.²¹² In considering the significance of Jakadrien Turner and her odyssey to a discussion of African Diaspora literature, one need only to consider, without intentionally objectifying Ms. Turner, the infinite positions and intersections of her story. If Turner can be considered as an allegorical representation of a woman of color within the African Diaspora identity, how might one identify some of the infinite intersections that create and facilitate Turner's identities and her experiences?

On some level, Jakadrien's epic journey reads like science fiction or a horror movie if it in fact were not the daily reality for many US American citizens and foreign nationals, especially those of minor age, residing in the US.²¹³ Since President Barack Obama took office in 2008, over "1.5 million immigrants from various countries" have been deported.²¹⁴ Supporters of the Obama administration attribute this large deportation number to the administration's focus on deporting illegal immigrants in the US who have committed serious crimes, but critics claim that "the deportations have swept up those

²¹¹ "Texas Teen....," op. cit., p. N/A

²¹² *ibid.*, p. NA.

²¹³ According to Stephen Yale-Loehr, "hundreds of US Citizens are wrongfully detained or departed each year." *Ibid.* p. N/A.

²¹⁴ Lourdes Medrano. "Modern Migrants Pose New Challenges to Mexican Border Towns." *The Christian Science Monitor* 17 Feb. 2013: N/A. *ProQuest. Newsstand*. Web. 2 Feb. 2013.

with otherwise clean records.”²¹⁵ Although rates of illegal immigration of adults to the US from Latin American countries have declined, the rate of illegal immigration of children (minors) from these countries to the US, which includes Colombia, has increased.²¹⁶ Unless provided with private funds, illegal immigrants classified as minors are not required to have legal representation, their parents or other legal guardians, or a translator/interpreter if they do not speak English with them when they are adjudicating through the US deportation system and process, which includes a final hearing and appearance before an US immigration judge.²¹⁷ Although Jakadrien spoke no Spanish, was a fourteen year old minor and had no documents to prove that she was *not* a Colombian national, ICE authorities argued that it was Jakadrien’s responsibility in the deportation process, even as a minor, to prove that she *was not* a citizen of Colombia as opposed to ICE proving that she *was not* a US citizen.

Ms. Turner’s and illegal aliens’ residing in the US experiences through the US deportation process and system are strikingly similar to the experiences of poor US citizens and predominantly US citizens of color who enter and move daily through the US judicial system. US citizens, who do not have the financial ability to afford legal representation, are supposed to be considered innocent until proven guilty, but they are often treated and adjudicated through the US judicial system as if they are guilty until proven innocent. Many US citizens, as a result of their inability to pay bond and to

²¹⁵ Rosalind S Helderman. “Hearing Highlights Divides on Immigration Overhaul.” *The Washington Post* 14 Feb. 2013: A.3. *ProQuest Newsstand*. 17 Feb. 2013.

²¹⁶ As of February 18, 2013, more than “11,000 unaccompanied minors have been placed in deportation proceedings, nearly double the numbers from last year. From October to July of 2012, authorities detained 21,842 unaccompanied minors, most at the Southwest border, a 48 percent increase over a year earlier.” Julie Preston. “Not Yet a Teenager and Facing Deportation, Alone, in Court.” *International Herald Tribune* 27 Aug. 2012: 5+. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 4 Feb. 2013.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5+.

receive adequate legal representation, either succumb to the pressures of the judicial system to plea bargain out (almost always to a felony), or they are found guilty of a felony when they are in fact innocent.²¹⁸ It would seem that Ms. Turner was caught up in and a victim of the US's current deportation policy, specifically the current policy that expedites the deportation of minors who are illegally residing in the US.²¹⁹ According to *CNN*, "it took less than two months for Jakadrien Turner to pass through deportation proceedings and [to be] put on the streets of Columbia."²²⁰

The recent increase of minor-aged illegal immigrants in the US obscures other, equally real forces of patriarchy and oppression that affect immigration patterns and trends, and the lives, experiences, and identities of Americans in the US. When underage migrants were interviewed in Texas by the Women's Refugee Commission, "an advocacy group, they said that they were seeking to escape increasingly violent gangs and drug traffickers who were recruiting children aggressively at home [in their birth countries]." Jessica Jones, "a member of the commission's fact-find team, said [that] most [of the underage migrants that she and her group interviewed] were willing to risk the uncertain dangers of the trip north [to the US] to escape certain dangers [that] they face[d] at home."²²¹ These migrants chose to face the lethal and legal uncertainty of crossing the

²¹⁸Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010. Also see *Gideon's Army*. Dir. Down Porter. *HBO Documentary Films*, 2013. Film.

²¹⁹ Political Science Professor at Northwestern University, Jacqueline Stevens, says that "often in these situations [deportation hearings of illegal immigrants] they have these group hearings where they tell everybody you're going to be deported. Everything is really quick, even if you understand English you wouldn't understand what is going on. If she [Jakadrien Turner] were in that situation as a 14-year-old she would be herded through like cattle and not have a chance to talk to the judge about her situation." "Texas Teen....," op. cit., p. N/A

²²⁰ "Mystery Surrounds Jakadrien Turner's deportation to Colombia: updated feed link from *CNN*." *Todaysthv.com*. Today's TV11, 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.

²²¹ Preston, op. cit., p. 5+.

southern US border, not speaking the language, and fleeing without their family members rather than face the lethal realities of violence and drugs in their home countries. When Jakadrien Turner first “ran away” from her home in Texas, “her family says [that] she was lured to Houston and forced into prostitution by three adult men.”²²² Additional sources report that once fourteen year old Jakadrien was in Houston, she was forced to take and sell drugs, and she “was physically and sexually abused and made to ‘put herself at risk’ with men twice her age.”²²³ The obscure story of Ms. Turner’s narrative as an underage American sex worker, who was raped and trafficked within the US directly out of her home town and state of Texas, belies the over-sexualized and adult narratives that the media wants to play out to explain Jakadrien’s deportation to Colombia. Instead, the majority of the media reports in their content and in their tone convey Jakadrien Turner’s story as a story full of mystery and skepticism. The reports imply that Ms. Turner’s story and her experience are a result of her own actions and that she and she alone is solely to blame for her deportation, even as an underage minor.

Blaming Jakadrien Turner, her body, a black body, and its sexual deviance distorts the construction of racial, gendered, and national identities at play, unfortunately, for the 21st century in the US. Those identities still at play are White, paternal, male, rich, citizen, heterosexual, felony free, and privileged, with one’s success being relative to how near or far one may be from this layered identity. Patricia Hill Collins writes in “Mammies, Matriarchs, and other Controlling Images,” that “racialization involves

²²² “Mystery Surrounds Jakadrien Turner’s deportation to Colombia: updated feed link from *CNN*.” *Todaysthv.com*. Today’s TV11, 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.

²²³ Leslie Minora. “The Mother of Jakadrien Turner, the Oak Cliff Teen Deported to Columbia, is Suing the Feds.” *blogs.dallasobserver.com*. Dallas Observer, 24 May 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2013.

attaching racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.”²²⁴ When record deportation of illegal aliens in the US is taking place in the 21st century under an African American President, how does US society frame a successful US identity citizenship narrative in the face of narratives of oppression and inequity? When an overzealous system of deportation uses US immigration laws and policies to separate children from their parents, deports people who have lived almost their entire lives in the US since they were children and don’t even speak their native languages back to their native countries, and states legislate racial profiling and other discriminatory practices into law under the guise of stopping illegal immigration, how can the US frame and justify this discourse when more and more of these practices are hitting close to home and crossing identity boundaries of us versus them? When the human beings who are deported and are victims of human trafficking look like you, someone in your family or someone in your neighborhood or church, how must the story start to construct itself so that the object remains objectified and distance from the self? When over 1.5 million people have been deported since the start of the Obama administration and when over 100,000 children in the US are victims of human trafficking to become sex workers, chances are that someone will hear about it, and the cases, like Ms. Turners, will garner public attention.

Constructed a racial identity narrative for the 21st century, then, looks for boundaries of difference, which become the lines of demarcation that create the identity. Although all binaries are false, some boundaries become the tried and true boundaries

²²⁴Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

like the Patricia Hill Collins' image of the African American female as an over sexed Hoochie momma, which Collins argues is an image that was developed during slavery to obscure the larger real structural and gendered sources of power that actually created, perpetuated, and controlled slavery. Justifying the increase of the deportation of illegal immigrants from the US because of being criminal illegal aliens also works to construct a racialized, national identity. By forcing the public to focus on the criminalization of illegal aliens, the influence of corporations and racist practices and policies and their effect on citizens throughout the Americas is obscured. If the media fully investigated what happened to Jakadrien Turner from the moment she left her birth mother's custody until she was returned to the US, what monsters would need to be realized and what new, but legitimate, places would blame need to adequately and fully placed?

For so long, human trafficking has been framed in mainstream media discourse as something that is a problem in countries, spaces, and places other than the US. In 2001, reports listed the state of Texas as among the highest, next to Florida and California, in the US for human trafficking according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center.²²⁵ Laurel Bellows reports that about "21 million people globally, predominantly women and children, are, day in and day out, forced to work or engage in sexual acts under threats of violence or death."²²⁶ In addition, Bellows notes more than 100,000 US citizens are "victims of trafficking," but because "data are scarce, many experts say the

²²⁵ Doreen Hemlock. "Four South Florida Women to Trek Mount Everest to Raise Funds to Fight Human Trafficking." *McClatchy-Tribune Business News* 17 Feb 2013: N/A. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 18 Feb. 2013.

²²⁶ Laurel Bellows. "Stop Trafficking Victims of the Sex-Slave Trade Need Help from the Justice System. Governor is Right to Raise Attention to the Issue." *Newsday* 13 Jan. 2013:A.34+. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 18 Feb. 2013.

[US trafficking victim number] is actually much higher.”²²⁷ It is easier to believe that foreign born poor and brown girls illegally arriving and working in the US are simply illegal aliens looking for a free ride instead of exploited human being searching for a better life. Likewise, it is easier believe that a US born American citizen, under age, lied about her US citizenship, and as a result, was solely responsible for her own illegal deportation to a foreign country rather than believe that she was kidnapped, raped and trafficked into prostitution, which resulted in her illegal deportation to a foreign country. In the image of Jakadrien Turner, her black body embodies a gendered female identity for the African Diaspora of the 21st century with intersections of nationality, citizenship, race, space and class. What is known of Ms. Turner’s epic journey crosses numerous intersections of identity, place and experience, which impacts Jakadrien’s dominant national identity position as African American.

The novel, *The Salt Roads*, written by Nalo Hopkinson and first published in 2003 is a non-linear and temporal tale of struggle, which connects the past with the present in order to imagine a future without financial, physical, spiritual, and sexual restrictions and gendered oppression. The novel mixes “historical fiction, fantasy, and folklore,” and its plot oscillates from a sugar cane plantation in San Domingue, nineteenth century Paris, ancient Egypt, and the infinite spaces of the Goddess Ezili, who is “the Afro-Caribbean

²²⁷ “According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Texas many account for more than 25 percent of all human trafficking victims annually in the US. In prior years, some 38 percent of all calls to the national Human Trafficking Resource Center Hotline were from Texas. Domestically, 100,000 children are trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation every year and 13 is the average age of forced entrance into prostitution.” “Love146 Launches Campaign to Provide Long-Term Solutions in Texas’ Fight Against Sex-Trafficking.” *PR Newswire* 25 Jan. 2011: N/A. *ProQuest Newsstand*. Web. 10 Feb. 2013. Also see Bellows, op. cit., p. A.34+.

goddess of love and sex.”²²⁸ The time of the novel is non-linear and disjointed, as it is woven out of a spatial and temporal telling. The Goddess Ezili acts as an immortal bridge in the narrative structure of the text and within the lives of the characters that is not purely African and is not a pure Africa of the “past.” Similar to Jakadrien’s displacement to South America, the characters Mer, Jeanne and Meritet are all women of African descent living literally within the diaspora and outside of linear time and outside of the US but also in the site of oppression compounded by their gender. As a Caribbean writer, Nalo Hopkinson notes the complexity of African Diaspora identity during a *Callaloo* interview:

The similarities start with a love of language and a love of story. The kind of signifying that I do as a Caribbean person is very different from what a black American person would do, but I recognize that it has the same historical roots. I recognize it when it comes from the, and they recognize it when it comes from me, even if we don’t have a language or immediate culture in common. We recognize the roots that it comes from.²²⁹

In this manner, Hopkinson, by her own admission, is deconstructing notions of constructed racial identities by displaying how much difference there exists between people or groups who, from the outside, may appear to be of the same race.

Mer is slave and a mid-wife on a “Caribbean sugar plantation,” and she is of African descent. As a female slave, she is subject to the control of her white master, a

²²⁸ “Review Nalo Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads*.” *Library Journal* 1 Sept 2003:207. JSTOR. Web. 11 Feb. 2013.

²²⁹ Jene Watson-Aifah, and Nalo Hopkinson. “A Conversation with Nalo Hopkinson.” *Callaloo* 26.1 (2003): 160-169. JSTOR. Web. 11 Feb. 2013.

backra. Her character placement is literally between four worlds: African and the Caribbean, slavery and freedom, male and female, spiritual and earth bound. Mer's character has the ability to provide commentary on the institution of slavery and its intersections of oppression because she remembers home, she remembers Africa. Her memory juxtaposes the negativity of slavery with the goodness of her memories of African and of her freedom. When fellow slave Georgine's son, the child of her white master Mister Pierre, is born stillborn, the blood of the Georgine birth reminds Mer of the harshness of Middle Passage and its physical and psychological exploitation of women:

A woman had died chained to me on the slave ship. Blood and liquid shit had been gushing from her anus for days before. In the narrow space we had lain together for weeks, but I never knew her name, couldn't understand her language. Was too sick myself to know she'd died. Was Tipingee, a little girl then, who had shouted and shouted till the sailors came and cut the dead woman away from me. The mess between Georgine's legs put me in the mid of that death. It always did now, when I helped woman birth. Back home, birth had been a thing of joy.

(Hopkinson 28).

The baby is born dead, and the master Pierre just orders Georgine to provide him with a new son in nine months because he needs someone to help him work the plantation.

There is no time or space for Georgine to mourn her loss as a mother and to express her humanity. She looks at the body, but she "just sucked her tears back into her nose"

(Hopkinson 33). Georgine's human value is less than an animal. Her job is to simply

provide sexual gratification to her White master, to work, and to provide male offspring who will eventually work and benefit the land, i.e., support patriarchy. In considering how women and young girls are trafficked today in contemporary culture, there isn't much difference among the women in Hopkinson's fiction compared with the reality of how women's bodies are used to serve the economic and pleasure benefit of others.

Jeanne Duval is a black, free woman in mid-nineteenth century Paris making her living as a dancer. However, Jeanne is *still* a slave to the social and gendered limits that patriarchal Parisian society places on her ethnicity, her gender, and her sexual orientation. Jeanne's only initial hope of physical security is being a mistress to a white man of privilege: the poet Charles Baudelaire. Jeanne has a "secret marriage" with her female partner Lise, but because of gendered economic and social norms, Jeanne and Lise, as women, must depend upon men for their economic security and comfort in Parisian society of 1842 (Hopkinson 23).

Meritet (Thais) is a prostitute in in the world of Ancient Egypt. Thais' social and position is determined because she is poor and a woman. The primary characters are also subject to the control of the Gods: "The gods will do as they wish" (Hopkinson 100), even if that means enslavement, "clap," and spontaneous abortion (miscarriage). Their mode of connective identity correlates to slavery, but it is not specific to slavery. Mer, Jeanne and Meritet are held together through their spiritual and ancestral connection to the Goddess Ezili. The three "mortal" women are also bound together by their experiences of oppression through gender, religion, space, place and race. They are in turn bound to Ezili through their beliefs in the Gods and powers of their African

ancestors. The infinite and boundless Ezili might be the only surviving aspect of an African identity, which is not bound to an idealized country, one body of water and a group of people. By the end of the novel, with Mer seeing her Goddess in the Christian Goddess, Mary, only backwards, Ezili and other Gods are not even bound to a specific religious practice or belief.

Contrary to Mer and Jeanne, who both love women emotionally and physically, Thais' character is never presented in a physical love relationship with another woman. Her friend and fellow slave/prostitute Judah, symbolically, might work as an interpretive type of gender crossing identities for Thais because of the way Judah is described in the text: "Judah sat on the bed, flicking his curly blond hair off his shoulder with one hand...Even when he was serious, he never forgot to show off how pretty he was" (Hopkinson 270). Judah and Thais, both, have gendered position in their societies because of their position as slave, as prostitute and as poor. If power within a patriarchy is gendered as male, then both Thais and Judah are politically read (coded) as female because they have no power. Consider the conversation between Judah and Thais about having sex with the same patron, Antoniou. Judah gives Thais some advice: "You should take him in the ass, like I do" (Hopkinson 270). Economically and physically, Judah and Thais share the same position of power within the society. It makes perfect sense that Zosimus must "purify" his narrative of *his* dusky Egypt of Mary in order to avoid his religion's complicity in the patriarchal system that allows for such dichotomies of poverty, gender, and access to exist.

The relationship between Tipingee and Mer could be attributed to “just” being shipmates, but the relationship between Lise and Jeanne challenges the origins of the term “shipmates.” In the novel, the narrative’s oscillation from Tipingee to Mer, Lise and Jeanne, and Patrice and Tipingee makes me believe that these women chose to love each other not because of convenience but out of the power of their own choice, their love, and their own pleasure. A woman loving another woman was among one of the only choices that was not controlled by other people, particularly men. When Tipingee chooses to stay with Mer at the plantation and not leave with her husband, Patrice, whom she clearly loves, to go live with the maroons in the bush, Tipingee is choosing the love of Mer, a woman, over the love of Patrice, a man and her husband. This connection, although made stronger by the struggles of slavery, is stronger than just the condition of enslavement and the middle passage. Tipingee not only chooses Mer and her love for Mer, she also would prefer enslavement with Mer than freedom with Patrice. From the love that Mer and Tipingee share in the text, I believe that they, as women and as characters, would be together no matter where they were and no matter the historical and contextual circumstances of their physical conditions. The Atlantic is present in the text because of its movement of slaves, but the Atlantic is not limited to the movement of slaves. The Atlantic, water, becomes a space of spiritual power and travel. If blacks are limited to traveling on the Atlantic, how, because of the history, are their identities limited? *The Salt Roads* provides other means of crossing, such a spiritual and temporal crossing, which works to enrich the identities of its characters so that they are not merely

defined by the oppressive marker of the slave trade. The identities and experiences of Hopkinson's characters are open to the world.

In Brackette F. Williams's context, scholars should also consider the economic connections between the economies of slavery and the experiences of indigenous black peoples not engaged in New World slavery but possibly affected by connected economies of colonization and imperialism. The connection based upon a black identity or common economic factors. Consider Judah's answer to Meritet's answer to Judah when he questions her about how they are going to find money to travel after their long stay in the desert. Meritet replies "the way we know best, Judah. On our backs" (Hopkinson 389). In this context, racial identity is affected by one's class and economic position. Meritet is a prostitute because she is a slave.

Dionne Brand in her book *A Map to the Door of No Return* works against the limited notion of a fixed African American identity. Brand takes readers through a narrative memoir of her life events, which moves from the relatively mundane act of naming and water to the historical, collective events of displacement, migration, revolution, and public and private war. The narrative of the text relies on personal experience and the synthesis of other texts, as they are relevant to the experience and knowledge of the speaker, such as prose narratives of the Middle Passage or verses of Pablo Neruda. Brand's texts of integration are academic and non-academic, and Brand challenges the meaning of knowledge and ethos. Consider Brand's commentary on the use of voices to discover an individual voice, particularly for academics: "Yet another is heading straight to the library to cracker her head on Kristeva and Spivak before she sits

before a committee that will always be present to her as she makes her way grudgingly and insecurely through academic, through life, never sure, always sure that she is never in control.”²³⁰ In this text, Brand is in control because she determines what texts are used and what texts are not used. The creation of her identity is not solely reliant upon a trans-Atlantic identity, where one ocean, the ship, the white captain and crew and everyone and everything is in control of the experience of the black people in the belly of the ship. The ship, paradoxically and the passage, can equally been read as the ultimate point of the absence of power.

In writing this logical consideration, I must write that I acknowledge and respect the strength and courage it took my ancestors to survive that journey, which is a valid identity. The position of the slave and her/his/its/their identity in the slave ship is a paradox worthy of considerations from all philosophical angles. It is a queer time and space of consideration of identity: powerful and powerless simultaneously. Brand gives herself, particularly her grandfather, her memories, her experiences and her existence, permission to be the ethos upon which her identity and work stands. Ironically, Brand’s grandfather becomes her map and not necessarily a physical location or landmark. Might a need to anchor identity to a fix physical place, land or ocean, be another act of imperialism, no matter the intention? It might be possible that this notion of identity is so intriguing because it is circular and failing in its logic. Again, it is a paradox. A circle can include at the same time it can exclude, and it only returns upon itself. Brand works hard to get out of this trap, and her reader is allowed to experience the text through her

²³⁰ Dionne Brand. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Canada: Vintage, 2002. Print. 28.

words but also through her references of meanings, not necessarily a fixed and limited body of water. Brand's meaning and identity are based upon the release of the illusion of Africa as place, as a home patiently waits there until one decides and is able to return, and as identity. In the end, Africa only exists inside, and there is never a place or a spatial location to return to. This is a hard concept to ponder, like Brand, anyone can hop on a plane, hop on a boat, or look at a map to find evidence that "a place" or a location does actually exist. Brand and Gilroy come close in their consideration of African as a myth, but Gilroy fails to critique gender, extensively, in his paradigm. But to Brand, even if one physically or geographically returns to Africa, one can never actually inhabit the Africa that the Diaspora was torn from. To Brand, "Africa is a return, but aptly it is in the air and it is a glancing pass at the *Door of No Return*. The door is not on this map. The door is my retina."²³¹ In this way, the door does not exist. If African does not exist, maybe the Atlantic itself, as a place to lead to home or lead to an identity, does not exist. It can only be a desired figment of the imagination always in the peripheral vision of the seeker or that part of an identity that is rejected by the dominant narratives that face African Diaspora peoples around the globe. The absence of the door and the desire for a door extends and shapes a new, different African identity that is not bound to a continent, a body of water, a gender, a sexual orientation, its indigenous peoples, and its cultures, etc. Consider the beautiful connection between Brand and the parking attendant: "Look, I come from one of the oldest cities in the world. The oldest civilization. They build a parking lot and they think that it is a civilization."²³² Both the attendant and Brand can

²³¹ Ibid, p. 89.

²³² Ibid, p. 102.

acknowledge an origin, but the origin cannot be a part of the present experience, or it limits the ability to exist in the present and move forward into the future. Brand quotes Neruda to underscore this point: “Nothing they can do/ but rent a room across the street, and tail us/so they can learn to laugh and cry like us.”²³³ Like Brand and her text, the desire for an African homeland and a fixed, universal identity is too late or never existed as a possibility. Maybe the desire for African as a homeland that can be returned to is what keeps us, metaphorically and emotionally, on the “ship” because “returning to Africa” is accepting the psychological and power paradigm of *those that took us and our ancestors away in the first place*. This is a response to what Gilroy views as a momentary interruption instead of forward movement.

In the essay, “The Dialectic between Diasporas and Homelands,” Elliott P. Skinner defines the concept of Diaspora as parallel to the experience of the Jewish people.²³⁴ Skinner goes on to note that “Africans and Jews ... were forcibly taken into exile or dispersed.”²³⁵ Ivan Van Sertima’s texts and other scholarly work provide evidence that many Africans voluntarily traveled from the continent of Africa, but most of the displacements of African people, resulting in the modern and post-modern African Diaspora, are primarily a direct result of the slave trade, racial slavery, wars, and other forms of oppression, colonization, imperialism and conflict, which the ship and Atlantic image embodies. Gilroy believes that black American identity was “momentarily interrupted by slavery and colonialism,” and racial slavery is not “a substantial impact

²³³ Ibid, p. 103.

²³⁴ Elliot P Skinner. “The Dialectic between Diasporas and Homelands.” *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. 2nd ed. Ed. Joseph E Harris. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1993. 11-40. Print.

²³⁵ Ibid, p. 13.

upon African tradition or the capacity of black intellectuals to align themselves with it.”²³⁶ Ironically, Gilroy fails to note how gender and oppression also disrupted identity within the systems of slavery and colonialism. Gilroy’s assertion completely contradicts the very definition of the African Diaspora. Can the African Diaspora women and men speak at the same time? Is this dialectic? Is this a contradiction? This doesn’t mean that I am placing all of black identity and all of American black culture in the root of American slavery nor does this mean that I am discrediting or disrespecting Gilroy’s work in any way. I have tremendous respect for Gilroy and his groundbreaking work, and maybe this is the purpose of his work: to lead us (me) out of the oppressive trap of a fixed and obtainable identity.

The modern and post-modern voice of the African black identity cannot change that modern event of slavery for what it was, and its legacy and impact on black people and their identity throughout the Diaspora. When we are talking about Diaspora issues and race, a major root or influence will always be in the slave trade, racial slavery, and other forms of oppression relative to national identity. To deny the disproportionate result of the slave trade and racial slavery, as part of the African Diaspora identity, is to irresponsibly imply that racism and racist forces no longer exist and that they do not exact any lasting and pervasive influence upon people of color [read black] all over the world. Might it be to reject identity after one has embraced it? A theoretical change in perspective cannot necessarily represent a tangible change in the condition, physically and philosophically, of African Diaspora people.

²³⁶ Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts, 1993. Print. 190.

What Gilroy's image of the ship fails to consider are other black identities that were not developed through New World slavery and trade, as Gilroy's ship metaphor implies. Gilroy's theory does not include indigenous black people and black people affected by colonialism and imperialism in places other than Europe and the Americas. Gilroy asserts that "ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined, [and they] were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected."²³⁷

What about black identities who crossed the Atlantic and other great waters voluntarily in the Ancient World and in the Old World, as evidenced in Van Sertima's *They Came before Columbus*? If Gilroy's theory is critical for black American essentialists closing possibilities because they may have failed to consider Atlantic influences, how is Gilroy closing those same possibilities of legacy in his new theory, which works to eliminate racism while supposedly taking race and racial slavery into account? Are these really strong points of entry in an African Diaspora identity that is fluid and transcends nationalism if other black identities are not considered? Paul Zeleza works to answer this question:

Notwithstanding its considerable insights and contributions to Diaspora studies and cultural studies, *The Black Atlantic* has been faulted for oversimplifying the African American experience and the role of Africa and African connections in its collective memory, imagination and thought... for universalizing the racialized 'minority' experience of African Americans (in most Caribbean

²³⁷ Ibid, p. 37.

islands, African-descended people constitute the majority); for foreclosing the relationships and connections among the black Diaspora cultures themselves beyond the Anglophone world (the largest African Diaspora population is in Brazil and speaks Portuguese) and between them and African cultures; for its postmodernist phobias against essentialism, real and imaginary, strategic or slight, while at the same time desperately seeking a 'black,' not a 'white,' or 'multicultural' Atlantic; for its exclusionary epistemic cultural politics in its Eurocentric excision and disdain for Africa; and for mystifying modernity as the primary object of black Atlantic critique barring questions of imperialism and capitalism. (37)

When Gilroy makes this arbitrary stipulation about identity with the use of the ship metaphor, this metaphor limits the inclusion of other "black" and African peoples, experiences, and identities. Consider the identities of *Serena Selena* by Mayra Santos-Febres.

Serena Selena first published in 2000 breaks through the barriers of race, nationality, class and ethnicity to reveal the fluidity of gender and humanity. The gender-crossing characters of the African and Caribbean Diaspora complicate the normative expectations of gender identity to the point where other factors of identity like race and class pushed to the margins of identity or maybe they, too, are made just as fluid (unfixed) as gender. The function of gender in creating and maintaining identity competes

with the scripts of class and race, which work against the freedom and happiness that gender fluidity provides. The characters Serena and Hugo, ironically enough, are shaped by their family expectations and the expectations of their larger outside societies. Serena is so beautiful beyond expectation that she is objectified and abandoned by her own mother; “I don’t know what this child has that makes the mean crazy” (Santos-Febres 57). The inability for Serena (Leocadio) to follow the appropriate gender script trumps his mother’s loyalty to him. Hugo’s father creates expectations of class and status for him. His trip to the neighborhood is seen as an attempt at emasculation (interesting...poverty and class an emasculating force...is this a heterosexual norm or fluidity of any power?) Imagine how the identities and experiences of Hugo and Serena could expand a trans-Atlantic identity or complete destroy it. Most of us are told that we have no options, and we accept the scripts that we are given. Hugo is forced to have sex with the mullata, Serena. Martha proudly states that “everybody here knows that we’ve all got some African blood running in our veins” (Santos-Febres 139). The novel draws out of the binary occupations with gender constructions. Febres-Santos has made the reader a voyeur of the story of Serena. The reader navigates a script and a place unfamiliar yet interesting. The reader is made guilty through their participation the text. Meaning can only come through shared terms of expectations or the acceptance of limitations of gender, nationality and race. These mulatto beauties tell on themselves, and in turn, they tell on me, too.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s Nanny, an ex-slave, talks to Janie, about the hardships of being black and female in a Jim Crow society. Nanny uses the

metaphor of the oceans and describes the ocean as a way off place “where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothing but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to but he don’t tote it” (Hurston 14). By not “toting” the load, Nanny, as a former slave once silenced, speaks back to power, but Nanny is still oppressed by racism and her actions within it. Ideally, Janie must work throughout to the text to break free of the psychological yoke of speaking that Nanny has passed on to her. By the end of the novel, Janie pulls “in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life is in the meshes” (184). Does the fish net, as a metaphor and not the ship and the Atlantic ocean, become the new or better more inclusive and fluid metaphor for the black identity speaking back to the racial oppression of modernity? Janie has advanced to a new identity because the ocean and the ship are no longer a place and space of the unknown and a place and space of death.

Baldwin’s character, John, has a similar revelation when his self-actualization comes from finding “some other salvation” than the slave identity, which is set in the legacy of slavery forever even in freedom.²³⁸ Like Janie, John must create an identity that he forges for himself: one that accepts his sexuality and his experiences different from those of his family whose members are stuck in an identity created by the bitterness of racism. John’s identity and any inclusive and fluid identity are not a cookie-cutter identities pre-set and organized for them to fit into. If so, he and we cookie cut ourselves. It is such a violent analogy but appropriate because it conveys the violent nature of

²³⁸ James. R. Giles. “Religious Alienation and ‘Homosexual Consciousness’ in *City of the Night and Go Tell It on the Mountain*.” *College English* 36.3 (1974): 369-380. Print.

language and power that excludes and silences others. Identity leads to separation, and separation is unnatural and causes more pain and suffering than relief. The black people in Turner's painting are not fishing or achieving some salvation; they are eternally in a state of drowning. They are in an eternal state of dying. The bodies in Turner's ocean (water) have no relief. Thank the Goddess that the ocean for Janie and John is fruitful and provides the physical and spiritual sustenance of fish (salvation) because they have identified and have their own agency. What sacrilege (humor and sarcasm)? Janie and John have become the source of their own sustenance and identity. Unlike a Christian, Western model, salvation does not only happen outside of self. Salvation can come from within because we are a part of the Goddess and all life. In the same way, Gilroy's trans-Atlantic theory is working hard to find a fruitful place among the ship setting for black the African Diaspora, but it must be in a language and with metaphors that do not increase the likelihood that humans, of all races, nationalities, genders and experiences will become caught up in the meshes of gendered power and identity.

There is Something not Quite Right with this Picture: an Exploration into Race, Language, and Meaning and a contemporary discussion of African Diaspora Literature



Photo Image7: Reelected George W Bush in the White House on Election Night²³⁹

After it was *decided* that Bush won a second term after the November presidential election, *Newsweek* magazine published a photo essay titled “Election Night 2004.”²⁴⁰ One of the photo essay’s subtitles reads “Family Affair: on the night of the vote, ‘41’ looked on as his son won what he had lost—a second White House term”.²⁴¹ The photo on pages 10 and 11 is a two page panoramic view of a room in the White House. From the left to the right of the page spans Bush family members, President Bush, and there is

²³⁹ “Election Night: A Sweet Victory...and a Tough Loss.” Photo. *Newsweek* 14 Nov. 2004: 10-11. Print.

²⁴⁰ Ibid

²⁴¹ Ibid

what looks like a security guard standing in a door to the far left of the photo. It is an expectable photo in its content. The scene for the photo is a sitting room with family and friends waiting together on an important night. The photo is “common enough” for what readers would expect, except for a Black woman on the far right of the photo. The Black woman is not Condoleezza Rice, as most Black people, except for security agents, near the President have been identified and credentialed to the viewing public. The unidentified Black woman is sitting on the edge of a green chair, and she has grey hair. She and the “security guard” are the only people in the photo appearing to look at the camera or the person taking the photo.

As politically incorrect as this may be, I immediately wonder who the unidentified Black woman is and what she is doing in the White House. Is she the maid? Is she security? Is she a family friend? Is she a relative? Is she a nurse? Is she a nanny? I guess in any other context the unidentified photo of the Black woman wouldn't be interesting, but considering the issues of race and voter disenfranchisement that surround both the 2000 and 2004 elections, her happy and calm appearance in this photo, while hundreds of thousands of Black voters in Ohio and Florida are denied the vote, is quite intriguing. By reading a past time into this photo image, the photo becomes the text, and the text becomes the simulation, and the simulation became the “master narrative” of the 2004 election.

The master narrative, like all dominant and master narratives, became the story of what happened and why: the 2000 and 2004 elections were not a disenfranchisement of African American voters and other marginalized American voters. (Of course the photo

also works to simulate other, different, and very important master narratives directly related to the pictured administration, but these narratives are not the primary strain of *this* paper.) The photo text master narrative represents Jean Baudrillard's successive phases of the image, which creates a meaning that "has no relation to any reality whatsoever".²⁴² The "double speak" of politicians, politics, and political images, and their effects on social institutions and human life are dismantled and recreated in this photo. In the photo's attempt to obscure, the photo connects the American meanings of race to power. It connects American racism to legislation. It connects American racists (read all Americans because all things are tainted by what they are of) to racial perceptions versus realities. The photo rewrites the definition of American citizenship (enfranchisement) and its correlation to race, gender, and power. While looking at this cover of *Newsweek*, I, African American female, enter into the narrative like an ongoing discussion. I become part of the master narrative.

Just as my project entered in the past time, as the critical reader, I can choose to accept the narrative as presented, or I can reject the narrative. I reject the master narrative in texts through questioning its legitimacy through comparing it to my experiences and "what I know and don't know." I resist the narrative, and my resistance becomes a multifaceted position, which overall represents a questioning of ideologies of race, citizenship, and class.²⁴³ My narrative is not the simulacra of "normalcy" and/or of "racial harmony," which is being projected by the photo but this way of reading becomes

²⁴² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

²⁴³ Paul de Man. *The Resistance to Theory: Theory and History of Literature* Volume 33. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002. Print.

the methodology of which I can affirm my experiences and valid my identity within larger, male and white dominated paradigms.

I am often baffled, even as a teacher, at the ability of the recent language of American politics and the American media to mask race, as if race and racism no longer exist in America. I use the word language to convey all modes of communication. While language masks race, prejudice, and racism, language also obscures race and racism with new and different language, i.e., “personal responsibility,” “qualifications,” and “choice.” These “new myths” become of way of encoding race, which solidifies the paradigm of racism and the severe inequality in America. A report from the *Associated Press* on the growing wealth gap for American Blacks and Hispanics compared to American Whites evidences the space between dissimulation and simulation.²⁴⁴ The *Associated Press*’ data belies the media images of prosperity and racial harmony. I lose count of how many times my students use commercial images of minorities as evidence of racial and social-economic equality.

This new encoding of race and racism in American language and American media culture perpetuates an inequality that is even more integral to the American paradigm than ever before and further underscores the need to read past time into literature texts of the African Diaspora to better understand contemporary current events and *positionalities* of marginalized people. The encoding of power affects the American vocabulary, and how Americans speak to one another. It affects institutions. It affects laws. Ideally, it affects all groups of people in America, even those who are not negatively and directly

²⁴⁴ Genaro C. Armas. “Wealth gap for Hispanics, Blacks Grows.” *The Indianapolis Star* (Associated Press) 18 Oct. 2004. 18 Oct. 2004. <<http://www.indystar.com/articles/9/187354-9279-P.html>>.

impacted by the new encoding. The new language gives those Americans not affected (so they think) by race and inequality a reason to not concern themselves with issues of race. Willful ignorance only works to perpetuate the problem. As race and racism in language and in politics become more and more discounted, unfashionable, undesirable and obscured, racism and other forms of inequality have become commoditized and solidified within the culture. More people become victims of racism, particularly institutional racism, which masks its racism in the language and meanings that work to develop the criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

The “closeness” of the Presidential elections in 2000 and 2004 were not Jim Crow (a continuation of the historical disenfranchisement of African American voters). No. No. No. According to the media and legislators, the 2000 and 2004 incidents were innocent “voting irregularities”: broken voting machines, lack of voter education (poor people and Black people are too stupid to vote correctly), and other, innocuous explanations that never ever mentioned race or mentioned the pivotal connections between race, racism, and political candidates and power. The maintenance of this new lexicon of race and “ways of viewing race” was and is so powerful that the Democratic nominee in 2000, Al Gore, wouldn’t even risk gaining the White House by fighting for and mentioning the disproportionate disenfranchisement of Black voters during the Florida recount. It makes one wonder what is really important to understanding or “reading” reality. Was Gore’s power position and other, as a wealthy White male in an elite political system, more important than speaking out about disenfranchised African Americans and other marginalized groups? Were Gore and other White Democrats afraid

of the binary meanings associated with explicitly fighting for the enfranchisement of American Blacks?

Although the story of Kathleen Harris and Florida, illegally and unconstitutionally, disenfranchising thousands of registered Black voters was pervasive in the media (language), there was no mainstream consideration or mainstream embracing of that master narrative because it did not fit the new and current American language of how America defines “race” and “racism.” Enfranchisement will never change unless the part of the paradigm, the love relationship of what is represented versus what is the actual reality, is revealed and dismantled. Revelation and dismantling can take place through reading past-time into the text. A question to consider for future work is what might be found once racial identity is dismantled from the text and will readers and scholars have the will and courage to dismantle what they discover, which I believe is class.

The documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion* considers the very existence of a race construct forged through psychological, social, political, and any “other” position within the American construct of racial identity, racial equality, and American nationalism. Like Toni Morrison in her essay “Black Matters,” I frantically thought about how intellectually and physically “free” I was of contamination from the subject’s narrative of race, identity, and equality.²⁴⁵ Although I and others, who share my racial and national identity, are almost always portrayed as the “object” within the dominate

²⁴⁵ Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print.

discourses of Western society, I painfully tried to identify all the ways that my perspectives, my life, and my actions have been “racialized” in my project.

It was not a discourse that I wanted to have or a discourse that I was ready to have, but it was a discourse that I started nonetheless, which has not necessarily been a negative experience, so far. The discourse into the interrogation of language and meaning in my project has been analogous to entering an unlit room in search of an object, desperately needed, without the benefit of a light. I excavate an implicit but pervasive discourse whose existence and power has been fueled by its perception and reality created by my historical acceptance and lack of analysis. Maybe the object and the subject both benefited from the “false” meanings and realities of race. Maybe I benefited from the false notion of race and the various social, political, and educational constructs it creates and created in my own life: a scary question for an African American attending an academic institution that is primarily White and male dominated.

I find myself saying in my head: “do you want to go there?”

The essays “Knowledge Construction and Racist ‘Science’” by Brewer and the essay “Black Matters” by Toni Morrison considers the false paradigm of race as formulated in the exclusive spaces of those who “get” to speak and define meanings and realities. Brewer’s article focuses on *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray.²⁴⁶ Brewer considers the ways in which race and power are constantly repackaged in meaning in order to rationalize its existence and to legitimize the disenfranchisement of African Americans, women, and poor people. The essay develops a step further to assert

²⁴⁶ Rose M. Brewer. “Knowledge Construction and Racist ‘Science.’” *American Behavioral Scientist* 39.1 (1995):62-73. Print.

how racialized research, “pseudoscience,” is legitimized and made pervasive through responding discourses: this pervasiveness perpetuates racist policies, attitudes, and justifies inequalities through negating or eliminating the “real” causes of inequality: racism and racist capitalistic policies.²⁴⁷ Morrison’s takes this same interrogation of the subject’s ability to control the meaning and language of race. She takes the interpretation of that paradigm and turns it on its head. She takes the lens from the “looking subject,” takes it from the object, and places it squarely on the subject for both the subject and the object to view simultaneously. Like revealing the Wiz behind the curtain in the *Wizard of Oz*, Morrison creates a shift of power, definition, and reality because Morrison provides a new, different narrative—a narrative that is less beneficial to the White subject with the false edge of the racialized lens. The creation and assessment of “black” life is more an indication of the latent fears and the creation of an identity of the White American race and less a legitimate portrayal African American ethnicity and identity²⁴⁸. Americans needed to define the “other” in order to define “self.” The systematic oppression through the definition of African Americans became the cost of the creation of an American self.

What is the power of defining race and questioning those in control of creating and shaping race in analysis literature of the African Diaspora? The impact of questioning releases a burden that any marginalized group or object must wade through at every opportunity to succeed beyond the “expectation” to become just a little like the

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Toni Morrison. *Playing in the Dark*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992. Print. 6.

subject in education, money, employment, housing, etc. Questioning language and meaning gives explicit permission to acknowledge the political and powerful effects of such discourses on policy and the quality of life for those unfortunate to be classed as object (read African American).

I am pessimistic about the opportunity to fully document “race” as a means to dismantle race with the hope of one day destroying hierarchies based on race, i.e., racism. Race, racial identity, and racial hierarchies are as intertwined in human existence as nerves are intertwined within the human spinal cord. Might the dissection of just one minuscule nerve through reading past-time into literature lead to the paralysis of the entire body? Might the complete deconstruction of race as a construct or the pursuit of the construction of race lead to the same result, a paralysis of humanity, identity, and existence? The text *Race* by Hannaford, seeks to deconstruct the very historic origin of race without, ironically, paying close attention to the “real” legacy of race. As a scholar, he is trying to uncover the meaning of race and racism by pursuing its origins. The author believes that people must relinquish all other “real” factors associated with race in order to analyze race with an “objective” mind. This means that American must be willing to question all knowledge about nationality and race in order to enter into a discourse that will actually work to dismantle race and racism.

Like many Americans, I receive news from various media outlets: cable, radio, and the internet. I either accept what they report, or I act against it, letting the tension of the reports versus my reality create new knowledge, trying to get at the “heart” of what I want to explain about voting and Jim Crow in the 21st century. I once told someone that

there should be a diagnosis for the intellectual condition that I have had since the 2000 and 2004 election. The text, *Racial Formation in the United States*, better articulates what has been plaguing me, intellectually, for the last four years. Although the authors tend to negate gender, incarceration, and other aspects of the contemporary race paradigm in America, their theories explain the response of White supremacy (reaction) to social, economic, and political gains made during the Civil Rights Movement and during other black social movements. Although it could address additional factors, *Racial Formation*, as a theory, goes a long way to explain the current, contemporary paradigms of racism in America and to providing guidance to reading past-time in literature of the African Diaspora.

Experts in the field of critical race theory refer to the *paradigm shift* of African Americans in America as *rearticulation*.²⁴⁹ Rearticulation manifested itself in advancements in education, housing, and employment, at least in the early part of the black social movements. Equality, choice, integration, and Affirmative Action were many of the terms that were redefined by the Right as a response to the rearticulation race by the Civil Rights Movement and other Black social movements. I watched what happened in 2000 and 2004 without the language to fully and accurately articulate what happened, and because others were not in possession of a language and meanings that addressed race and discrimination, I could not have a discussion with others. I understood Jim Crow in a social and historical context, but I could not wrap my intellectual brain around believing that it, Jim Crow, could happen in the 21st century. I

²⁴⁹ Michael Omi, and Howard Winant. "Racial Formations." *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: an Integrated Study*. 7th ed. Ed. Paul S. Rothenberg. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2007. 13-22. Print.

did not want to accept that the paradigm had shifted back to what the Civil Rights Movement had fought against, and I could not wrap my brain around Jim Crow happening in front of all Americans and most Americans who were *comfortable* “pretending” that 2000 and 2004 was all about hanging chads, faulty machines, and voter errors. Language and meaning were being used to create a false reality, but being able to read past time into literature texts of the African diaspora allowed a vehicle of expression and commentary. The challenge was to create a synthesis of contemporary events, time and meaning with past events, time and meaning.

Admittedly, this is quite naïve, but I find more comfort in being able to call this, as an example of synthesizing past time with current time, an “uncovering” of Jim Crow, barely beneath the surface, a reaction response of the White Supremacy movement instead of a voting abnormality and voting fraud.²⁵⁰ The term “voting fraud” becomes the language vehicle to encode race and racism by making race and racism unclear.²⁵¹ If race and racism are unclear, meaning is unclear. If meaning is unclear, so, too, is reality for all of those affected by race and racism, which include both Blacks and Whites, not to mention other races that are not even recognized because of the excluding binary definition of race in America as only White and Black people. The disenfranchisement of African American voters is a de facto existence of White power and slavery in America happening today, not just in Florida but in Ohio, Minnesota, New Mexico, and other swing states. This “new right” operates in a “political space” of popularity, much like the celebration of patriotism, terrorism, and September 11: “much has been written

²⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 237.

²⁵¹ Ibid, p. 120-121.

about the new Right's tendency to focus on controversial social issues as a means of rallying and organizing its constituency."²⁵² What additional social, economic, and political paradigm shifts will African Americans and other marginalized groups (in fact the world) experience as a result of the reactionary and all too real responses of successful white-supremacy language?

According to Crick, "intellectuals might ... be a bridge between the scholarly and the public mind, especially when matters of understanding are of great political and social importance."²⁵³ It is only logical to start with the origins of the word "race:" its connotation, its denotation, and its conceptualization. Admittedly, my own "social location," as African American, female, mother, wife, teacher, urban, child of divorce, and product of a single parent household, intimately impacts my conceptualization of race. My social location filters what I learn, and my social location is juxtaposed to the assertions of the various scholars, languages, and meanings that I encounter and develop. I assert the subjectivity of my conceptualization, not to negate my experiences or what will follow in this critical writing, but I assert the parameters of my conceptualization to claim my experiences and their meaning in order to craft the beginnings of an intellectual space, like the construction of a new larger window out of a smaller window embedded in an aged home, into recognition, questioning, discovering, and hopefully understanding new conceptualizations of race. At best, I can create a discourse on the meanings of race, which may not be comprehensive, objective, or didactic, but at least, the discourse can be

²⁵² Ibid, p. 121-123.

²⁵³ Bernard Crick. Foreword. *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*. Ed. Ivan Hannaford. Washington. The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996. xi-xvi. Print.

one that is intellectually challenging through reading past-time into literature. If the intellectual is the bridge between *the scholarly* mind and *the public* mind, the bridge between the academic and the non-academic, and the bridge between the institution and the individual, then the intellectual is the private space and place between and among the two easily identifiable paradigms. It is the place and the space that does not follow; it asks questions and critiques the adjustments it makes to survive through new meanings and different usages of language.

My intellectual pursuit of the definition of race and the events that evidence it is a search of *what is not said* and unavailable for the public and the scholarly view but none-the-less more powerful and pervasive in its implicitness, existence, and influence. For the infinite process of recognition, questioning, discovery, and understanding, my project's conclusion, into reading the meanings and experience of race, with permission begins the process of making the recursive linear and making the obscured seen. That which is the scholarly and the public (both for view) in Western culture is always approved or disallowed; thus, each sector, the scholarly and the public, self-perpetuate or self-negate in order to create dominant and acceptable realities that are central to the definition of race. Institutions create reality, and what is omitted and unseen, is considered outside the margins and marginalized in meaning and in reality.

For example, scholars and institutions research, present new theories, and publish. Critics and others in the public realm critique and either accept or reject through providing appropriate affirmation through accolades and status. The public produces phenomena (behavior). Institutions and scholars affirm the public's behavior through

teaching, research, and publication. It is important to note that scholars and institutions, both, can invade the public and the scholarly space, sometimes simultaneously. There is a criterion that regulates who and what has access to both the scholarly and the private. This irony works to develop the meaning and conceptualization of race, which most always works to the detriment of Black Americans and produces what Cornel West names as a “neglected variable” in discursive, scholarly, and public existence.²⁵⁴

For example, consider the University of Minnesota’s dismantling of General College. The discussion of dismantling the college failed to address the responsibilities for an institution to serve the underserved community, which obscured the discussion of race, racism, class, and the under service of the community. This obscuring is racist at its core because it redefines competition, as not serving the needs of diversity and being void of any type of bias or inequity. It is understandable to see why some people hold the perception that people of color are not as competitive as their White counterparts when Big Ten research institutions are perpetuating this stereotype at an administrative and institutional level. Imagine the graduates’ perspectives on race and serving the underserved because of the University’s example.

Race in the American paradigm is defined within these spaces of irony because race, historically, in the Western paradigm has been excluded from both the scholarly and the public until recently, probably the last thirty years, but even that, too, is questionable, depending upon the scholar(s), institution(s), and public space and place. If we stipulate for the sake of discussion that the “beginning of America” is the American Constitution,

²⁵⁴West, Cornel. “A Genealogy of Modern Racism.” *Race Critical Theories*. Eds. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. 90-112. Print.

then the race ideal and the definition of race are systemic to America, its ideal, and its reality. The critical consideration of the definition of race within the American paradigm must initiate from that “beginning” place of “independence” and from America’s interdependence with slaves, with slave labor, and with the criterion of American citizenship. One could consider that this demarcation is the legacy place and site of definition, language, and meaning today.

African Americans were “made property” through law. This law also prohibited the slaves’ ability to contribute to the public and to contribute to the scholarly, “American Civic,” institutions: education, ownership, voting, religion, etc. Ideally, it would be politically correct to consider poor Whites, Native Americans, and other marginalized Americans in the race paradigm, but addressing the Black American issue and definition of race, sets the stage for all other classifications of American identity and citizenship criteria. Blackness was the line of demarcation that determined the value of all else relative to Blackness and American citizenship. The condition of American slavery was purely determined by a person’s skin color and the skin color of their maternal parent, but the conceptualization of the reality and language of slavery determined race and how race was defined. So, even if a Black American lived in a Northern free state, all Americans, Black, White, and in between, would know that if that Black American lived in the South, s/he would be subjugated; thus, the institution of American slavery and American slavery’s definition of race branded *all* American Blacks and *all other Blacks* around the globe forever, even after the institution was abolished.

What could be worse in the new America, which celebrated freedom and independence above all things, than a perception of a group of people that did not have freedom or worse did not deserve it or were unable to maintain it?

Enslavement was analogous to all things old, analogous to all things bad, and analogous to all things uncivilized. It slapped the “freedom” of Emerson’s “self-reliance” smack dab in the face, no matter how hypocritically. What could be worse in a new country where survival depended on the individual’s ability to live autonomously on the “new” land without being a burden to others? What a great catalyst (for those not Black, not White, not male, and not privileged) to work against, or they would have been in grave danger, at least, of becoming, being compared, or giving meaning and living in a reality “equal” to Black American slaves? What an amazing stroke of genius for those who were White, male, and privileged, living in the society to maintain such an enduring oligarchy of meaning and simulation for White power and privilege? Andrew Hacker in his text, *Two Nations*, makes an important point:

But as much as anything, being “black” in America bears the mark of slavery. Even after emancipation, citizens who had been slaves still found themselves consigned to a subordinate status. Put most simply, the ideology that had provided the rationale for slavery did not disappear. Blacks continued to be seen as an inferior species, not only unsuited for equality but not even meriting a chance to show their worth. Immigrants

only hours off the boat, while often subjected to scorn, were—and still are —allowed to assert their superiority to black Americans.²⁵⁶

Consider how many different racial and ethnic groups have migrated to America only to surpass Black Americans in public and private benefits of American citizenship. Systemic to the country's very core and as hypocritical as Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, the nature of race becomes something deeper than arbitrary skin color, which predetermines race. The nature of race became the use and omission of language, meaning, and reality. American would look much different if Jefferson had been allowed to keep his reference to the "buying and selling of men" in his early draft of *The Declaration of Independence*. The very definition of American was the antithesis of Black: an American citizenship conceptualized in the "nation building stage." The definition (language) would become the intrinsic definition of Blackness: a definition (to name a few) of dependent, burden, lazy, solvent, sinister, stupid, over-sexed, incompetent, infantile, and above all not worthy of citizenship, which included the right to vote. Ironically, the hypocritical act of slavery and White supremacy became that which was omitted and silent between the scholarly and the public. The myth of White supremacy and Black incompetence took its place in the space between the scholarly and the public. It would be a long time before intellectuals would work to build the bridge between the two to question and deconstruct the myth. The bridge barely exists today.

The issues of race and disenfranchisement in the 2000 and 2004 election define Black Americans, as American citizens, in a negative and bottom, hierarchical way.

²⁵⁶ Andrew Hacker. *Two Nations: Black & White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.

Cornell West and Hannaford attribute this race language and philosophy as happening before the French and American Revolutions and before Manifest Destiny. The American race paradigm was the first to apply the antiquity government models with racist theories (language) of Enlightenment. This was the “New World” criterion. Once a society of race, ownership, wealth, slavery, freedom, and citizenship was in place, there could be nothing less than Black, as the point of definition like the color black is the last and darkest position on the color spectrum of a rainbow. Although enfranchisement existed for other groups relative to Black Americans, no other American group was and is so intrinsically and irrevocably damaged as Black Americans by the very definition (language) and legacy of race. On October 7, 2004, during a Presidential Debate, President George Bush, who has a reputation for appointing conservative judges and appointing them through Constitutional loopholes to avoid approval of Congress, was asked about his choices for Supreme Court judges should he win re-election. The President made reference to the appointment of a judge who would never strike the word “God” from the U.S. Constitution, and the President made reference to the *Dred Scott* case:

Another example would be the Dred Scott case, which is where judges, years ago, said that the Constitution allowed slavery because of personal property rights...That's a personal opinion. That's not what the Constitution says. The Constitution of the United States says we're all—

you know, it doesn't say that. It doesn't speak to the equality of America.²⁵⁷

What is telling by the President's reference is the blatant omission of the past-time meaning, language, and contextual and historical complexity of the Supreme Court's decision in the *Dred Scott* case. His comment displayed, at least in its wording, ignorance of the complex and intentional relationships between the national building of America's public mind and scholarly mind in creating and maintaining a de facto system of oppression and slavery of Black Americans. His last statement, "[the Constitution] does not speak to the equality of America" was dangerously ambiguous and open for innuendo, which could too easily appeal to those who either support or do not support the disenfranchising definition of race and equality. It was as if he didn't appreciate the irony of the *Dred Scott* case in the "shadow" his lawyers stopping the Florida recount, and the counting of votes (citizenship rights) of thousands of people of color. Or, maybe he did know, and I am just in denial about the President's reality and the reality they are working to create. In 1857, the *Evening Journal* in Albany, New York published a commentary on the courts' *Dred Scott* decision, stating that many of the members of the court shared the same interests:

It is no novelty to find the Supreme Court following the lead of the Slavery Extension party, to which most of its members belong. Five of the Judges are slaveholders, and two of the other four owe their appointments to their facile ingenuity in making State laws bend to

²⁵⁷ "Transcript: Second Presidential Debate." *Washington Post* 8 Oct. 2004. 10 Oct. 2004 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/politics/debatereferee/debate_1008.html>.

Federal demands in behalf of 'the Southern institution.'²⁵⁸

Autonomously, the President's reference would not seem surprising, but in the context of the heavily documented disenfranchisement of predominantly Black, Florida voters in the 2000 Presidential election by the President's political party, his statement may be evidence of the still pervasive and oppressive power of the meaning of language America. White supremacy is at the top, there are those in the middle, but Black is definitely and always at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

Blackness is still predominantly perceived as the most negative and the least desired within the civic American paradigm. Race becomes the powerful and pervasive method for maintaining a White patriarchal system of global power because in its arbitrary and simple representation, the omitted definition of race allows for a total and pervasive application. The Blacks of India can be oppressed just as easily as the Blacks of South Africa. The Blacks of the Sudan and the Blacks in Great Britain can be just as easily oppressed as the Blacks in Chicago, Illinois. The definition and language of race have not changed. It is only repackaged, made more pervasive and implicit, and consistently delivered through almost every facet of contemporary Western culture between the scholarly and the public mind. There is an arbitrary nature of power in the creation of the myth of America and the myth's designation of "whiteness." It is an American designation of whiteness within an American myth, particularly the demarcation of whiteness, as it pertains to American citizenship, freedom, and American

²⁵⁸ "Opinions of the Supreme Court in the Dred Scott Case." (*Secession Editorials Era Project Web Page.*) *Evening Journal: Republican* 7 March 1857. 10 Oct. 2004
<<http://history.furman.edu/~benson/docs/nyajds57307a.htm>>.

access to opportunity and power through education, housing, ownership, and employment. Intellectually, I have learned that there is not a set language for race and power. There are only places of hybridity and meanings and those places can be discovered in reading past-time into African Diaspora literature texts. The language, i.e., words of race, is arbitrary. It is the power's designation that precedes the language and the creation of a reality, which is the challenge for the reader and a question for future consideration. Consider the abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century, the Civil Rights Movement, and the discovery of 21st century science that race does not "biologically" exist, how will readers continued to read past time into text once all paradigms of power are dismantled?

It is one thing to know that there is no biological evidence to support race. It is another thing to consider the position of scientific fact within a created reality, a reality not controlled by science but controlled by fallible human beings with power to arbitrarily create hierarchies of language and meaning. This language and meaning still affect culture and all other human behavior. It is ironic when I consider my own path to the knowledge of the meaning and language of slavery and race. I know about the biology of race somewhere in the back of my mind, but I cannot specifically pin-point when and where I learned it or first heard it. I remember reading the only *one* paragraph about slavery in my seventh grade Sociology textbook. The textbook was covered with an aerial photo of Midwestern farmland. I remember trying to read Dubois' *Souls of Black Folk* as a 19-year-old freshman and giving up because I thought it was too dense. I remember Conrad's descriptions of the dark land and its darker savages in *The Heart of*

Darkness during my junior year of college in my all White classroom. I remember “getting” that Janie’s loss of Teacake in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was about Janie’s own self-actualization as a Black woman and knowing that I wanted to study literature. But, I don’t remember the exact moment that I learned that whiteness had and has no biological basis. This earth shattering knowledge should have been a “light bulb moment,” but it wasn’t one, at least not one that I recall, because the new science did change the language of race. So, it didn’t change the reality of race and racism.

How am I a part of this creation of reality?

Intuitively and emotionally, I resisted that knowledge seriously. I stipulated serious, as an active internalization of the biological evidence (knowledge) against whiteness in a move toward aggressively challenging my own definitions, stereotypes, and behavior related to race and related to whiteness. Dare I say that I had to challenge my own whiteness through identifying *it* masked as “correct meaning and language” in my life. I cannot theorize that I could not recall that moment because I understood the difference between what I know versus what is reality. I believe, now, that I could not and was not willing to process that notion into my own existence and my own perspective of how I see, live, and operate within the world, and how I operate in whiteness. Like Martha Menchaca’s “auto/ethnography,” I needed to interrogate my own biological landscape, past and present, to reach some objectivity —if objectivity is possible. The tension between the realities of living my everyday life juxtaposed to what science is now prepared to support left a huge black hole of hypocrisy that I wasn’t willing to step

into. It was one thing for science to discover that there was and is no biological foundation for race; it was completely another aspect to contend that this “new” knowledge and language would be a powerful equalizing factor among all races and that this new information would dismantle whiteness. In contrast, this new information only perpetuated racism and whiteness even more because it only highlighted the disparities of the social and concrete vehicles to power and opportunity, which Blacks and other non-Whites were and are historically denied.

In conclusion, Angela Davis in her essay, “Education and Liberation: Black Women’s Perspective,” underscores the historical and continual nature of this conflict of Blacks’ knowledge of facts versus reality:

Black people were hardly celebrating the abstract principles of freedom when they hailed the advent of emancipation. As that ‘great human sob shrieked in the wind and tossed its tears upon the sea – free, free, free.’

Black people were not giving vent to religious frenzy. They knew exactly what they wanted: the women and the men alike wanted land, they wanted the ballot and ‘they were consumed with desire for schools.’²⁵⁹

The sobering understanding of the reality of American citizenship that newly freed slaves had was astounding. They, unlike other Americans, were not enchanted with the romantic myth of whiteness and becoming White. Although they understood what whiteness meant in the American paradigm, they also understood and believed that certain opportunities were analogous with an American identity, i.e., education, land

²⁵⁹ Angela Davis. “Education and Liberation: Black Women’s Perspective.” *Race Critical Theories*. Eds. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. 69-79. Print.

ownership, and freedom. The newly freed slaves wanted to be American not White.

Ironically, emancipation was supposed to dispel whiteness as the precursor for American identity and everything tangible that came with that identity, but it would come to pass that Blacks and other non-Whites were put within a cruel paradox. Although they were American citizens, they would never be White. If one is not White in America, one will never have access to the benefits of American “whiteness,” which can cruelly be synonymous to American citizenship in reality, not necessarily factual. The 21st century disenfranchisement of non-White voters in the 2000 and in the 2004 Presidential election evidenced this reality.

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Personal Family Photograph. Elora Coleman (great, great paternal grandmother) and Robert Coleman (great, great paternal uncle). Family Photo. St. Louis, Missouri, circa late 1930s-early 1940s. (Photo Image 2).

Personal Family Photograph. Cheryl Coleman (mother) and Ronald Coleman (son/brother) at Ronald’s high school graduation in the spring 1996 in Chicago, Illinois. (Photo Image 3).