INDELIBLE LEGACIES: TRANSGENERATIONAL TRAUMA AND THERAPEUTIC ANCESTRAL RECONCILIATION IN KINDRED, THE CHANEYSVILLE INCIDENT, STIGMATA AND THE KNOWN WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

There exists a myriad of assumptions attempting to shed light on the need to represent the traumatic legacy of slavery in post-slavery eras, namely in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The most prevalent of these assumptions can be considered as the desire to reimagine the past of slavery to address certain gaps and fissures in existing scholarship on African American history. Contemporary African American writers, in their own converging and diverging narrative ways, employ the narrative structure and themes of the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thus bringing a new style of representing the African American experience to prominence. This reinventing and reimagining the history of American slavery is a common theme in the sub-genre called “neo-slave narratives”. This term is initially coined by Bernard Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1989), and later developed by Ashraf Rushdy in *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999). Bell defines neo-slave narratives as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). Rushdy takes a different approach in his definition of neo-slave narratives, that is, “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative” (3).

For the purposes of this project, Bell’s definition remains ill-suited in the sense that neither of the narratives that constitute the scope of this study traces the traditional trajectory from bondage to freedom. Rushdy’s definition is also limited in that it does not
include the revisionary or postmodern slave narratives that experiment with the form and conventions of the antebellum slave narratives. Rushdy, in *Remembering Generations* (2001) proposes an alternative term, what he calls as palimpsest narratives, “in which an African American subject who lives in the 1970s is forced to adopt a bi-temporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery” (5). Three of the texts I analyze in this project, namely, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) represent a contemporary subject, who unwittingly inherits the psychological trauma of his or her enslaved ancestors. The modern subjects of the aforementioned narratives also manifest physical and psychological symptoms associated with this ancestral trauma. In this context, these three novels constitute pioneering examples of palimpsest narratives. Although, Edward Jones’ *The Known World* (2003) does not fit in the definition of the genre due to its 19th century temporal frame, it is possible to argue that Jones contributes to the palimpsest narratives in documenting a profoundly radical slave experience.

Rushdy defines palimpsest as “either a parchment on which the original writing can be erased to provide space for second writing or a manuscript on which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing” (7). The metaphor of the palimpsest suggests a distinctive way of representing the past of slavery. In this view, the past and the present become interchangeable since the residual impact of the history of slavery will always remain and resurface in the present. The metaphor also embodies the revisionary practices of the writers of the genre whose fiction attempts to amend
misrepresentations of slave narratives of the antebellum era. In rewriting slave narratives, the writers assume the role of a historian seeking to discover and recover the past that has long been ignored. Redressing the apathy surrounding the history of slavery necessitates a symbolic return to the past. Thus, revisiting the antebellum era and rewriting the past becomes essential.

In reinventing the slave experience, these writers seek to reject the boundaries of the prevailing accounts of history and myth. In this way, they elaborate on what is excluded from traditional, recorded historical accounts of the dominant culture. These texts, thereby, not only enable their protagonists to embark upon a journey to an alternative, unrecorded history of slavery, but also compel readers to imagine the multiple versions of the same history, opening up a vast array of new possibilities. Thus, the project to revisit the slavery takes on a double initiative: first, to recover and “claim authority over the narrative construction of the past”, and, second, to convey the pervasive effects of historical trauma of slavery (Spaulding 2). Not only is the thematic concern of representing slavery in their works of paramount value to the writers of the genre, but the way they choose to narrate these stories is also equally crucial. In order to repudiate the existing versions of traditional history, they play with the traditional, structural conventions of the narrative form in portraying slavery. As Spaulding observes, these texts “rely on non-mimetic genres and devices in order to claim historical authority in their depiction of American slavery”, and instead of drawing from the conventional modes of representation, they “use elements of the fantastic to occupy the past, present, and, in some cases, the future simultaneously” (5). For instance, in Kindred, The
*Chaneysville Incident,* and *Stigmata,* the readers are presented with twentieth century protagonists who are confronted with their ancestral legacy of slavery in their modern lives. Since *The Known World* is set in the antebellum era, Jones represents the historical context of American slavery. However, what sets *The Known World* aside from the conventional accounts of slave narratives is Jones’ unique approach in handling the complex issue of American slavery. Jones breaks away from traditional slave narratives in creating a black slave owner, presenting a rather unconventional narrative of slavery.

It is important to remind here that although it is a known fact that some African Americans enslaved their own people during the antebellum era, representing black slave owners “became one of the implicit taboos in African American literary creation”, as Trudier Harris puts it (174). By portraying black slave owners in his fiction, Jones inverts the familiar world of race relations and situates them within a completely different context. Although he does not employ the elements of the fantastic, Jones obscures the dynamics of the master-slave relationship, which is at the core of the foundation of American slavery. In introducing a paradoxical representation of slavery, he challenges familiar conceptions and compels the reader to reimagine the conventional depictions of the history of American slavery. In addition, Jones abandons narrative realism by utilizing a non-linear narrative structure. Hence, his novel also fits in the genre of neo-slave narratives. While Butler, Bradley, and Perry write within the genre by complicating the style and narrative form of the slave narratives and incorporating supernatural elements, Jones plays the game by deconstructing the theme of slavery, and thus contributing to the original project to revise African American history.
What connects the characters in the aforementioned narratives is the invisible bond of the history of enslavement regardless of temporality and space. Hence, in these narratives, the domains of past, present, and future are significantly interconnected. There is no doubt that the collective history of slavery has a profound traumatic effect on the lives of those who live in the present. The modern, twentieth century lives of the protagonists in *Kindred, The Chaneyville Incident, and Stigmata* are intruded by experiences of a severe psychological trauma embedded in their ancestors’ history, which is inextricably bound up with the physical and psychological violence of slavery. These narratives depict “the effects of a slave past on a personal present by showing how ancestors’ lives act as a palimpsest on the lives of their contemporary progeny” (Rushdy 9). In *The Known World*, the effects of the original historical trauma can be observed through the protagonist, who, despite his slaveholder status, cannot maintain a normal life outside the confines of the traumas of enslavement. Therefore, these texts become insightful tools to speculate on the residual effects of historical trauma of American slavery. In order to bring a new perspective to the current interpretations of the texts that engage the historical trauma of slavery, the connection between twentieth century African American identity and the historical trauma of slavery should be further scrutinized by an in-depth investigation of the realm of psychological trauma that hovers between past and present.
Psychoanalytic Models of Trauma

Trauma is defined as “…a term used freely either of physical injury caused by some direct external force or of psychological injury caused by some extreme emotional assault” (Reber 76). Here, it becomes essential to explain the difference between primary and secondary trauma. The definition given above outlines the meaning of traditional primary trauma. We can talk about a primary trauma if the victim has directly been exposed to a traumatic event. Secondary trauma, however, is different from a direct or primary trauma in the sense that the victim has not experienced or witnessed the traumatic event, yet exhibits the same symptoms and suffers from a psychical disintegration of self. It is not possible to discuss a direct trauma in the narrative texts that will be discussed here given the setting and temporality of the twentieth century with the exception of The Known World. However, a psychic ancestral connection entraps characters into the original trauma of enslavement, evoking the images of the Middle Passage. In this way, the initial trauma of enslavement reinvents itself in these texts. This project focuses on this psychological dimension of trauma that is transmissible and demonstrates that Butler, Bradley, Perry and Jones convey this particular aspect of trauma in Kindred, The Chaneysville Incident, Stigmata and The Known World.

Cathy Caruth, Ruth Leys and other trauma theorists analyze the recurrent nature of a psychic trauma and its long-term effects on the subsequent generations. To borrow from Caruth, a traumatic experience is defined as “a response to an event that is outside the
range of the usual human experience” (3). There is no doubt that the Middle Passage and the institution of slavery are inexplicable human experiences that left indelible scars in the African American psyche. Caruth’s conception of trauma is relevant to this study in that she links psychological trauma to the idea of possession when she explains the condition of trauma as “being possessed by an image or an event” (4-5). Thus, traumatized people are incessantly haunted by the weight of the past events. Entrapped in the temporality of the unassimilated traumatizing event, these individuals “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). For the traumatized individual, “trauma is such an incomprehensible event that defies all representation” (Caruth 153-154). If it is impossible to represent or master traumatic events in one’s lifetime, then the impact of the trauma is transmitted to unwitting subsequent generations, whose lives are shaped by the residual effects of this ancestral trauma. As Ruth Leys observes, “if history is a symptom of trauma it is a symptom which must not, indeed cannot, be cured but simply transmitted, passed on” (269). Along similar lines, by stressing the transmission of trauma across space and time, Caruth suggests that a trauma experienced by one generation can be unconsciously passed on to ensuing generations. Thus, in her model of trauma, one person’s trauma is capable of haun
ting future generations just like a ghost returning from its grave to haunt the present. Even though there is not a direct connection to the traumatic event itself, ensuing generations involuntarily inherit the trauma of their ancestors, which takes us back to the concept of secondary trauma.
Transgenerational Trauma

The origins of the notion of transgenerational transmission of trauma can be found in Sigmund Freud’s early writings that suggest the intergenerational transmission of traumatic experience. Demonstrating this phenomenon in his *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud discusses the ancient trauma of the Jews, and explains how the tradition of monotheism was passed on to future generations. He also emphasizes the insistent return of the traumatic event, which is “against the will of the one it inhabits” (50), pointing to the unrestrained nature of transmission of the traumatic event. In addition, Freud claims that, “the archaic heritage of human beings comprises not only dispositions but also subject matter-memory traces of the experience of earlier generations” (99). In this perspective, the progeny not only inherits characteristic traits of their precursors, but also possesses the memory traces of them. This view becomes especially relevant when considered in the light of what Toni Morrison defines as “rememory” (35-36). Morrison’s notion of rememory also harbors the possibility of inheriting and recollecting another’s memories. For Morrison, the process of rememorying is never an individual, but a collective experience between individuals who share a common past of slavery.

In a similar vein, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok investigate the phenomenon of transgenerational possession, which is considered to be the involuntary transmission of trauma across generations. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, Abraham and Torok argue that descendants of oppressed generations “unwittingly inherit the psychic substance of their
ancestors’ lives” (166). Their study introduces the concepts of the “unspeakable family secrets” and “transgenerational phantom”, which is the haunting of ghostly figures intruding the present lives of their descendants. In their view of trauma, an undisclosed family secret, which takes the form of a transgenerational phantom, is transmitted to an unwitting progeny. With the incorporation of this transgenerational phantom, the subject manifests symptoms that are attributed to the traumatic family secret.

Each of the four texts that constitute the subject of this study revolves around the haunting return of an undisclosed secret in the family line, which consumes the lives of protagonists. Rushdy asserts that, “Slavery, in American intellectual discourse, is not only a metaphor, a sin, a cancer, a crime, or a shame, although it is also all of those things. Slavery is the family secret of America” (2). Slavery is the shared historical trauma that continues to affect African Americans regardless of their temporal distance from the antebellum era with all the horrors it represents. The unspeakable atrocities of slavery, never fully assimilated in the conscious mind, generate transgenerational phantoms that possess the contemporary subject. Abraham and Torok suggest that transgenerational phantoms do not physically return from their graves, but they pass along their unfinished business, or family secrets to the upcoming generations (167). In *Stigmata*, however, the transgenerational phantoms of the protagonist’s ancestors physically return and are lodged in her body, inflicting their pain upon her. The subsequent generations are not only given the burden to complete the unfinished tasks of their ancestors, but also inherit their memories and pain. The inherited ancestral pain remains as a haunting presence in the descendants’ consciousness until they symbolically
confront the specters of the past. In *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, by means of supernatural
devices of time travel and reincarnation, the protagonists are enabled to physically revisit
the times of slavery and reunite with their ancestors. Slavery, in this sense, operates as the
“phantom of a past that needs to be revised in order to be revered” (Rushdy 2). Thus,
returning to the original trauma can be seen as an effort to bridge the past, present, and
the future, which becomes essential in establishing therapeutic ancestral connections
across time and space.

In the desire to return to the antebellum era, one can find the motive to heal the
open wounds inflicted by American slavery. Bearing witness to all the horrors and
remediying the lost past can also be understood to be a haunting unfinished task of the
ancestors. The most urgent unfinished task for African Americans is the inability to show
any kind of reaction to the original psychic trauma of enslavement and the horrors of the
Middle Passage. Freud and Breuer, in *Studies in Hysteria*, explain how this intense effect
of the trauma remains in the unconscious despite the time’s healing effect. Freud and
Breuer write:

> Whether a memory fades or rids itself of affect depends on several factors. Of the greatest importance is *whether or not there was an energetic reaction to the affecting event*. By reaction we mean here the whole set of voluntary and involuntary reflexes – from tears to acts of revenge – into which, as experience shows, emotions are discharged…If the reaction is
suppressed the effect remains bound up with the memory. (11 emphasis in original)

Since it is impossible to resist the violence and oppression, the ancestors pass this incomplete task to their descendants, and thus these memories of the painful past are transmitted transgenerationally. The transgenerational approach to traumatic legacies finds evocative expression in the aforementioned neo-slave narratives. The transgenerational trauma theory also proves useful in tracing the ways in which the characters in *Kindred*, *The Chaneysville Incident*, *Stigmata* and *The Known World* display symptoms of ancestral trauma, which can also illuminate their inevitable confrontation with the historical moment of American slavery.

Vamik Volkan’s study on the relationship between a massive ancestral trauma and its psychological effects on individuals and groups haunted by this trauma emphasizes the significance of shared experiences of catastrophe in the formation of a large group trauma. He demonstrates that in incidents where the traumatized group is rendered helpless and passive in the face of a trauma, the original trauma keeps repeating itself generationally. Volkan’s concept of the transgenerational transmission of trauma is precisely linked to pioneering research on the second and third generations of Holocaust survivors and other individuals exposed to the trauma of the Third Reich. In *The Third Reich in the Unconscious* (2002), Volkan, Ast, and Greer further investigate the phenomenon of transgenerational transmission of trauma, and analyze the residual effects of a historical trauma such as the Holocaust. They argue that the images of the Holocaust
era are also transmissible and suggest the possibility of applying this thesis to the study of all large groups affected by a shared trauma. Volkan, Ast, and Greer contend that there is a direct connection between the Holocaust survivors and the subsequent generations’ experience of the same trauma. They write:

traumatized persons may, most consciously, oblige their descendants to resolve the directly traumatized generation’s unfinished psychological tasks relating to the shared trauma- reversing helplessness, for example, or mourning various losses. Images connected with the shared trauma then become involved in what is called transgenerational transmission. (3 emphasis in original)

Volkan’s theory of transgenerational transmission of trauma can be applied to African Americans whose ancestors were victimized by a massive trauma, namely the traumas of the Middle Passage as well as subsequent forms of violence and oppression of enslavement. Descendents of former slaves were never directly exposed to the trauma of slavery in their contemporary lives. Nevertheless, they are, as Volkan, Ast and Greer emphasize in another context, “caught up in a sort of time warp involving past traumatic events” (4). In this approach, the subsequent generations are seen as being held captive in the past by an invisible force demanding a voice through which to transfer its pain. The authors’ emphasis is on the effects of the shared trauma on the identity of the certain individuals that belong to the large group who was rendered helpless against the severity of the original trauma. Their work focuses on the transmissibility of the certain mental
representations of the initial trauma, which is crucial to the project at hand. *Indelible Legacies: Transgenerational Trauma and Therapeutic Ancestral Reconciliation in Kindred, The Chaneysville Incident, Stigmata, and The Known World* endeavors to articulate how memories of the Middle Passage and enslavement translate themselves across generations utilizing the transgenerational transmission theories of the Holocaust.

The representation of trauma in literature is an increasingly wide range of study and scholarship. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, suggest that traumatic history is “a history which is essentially not over, a history whose repercussions are not simply omnipresent (whether consciously or not) in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still evolving…in today’s political, historical, cultural and artistic scene” (xiv). Therefore, depictions of trauma in literature focus on this unfinished aspect of history, which continues to haunt the present. Moreover, by representing the collective history of oppression and shared trauma in their narratives, the writers are able to bridge multiple generations. In regards to the literature of the collective trauma, the most studied era is the Holocaust, which continues to be a pervasive area of research. The research pertaining to the particular moment of rupture in African American history, however, has not been expanded to scrutinize the subsequent residual trauma of the Middle Passage and enslavement, or their current implications on the twentieth century African American Literature. The literary representation of this horrific moment is crucial since the initial trauma and the inner conflict of enslaved ancestors are “unconsciously displaced onto the figures in the present” (Greenson 171), creating a repetitive pattern of traumatization.
This study goes beyond previous studies in traditional trauma and its representation in African American Literature by considering the transgenerational transmission approach and analyzing the narrative texts under this new radical perspective, thus contributing the project of filling gaps in the African American cultural history.

**The Relevance of Transgenerational Trauma Theories to Neo-Slave Narratives**

While there are quite a number of studies that revolve around individual traumas, none of these critical examinations has established an explicit link with the transgenerational trauma theories’ applicability to African Americans, who are affected by the collective trauma of enslavement. Moreover, the studies on the notion of transgenerational haunting in African American literature have been limited with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). My discussion of transgenerational trauma in contemporary African American literature attempts to formulate a new theory of loss and healing in African American literature. No extensive study encompassing the theories of transgenerational trauma and their applicability to *Kindred, The Chaneysville Incident, Stigmata* and *The Known World* has been conducted. In addition, while in *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, the protagonists are African American females, in *The Chaneysville Incident* and *The Known World* the readers are presented with their male counterparts. In most of the neo-slave narratives, the trauma of enslavement is examined from a black female viewpoint. *Indelible Legacies* discusses texts that reimagine slavery not only from the
perspective of the black enslaved female, but also offers a comparative analysis of the experiences of the male protagonists. The notion of transgenerational transmission of trauma and unconscious transfers of memory in the selected neo-slave narratives have not been thoroughly analyzed and developed. In fact, much of the literature concentrates on the traumatic effects of chattel slavery on enslaved African Americans and oppression embedded in the institution of slavery, yet the secondary trauma agonizing the subsequent generations and psychodynamic factors belonging to these groups are scarcely ever considered.

Sinikka Grant, in *Haunted Heritage: History, Memory, and Violence in the Drama of August Wilson, and Suzen-Lori Parks* (2006), also analyzes the notion of transgenerational haunting; however, her research remains mainly focused on the ghostly figures and the purpose of haunting in African American theatre. Her study examines how trauma and haunting are related, yet she does not expand upon the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma utilizing the extensive work of Vamik Volkan, Esther Rashkin and Maurice Apprey. Kathleen Brogan’s *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity* (1998) is another study focusing on the notion of haunting in literature. Yet, her study fails to include the works of African American Literature that explore the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma, for she only traces the notion of haunting in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Brogan’s study also fails to relate the issue of haunting to the theories of transgenerational trauma. Instead, Brogan discusses traditional trauma theories, which are only applicable to victims of a direct trauma.
In *Family Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Narrative* (1992), Rashkin extensively utilizes Abraham and Torok’s writings on the transgenerational haunting, phantom and family secrets. Her application of Abraham and Torok’s theories to the analysis of narrative literature greatly informed my readings of the texts that follow. However, my application of Abraham and Torok’s theories differ from Rashkins’ in that she selects four short stories to explore the implications of their concepts, while my dissertation concentrates on four contemporary African American novels. In this context, Rashkin does not trace the element of transgenerational haunting caused by the horrors of enslavement in her study. Despite the similarity of the theoretical concepts driven from Abraham and Torok’s approach, Rashkins’ emphasis is on the rhetoric and linguistic concealments of phantoms, whereas for my purposes, the idea of the transgenerational phantom and family secrets is utilized to delineate certain behavior patterns and actions of the protagonists. Additionally, Apprey, an African American psychoanalyst, is largely absent from current scholarship in African American Literature. His work illustrates the correlation between the trauma of the Middle Passage and enslavement and the black-on-black crimes in African American society. Therefore, his theories are also extremely relevant to the analyses of certain characters in selected novels for this project.

This dissertation begins with the trajectory of the theoretical assumptions of my analyses. In chapter one, drawing on psychoanalytic theories of traditional and transgenerational trauma, the framework of my study is established. Through an in-depth study of the intersections of history, memory and trauma in African American literature, the concept of the transgenerational trauma is expanded and the predominant themes in
Holocaust literature and African American literature are discussed. In this chapter, by utilizing the aforementioned theories, the mechanisms through which massive historical traumas stay alive in the collective consciousness of affected groups are investigated. In what follows, each four narratives are examined in the order of publication.

Chapter 2 explores Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and discusses Butler’s use of anachronistic time sequence as a powerful literary device to depict the original trauma. *Kindred* is “a sort of inverse slave narrative” as it is presented as the movement from freedom to enslavement” (Steinberg 467). Through time travel, Butler sends her protagonist Dana to antebellum Maryland, where she is exposed to the violence of slavery. Yet, this time she is offered a chance to reverse the trauma. Therefore, she is able to alter the past and realize a different outcome.

Chapter 3 explores David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*. It seeks to portray how the protagonist, John Washington, suffers from the family secret of mass suicides that haunts him in his present life. Through a close reading of the novel, the ways in which John embraces the history of his ancestors and reconstructs their forgotten history are illustrated. John, as a historian, shows the fallacies of the conventional historical depictions by discovering the hidden stories of his grandfather’s experiences as a slave. Just like Dana of *Kindred* and Lizzie of *Stigmata*, John is oblivious to his slave ancestry and the implications of his past on his present life until he decides to investigate the death of his father.

The fourth chapter discusses Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata*. Similar to the protagonists of *Kindred* and *The Chaneysville Incident*, the protagonist of *Stigmata*,
Lizzie, finds out that she has not escaped her ancestral past of slavery. Although all of the protagonists are born free, they realize that they are possessed by the traumatic history of slavery. In *Stigmata*, Perry also incorporates the elements of the fantastic into her narrative in order to send her protagonist to the original site of trauma. Like Dana in *Kindred*, Lizzie is also haunted by the traumatic memories of her slave ancestors. Likewise, Lizzie is handed down the task of resolving the unfinished business of her maternal line, and thus, she is repeatedly subjected to the haunting visions of her great-great grandmother and grandmother. She assumes the character of her foremothers who were enslaved and considers herself to be the reincarnations of these former slaves. In *Stigmata*, it is also possible to investigate how the trauma of her ancestors manifests itself in Lizzie’s psychopathology despite the disparities in time.

Chapter 5, focuses on Edward Jones’ *The Known World*, and explores how the symptoms of the trauma of slavery lead to dysfunctional relationships patterns. When exposed to a mass collective trauma, the effect of the original trauma shows itself in various ways in subsequent generations. Henry Townsend, a black slave owner, displays one of the most prevalent symptoms of possessing a traumatic history that is, identifying with the oppressor and tendency towards violence. Therefore, trauma theories especially become useful for an in-depth analysis of Henry who eventually identifies with his white master, and oppresses his own race.

The theories of transgenerational trauma opens up a multitude of questions that this project seeks to answer: Despite the contemporary historical era they belong to, how do the characters in these narratives experience and repeat the trauma of their distant
past? How do descendants of the enslaved share the same image of the traumatic event in their contemporary lives? What are certain mechanisms at play in passing the original trauma to the subsequent generation? Is there a psychic ancestral tie that binds the generations that share a collective trauma? Why do the writers situate trauma derived from the horrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement within the center of their twentieth century narratives? Do the characters play and replay the scenes of the primal trauma so as to master it and to achieve a sense of liberation by claiming their past? Is it possible to reverse the sense of helplessness that defines the initial trauma by representing it in the twentieth century?
CHAPTER 1

Theoretical Perspectives on Transgenerational Trauma

Before proceeding with a comprehensive analysis of the pathology of ancestral trauma that anchors the 20th century protagonists down into the depths of the terrors of the Middle Passage and slavery, the theoretical framework for my approach and its implications on this project will be established. As previously stated, my research is extensively informed by psychoanalytic approaches to the study of trauma. Therefore, this chapter is devoted to an in-depth discussion of trauma theories and their relevance to the analysis of *Kindred*, *The Chaneysville Incident*, *Stigmata*, and *The Known World*. In the subsequent chapters, close readings of the novels introduced above will be provided to demonstrate how various aspects of transgenerational trauma pervade the fiction of Octavia E. Butler, David Bradley, Phyllis Alesia Perry and Edward P. Jones.

Trauma theory emphasizes the importance of two concepts in a traumatic experience; the concept of time and geographical locus. In the case of a direct trauma, a temporal gap and a sense of dislocation follow the traumatic experience. Therefore, in order to access and represent the original trauma, revisiting the site of trauma is deemed necessary. However, given the incomprehensible nature of trauma, this proves to be a very difficult task to achieve. As Kali Tal observes, “Accurate representation of trauma can never be
achieved without recreating the event, since by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ conception” (15). Taking on the problematic task of representing historical trauma, Jones, Butler, Bradley and Perry stage the original scene of displacement in their narratives so as to address the issue of psychological wounding across generations. Hence, recreating the ancestral traumatic experiences and revisiting the Middle Passage as the site of historical loss become pervasive in the works of Jones, Butler, Bradley and Perry. Although these authors employ divergent modes of narration, themes, and characters, the pages of their fiction express a sense of connection across time and space.

In a traumatic experience, as Dominick LaCapra articulates, “the distance between here and there, then and now, collapses” (89). Thus, conceptions of temporality and spatiality become particularly essential in depicting trauma in contemporary fictions of Butler, Bradley, Perry and Jones. The ruptures of time and space manifested in their narratives, then, is profoundly representative of the historical legacy of slavery and the enforced separation from Africa. Additionally, with the disappearing boundaries of time and space, there arises a new possibility to connect contemporary characters to their historical counterparts. One could ascribe this notion of timelessness in a trauma to Yael Danieli’s concept of “fixity”. As Danieli explicates, “Exposure to trauma causes a

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1 Historical trauma is described as “trauma that is multigenerational and cumulative over time; it extends beyond the life span” (E. Duran, B. Duran, Brave Heart, and Horse-Davis 342). The response to historical trauma is explained “as a constellation of features in reaction to the multigenerational, collective, historical, and cumulative psychic wounding over time, both over the life span and across generations” (qtd. in Duran et al. 342). In the case of African Americans, the unresolved trauma of American slavery, then, becomes a historical, collective and cultural trauma, the impacts of which are passed down from one generation to another. Due to this inheritance of the psychic wound, the descendants carry within them the weight of the painful history of the preceding generations.
rupture, a possible regression, and a state of being ‘stuck’ in this free flow, which I have called fixity” (7 emphasis in original). It is, in fact, these states of fixity and regression, which entrap contemporary subjects into the trauma of their ancestors. In other words, while the temporal and spatial fixity these subjects experience intensify the feeling of displacement, the regressive dimension of the traumatic experience becomes a pathway from the present day to the past, transporting them back to the horrors of the antebellum era.

Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic concept of nachträglichkeit, which he refers to in his The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), "Little Hans" (1909), and his famous "The Wolf Man" case, is pivotal in identifying two separate moments in the constitution of a psychic trauma. The term "nachträglich" has two meanings. The first meaning is related with time and has a meaning of later, secondary or belatedness. The second meaning of the term, significantly, denotes a movement from past to future. Therefore, in a psychic trauma, the notion of nachträglichkeit signifies a secondary moment in a trauma that reinforces the idea that the original stimulus in a trauma repeats itself. As Jean Wyatt notes, “In the nachträglich temporal structure, the arrow of time moves simultaneously in two directions” (197 emphasis in original). This temporal duality not only suggests a movement from present to past, but also denotes a movement from past to present. On the one hand, the traumatic past is projected into the present, and on the other, the trauma victim can project meaning backward onto the past.
In this view, temporal discontinuities, nonlinear plots, and intrusive flashbacks displayed in *Kindred, The Chaneysville Incident, Stigmata*, and *The Known World* point to the presence of a trauma that continues from one generation to another. The aforementioned narrative strategies, as Michelle Balaev asserts, “emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience” (159). These tempo-spatial manipulations thereby become the tools through which the ancestral trauma is transmitted to the present. In addition, by means of the unconventional techniques employed, the protagonists are offered the opportunity to revisit the original site of mourning and loss. More fundamentally, it is through these narrative devices that they can piece together the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage and slavery and reconstruct a future that is free from the haunting legacy of the past.

The nonlinear temporal sequence of the novels also correlates to Freud’s abreactive theory of trauma, which can be summarized as revisiting the original traumatic event in order to work it through. In this model of trauma, victims are encouraged to replay the original trauma. Yet, this time the possibility of re-experiencing it with a different outcome exists for sufferers. By returning to the primal scene of the traumatic experience, they can also construct a meaningful text out of it for themselves. Additionally, abreaction provides individuals with a means to integrate the painful past with the present. The characters in *Kindred, The Chaneysville Incident, Stigmata* also attempt to master their ancestral traumas through re-experiencing and rememorying that take place during abreaction. Thus, by employing slavery as a subject matter in their 20th and 21st century fictions, and by utilizing radical narrative devices to transport their characters
back to the times of slavery Butler, Bradley, and Perry offer the modern subject the possibility of abreacting the same scene, the devastating experience of slavery. The abreactive model proposes that traumatic experience is “repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable, yet, it is also a literal, contagious, and mummified event” (Balaev 151). This model of trauma shifts the focus from a primary, individual trauma to a secondary trauma that is entrenched in a larger context, for it encompasses a larger group of people. The timeless and contagious nature of traumatic experience with its emphasis on secondary trauma serves as the foundation for transgenerational trauma theory that also underscores the possibility of passing an ancestral trauma to an unwitting descendant.

The texts that constitute the scope of this study pose a bold challenge to the traditional depictions of American history of slavery by blurring the lines between past, present, and future. In all of these works considered, “the past returns in the present, repeating and replaying the material and psychological structures of black bondage in such a way that to speak of a past and a present as distinct temporal domains becomes difficult”, as Gregory Laski puts it (1109). The interconnectedness of multiple generations that share a past of slavery demonstrate show how the traumatic history of enslavement is still a constant resonance in the lives of contemporary subjects. For these characters, returning to the primal scene, where they have the opportunity to change the same scene with an alternative outcome, becomes essential as they gain a sense of empowerment over the past. This new version of history also has the power to revolutionize African American cultural memory and opens doors to a new sense of future that is free from the haunting shadow of the past.
Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) builds on Freud’s abreactive model of trauma and posits that trauma “is never simply one’s own” (24), thus, pointing out to the shared aspect of a traumatic experience. In a similar vein, J. Brooks Bousin explains that, “trauma affects not only the individual but also, as studies of those victimized by the Holocaust have shown, victim-survivor populations, and the effects of trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally” (8). In her analysis of the element of cultural shame and racial trauma in Morrison’s novels, Bousin draws attention to the collective aspect of a psychological trauma and situates her study of trauma within racial and cultural contexts. She also embraces an all-encompassing approach towards trauma studies, and emphasizes that a descendant can inherit symptoms of a traumatic experience of a parent or an ancestor in the case of a cultural trauma.

Psychoanalytic trauma theories provide alternative ways of investigating the legacies of past cultural traumas that manifest themselves in various forms of literature. In order to explicate the interchange between literature, history and psychoanalysis, Caruth explores Freud’s notion of traumatic repetition, and his example of “the crying wound” (8). Freud uses a literary text, Tasso’s story, in order to illustrate his notion of traumatic repetition. Caruth’s analysis of the same story, however, provides an alternative vision to that of Freud’s. To quote Caruth:

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud’s writings on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a
pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language. (4)

An interpretation of the preceding quotation indicates Caruth’s departure from an individualized view of trauma since she opts for a collective approach to trauma instead. She also explains how unknown or forgotten memories and experiences of a distant past can be evoked through literary texts. It is not one wounded psyche that is in question; it is the shared void of millions that is to be addressed through literature. This is the reason why contemporary writers deliberately open the old wounds by recreating the original sites of trauma. The fictional characters, as well as the modern day reader, then, are left with the task of piecing together the fragments of the past, thus transforming these painful memories into a meaningful narrative.

Nicholas Rand, in his editorial introduction to *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), also reinforces the significant role of narrating untold stories in integrating traumatic experiences of the past into memorable life stories. Rand believes that “we must be able to remember the past, recall what was taken from us, understand and grieve over what we have lost to trauma, and so find and renew ourselves” (13). Thus, instead of concealing behind a dark veil of the painful past, one should step forward and reclaim history no matter how agonizing it is. It is through confronting the past, remembering what is lost,
and mourning for the losses that one can restore a sense of self. If we turn our back to history, and choose to neglect the lessons we can take from it, we face the threat of becoming an accomplice to actual perpetrators of a crime. On the contrary, injustices, horrible moments of our past, and crimes of humanity such as slavery should be remembered and shared in order to refrain from repeating the same mistakes. There is no doubt that the facts of the American history of slavery are likely to be ignored or even falsified in order to avoid the deep sense of shame they carry. However, the dehumanizing institution of slavery, combined with the ensuing manifest and subtle forms of racism, unquestionably affect the lives of a whole nation. It is for this reason that this reality of human history cannot simply be forgotten.

Unveiled facts of history also prove to be significantly useful mediums for examining the legacy of a collective trauma, such as the African American experience of slavery. Within this context, the accurate representations of the traumatic past not only assist the initial and secondary victims in grieving over their losses, but also function as a powerful source of inspiration from which they can draw strength and encouragement. Through immortalizing these stories of suffering and survival, these populations can regenerate an ancestral memory and reclaim their past. Additionally, they retain a sense of connection to their roots and form a cultural identity around what is lost to history. In this sense, the presence of the shared trauma of slavery not only plays a vital role in uniting African Americans on the same cultural platform, but also provides them with a sense of belonging. In regards to the notion of the shared trauma, Caruth asserts that “In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as
a simply understanding of the pasts of others, but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves” (11). Caruth’s contention is that, by returning to the traumas we have chosen to forget, we can create a meaningful dialogue out of the long forgotten history. Furthermore, narrating the trauma, passing the unspeakable story to others can also function as an initial step towards mastering the trauma.

Along similar lines, Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), also points out to the healing effect of telling the story of trauma. For Herman, as well as Caruth and many other psychiatrists, the process of healing can only start when the unspeakable is finally released from the unconscious, and the veiled truth is finally revealed. In retelling of the trauma story, the original traumatic event is evoked, and the sufferer experiences a sense of empowerment. This second time, this individual is also granted the power to alter his or her traumatic memories, and react to vicissitudes that render him or her invisible. Uncovering the traumatic experience also enables the victim to confront what he or she has suppressed in his past.

Recalling and retelling the trauma story, then, serve as a reconstructive stage through which the victim restores him or herself. Yet, it should be noted that listening to a trauma story, “involves an understanding of the fundamental injustice of the traumatic experience, and the need for a resolution that restores some sense of justice” (Herman 135). Thus, the role of the listener is not only to bear witness to the traumatic event, but also to assist the victim in unburdening his repository of fear, anger, and other trauma induced emotions. Through this process of telling, the psychic charge of the sufferer may
be weakened and gradually released. In order for the healing effect to take place, the listener should “share the burden of pain” (Herman 8). However, the victim’s verbalization of the traumatic story is not without risks, for the listener is also susceptible to the traumatizing impact of the past experience in this process. In trauma theory, this phenomenon is named as “traumatic countertransference” or “vicarious traumatization”. Laurie Ann Pearlman and Karen W. Saakvitne describe vicarious traumatization as:

A process, not an event. It includes our affects and defenses against the affects. That is, it is our strong reaction of grief and rage and outrage which grow over time as we hear repeatedly about the torture, humiliation, betrayal people perpetuate against others, and also our sorrow, our numbing, and our deep senses of loss which follow those reactions. (32)

When one bears witness to traumatic events of others by listening to or reading about them, he or she is also exposed to the traumatizing impact of the same experience. As we react to these memories with anger and sorrow, we become involved in the suffering of the teller. Hence, it is possible to claim that traumatic history of a sufferer has the power to infect others. In a case of vicarious traumatization, then, the listener is not immune to the contagious nature of the trauma in question, and during this interaction, he or she may develop an emphatic reaction to traumatic memories or experiences of the trauma victim. This phenomenon, that is also known as second traumatization, is usually observed in therapists or clinicians that deal with trauma survivors. Ruth Leys, in Trauma: A Genealogy (2000), notes that, “The transmission of the unrepresentable…an ineluctable
process of infection… implicates those of us who were not there by making us…
participants and co-owners of the traumatic event’” (269). In spite of the fact that the
listener was not physically present at the original moment of trauma, he or she may still
experience the overpowering effects of this event.

As far as traumatic experiences of slavery are concerned, it is plausible to argue
that in trauma narratives that deal with slavery and its aftermath, the redemptive power of
vicarious traumatization is communicated to the reader through retelling of the trauma. In
this context, the contemporary reader shares the agony of enslavement depicted in the
pages of the narrative and takes active part in reconstructing fragmented memories that
are concealed within the text. In this way, the effects of this collective pain are spared to
the reader as he or she wanders through the pages of the narrative. In this manner, the
narrative text becomes an agent through which the past trauma of enslavement is
transmitted to the reader. The issue of victimization to another’s trauma is also at work
when the traumatic experiences of an ancestor are unconsciously transmitted to a
descendant. The descendant not only suffers from the impact of the initial trauma, but
also manifests symptoms of the same event. Although these individuals have not had any
direct contact with the aggressor, they are still vulnerable to the same victimization that
has affected their ancestors.

Based on the assumption that a massive trauma is contagious in nature, and that it
can affect multiple generations, transgenerational trauma theory explains the mechanisms
through which traumatic experience is passed on from one generation to the next.
Echoing Caruth, Balaev expands upon the notion of transgenerational trauma that is
deeply woven into the psyche of people whose ancestors have endured a destructive trauma. Balaev writes:

The theory indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience or memory. (152)

From the preceding statement, it would appear that transgenerational model of trauma not only accounts for the transmission of the effects of a historical trauma, but also historical grievances of cultural memory across successive generations. In this view, historical traumatic experiences and memories associated with these events are seen as contagious entities haunting the modern subject despite his or her remote proximity to the initial trauma. This approach proves to be most appropriate when it is situated within the context of collective history of slavery, suffering, and persistent racial discrimination. Hence, the mental anguish represented in the novels to be analyzed, is not bound to an individual trauma that only concerns the victim, but to the collective trauma\(^2\) of the

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\(^2\) Kai Erikson’s *Everything in Its Path* (1976) is an analysis of the collective trauma emanating from the Buffalo Creek Flood, which occurred in West Virginia, in 1972. In this case study of the consequences of the Buffalo Creek disaster, Erikson observes the devastating impacts of the flood on community. He explains the difference between “individual trauma” and “collective trauma” in following terms: “By *individual trauma* I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively… By *collective trauma*, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with ‘trauma.’ But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer
Middle Passage and enslavement that continue to haunt multiple generations of African Americans. Since the unresolved conflict of the predecessors is unconsciously transmitted to the ensuing generations, the historical legacy of slavery, intensified with “continuing pattern[s] of abuse”, continue to plague the modern subject in various ways (Erikson 457).

**Inescapable Return of the Wounded Psyche**

The psychoanalytical theories of French psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok focus on the intersections of literature and psychoanalysis, thus present a new interpretive lens through which to analyze the causes of psychical suffering in novels that deal with trauma. Their outstanding work, *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), offers invaluable insight into the concepts of historical grievance and ancestral pain. Their unique approach to ancestral trauma has provided a valuable focal point from which to delineate the behavior and motivation of the characters that are discussed in the subsequent chapters. Abraham and Torok’s notions of “transgenerational haunting”, and “cryptonomy” are also significantly pertinent to my study of the transmission of the historical trauma of slavery through the collective unconscious. Abraham and Torok explain how “intimate recesses of the mind that have for one reason or another been denied expression” remain buried in the unconscious to be transmitted to a descendant
(4). This psychic territory is aptly called a crypt. Abraham and Torok define a crypt as a space in the human psyche where all painful memories, tormenting experiences and secrets are stored. This psychic realm, inside of which unspeakable secrets are deposited, is assumed to be capable of passing the hidden contents of the psyche to the offspring of a victimized generation. In this way, the initial trauma is handed down from the parent to the child, and to the next generations, thereby creating a chain of generational victimization.

In a similar vein, Gabriele Schwab, in *Haunting Legacies* (2010), explores how “violent histories generate psychic deformations passed on from generation to generation” (3). Schwab also advocates the theories of Abraham and Torok when she emphasizes, “the damages of violent histories can hibernate in the unconscious, only to be transmitted to the next generation like an undetected disease” (3). It would not be wrong to claim that since the victims of slavery and racial abuse were unable to reveal the humiliation, violence, and pain they have experienced, the remnants of these painful memories were stored in an inaccessible part of their minds. These fragments, however, reappear in the psyche of their descendants, and haunt them like a phantom that can affect “several generations and determine the fate of an entire family line” (Abraham and Torok 140). It is only when the buried contents of the crypt are decoded and worked through, that the symptoms of the trauma start to be lifted.

Abraham and Torok’s theory of “transgenerational haunting”, or “transgenerational phantom” aptly conveys how individuals can “unwittingly inherit the psychic substance
of their ancestors’ lives” (166). Furthermore, as Rand postulates, the symptoms of a trauma that are observed in the descendants of a traumatized parent or ancestor may spring from “psychic conflicts, traumas, or secrets” of their ancestors or parents (166). It is appropriate to make the distinction between an intergenerational trauma and transgenerational trauma here. An intergenerational trauma is the case of a trauma where the children of a traumatized individual unconsciously inherit the trauma of their parents, whereas in a case of a transgenerational trauma, the effects of the original trauma of an ancestor have been sustained over multiple generations. While *The Known World* and *The Chaneysville Incident* can be considered to be exceptional examples to delineate the dynamics of an intergenerational trauma, given the generational gap between the protagonists and their ancestors, in the analyses of *Kindred* and *Stigmata*, the theory of transgenerational trauma become more applicable.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of Abraham and Torok’s contribution to the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma, lies in their idea of psychic haunting. As Abraham and Torok explain, “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (171). Hence, their concept of haunting is dramatically different from a literal return of the dead. Yet, the underlying idea is parallel to that of a ghost story in which the dead, who suffered unrelievedly due to an injustice during their

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3 Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger defines intergenerational transmissions as “conscious…assimilated... transmissions thought and spoken about between grandparents, parents and children”, while she suggests that transgenerational transmissions are “secrets...hidden events which are sometimes banned even from thought” (92). For Schutzenberger, transgenerational transmissions are passed down from generation to generation without being thought about or assimilated. Marianne Hirsch, on the other hand, considers “familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation” as an example of intergenerational transmission, while she believes “National/political and cultural/archival memory” to be paradigms of transgenerational transmission (110).
lifetime, come back to life to seek justice. Despite the common reaction to a psychological trauma with secrecy and silence, unrevealed secrets and a lifetime of suffering refuse to be buried with the dead. While the physical body of a tormented soul remains underground, the injustice and pain that lie submerged in the depths of history, eventually surface. In order to put these restless souls to rest, the descendants have to finish their ancestors’ unfinished business by revisiting the trauma, thereby breaking the silence that surrounds it. This phantom, in fact, is nothing more than the embodiment of “the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence” (Abraham and Torok 168). Giving a voice to this historical trauma to reveal the unspeakable, therefore, becomes essential in dealing with unresolved grief that affects consecutive generations.

Silence in a case of a collective trauma can be seen as pernicious, for it clearly indicates the perpetuation of the cycle of victimization. It is impossible to overcome the overwhelming feeling of helplessness unless these experiences of inconceivable horror are communicated to others. As Bruno Bettelheim asserts, “What cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest; and if it is not, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation” (qtd. in Danieli 5). Therefore, instead of opting for silence after a traumatic event, sufferers must engage in the act of speaking. If the traumatic experience is not authenticated, the impact of the trauma will remain intact as an omnipresent entity in the lives of ensuing generations. Countering the “conspiracy of silence” by means of speaking through the pain, then, becomes indispensable for “intrapsychic integration and healing” (Danieli 4). As long as these experiences of abuse, cultural and material losses
remain buried inside the depths of the psyche, the impact of these immense losses will continue to haunt numerous generations.

Grappling with Ancestral Trauma: Mourning and Melancholia

In a very general sense, both mourning and melancholia can be considered to be reparative channels through which the affected populations remedy the impact of the trauma. Volkan, Ast and Greer relate their concept of the transgenerational trauma to Freud’s concept of melancholia. Recent scholarship on literary accounts of African American psyche has extensively utilized the psychoanalytic trauma theories, and Freud’s theories of melancholia. In his famous 1917 essay, “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud considers melancholia as a neurosis which is different from a healthy sense of mourning. While the former denies the repudiation of the lost object, the latter would relinquish it. In a case of melancholia, the loss is evoked by constructing an identity out of the continuous consumption of that loss. The theory of Freudian melancholia, then, can be read under a new light in relation to contemporary African American literature. That is to say that, Freudian melancholia can prove the existence of psychic connections between descendants and ancestors by emphasizing how the unresolved grief of the ancestor retains its power over future generations. If Freud’s lost object can be understood to be
the loss of millions of lives during the Atlantic slave trade, then, melancholia cannot be understood as only a source of psychic pain, but can denote resistance since melancholics are unwilling to let go of their lost object. Applying Freud’s theory of melancholia to certain racial groups, Paul Gilroy, in Postcolonial Melancholia, suggests that these individuals build identities around this loss, and form a racial identity around the loss of the traumatic moment of rupture, the journey of the Middle Passage. The protagonists of the novels that are discussed in Indelible Legacies also achieve a sense of liberation from unresolved ancestral pain they experience in their contemporary lives when they form a new identity through establishing ancestral connections across time.

Mourning can be defined as the process by which the affected person integrates the experience of loss into his or her own life. Responding to a loss with the act of mourning is crucial since it enables the victim to come to terms with the reality and accept the effects of this traumatic incident on his or her life. If the psychological process of mourning does not take place after a loss, the sufferer remains vulnerable to the impact of the tragedy. Therefore, remembering the past, recognizing what is lost, and mourning for the lost ones are necessary in the aftermath of a tragedy. As Volkan, Ast, and Greer, Jr. claim, “An individual, or a society, traumatized deliberately by ‘others’ has a tendency to ‘remain in the basement’; the sense of shame, humiliation, guilt, and helplessness may become internalized, complicating the survivors’ individual fates” (24). The metaphor of “remaining in the basement” is especially relevant in understanding the dynamics of internalization within a massive collective trauma. Herman shares with Caruth, Abraham and Torok, Rand, Volkan, Ast, and Greer, Jr. the view that breaking the destructive
pattern of silence is imperative for recovery. She asserts that by transmitting the untold stories of historical trauma, the sufferer can overcome the heavy burden of the past, and reinstate his or her identity. Furthermore, with this consciousness of historical reality, the affected populations can find ways to avoid future atrocities. Herman also considers remembrance and reconnection pivotal to the healing process in the presence of an individual as well as a collective trauma. She writes:

The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims. (1 emphasis in original)

In Herman’s view, it is hardly possible to conceal the experiences of suffering and abuse inflicted upon innocent victims, for atrocities are immutable. The irreparable harm they have suffered cannot be reversed or compensated. In spite of the collective attempt to take shelter in the defense mechanisms of denial and amnesia, victims cannot keep their painful memories concealed. These experiences, marked with brutal inhumanity, have to be remembered so that the dark veil surrounding this psychological trauma can be removed. Herman advocates the idea that the silenced, unspeakable truth should be
spoken so as to transcend the reenactment of trauma and reverse the cycle of generational suffering. As Schwab contends, “the only way to avoid the fixation on past violence and injuries is to bring their traces into the present” (6). In this view, recreating and reenacting the transgenerational trauma in their literary texts enable Butler, Bradley, Perry and Jones to emancipate their subjects from the haunting legacy of slavery. In doing so, they also offer the contemporary reader alternative visions regarding the ineradicable history of enslavement.

The aforementioned theorist’s engagement with silence, and gaps in a traumatic experience significantly coincides with Caruth’s view of psychological trauma as “the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world” (4). Therefore, there is a rupture at the center of trauma that marks a void, or alternatively, an absence. As Caruth maintains, “[T]he impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” (9). Within the context of the ongoing effects of the history of slavery, this absence at the heart of trauma can be considered as a manifestation of tragic cultural loss that owes its roots to the experience of the Middle Passage and its tragic aftermath. This irrevocable loss refuses to exist within the boundaries of a single place or time since its traumatizing effects are still omnipresent in the lives of the victims and their descendants alike.

As seen from this perspective, the integration of a trauma calls for two separate strategies. Each strategy attempts to obliterate the impact of the traumatic history in its own unique way. For Jones, Butler, Bradley and Perry, then, representing the trauma of
slavery in their literary texts entails a twofold objective. That is to say, by restaging the initial trauma, they attempt to complete the unfinished mourning process of their ancestors by remembering, accepting and owning the traumatic event, thus integrating it into the present life. On the other hand, this recreation of the original site of loss allows them to build connections across time and space and form resistance to oppression. Thus, these two different responses to ancestral trauma demonstrate these authors’ endeavor to liberate their subjects from the haunting grip of the legacy of slavery.

**The Middle Passage: An Unfinished Odyssey across Generations**

Vamik Volkan, Gabriele Ast, and William Greer’s major research in *The Third Reich in the Unconscious* (2002) addresses the intersections of psychological trajectories of individual, collective, or historical traumas. Their work is mainly concerned with the long-term effects of the Holocaust, and other massive collective traumas such as wars, genocides, natural and man-made disasters. Although Volkan, Ast and Greer’s study remains merely focused on the long-term effects of the Holocaust, their investigation of societies that are massively affected by a devastating trauma makes their research significantly pertinent to the study of American slavery, and the subsequent racial, social and psychological oppression. Their findings regarding the long-term effects of the Holocaust can also be contextualized to involve other populations for whom a shared trauma has become a determinant of identity. Their studies on different contexts and
dimensions of trauma, and investigation of the psychology of traumatized societies, are also significant contributions to my analysis of the lingering legacy of the Middle Passage and slavery.

According to Volkan, Ast, and Greer in the aftermath of a massive disaster, the repercussions of the traumatic event manifest themselves in a multitude of different forms. First, the affected population might display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD, also referred to as “shell-shock” or “battle fatigue” by military personnel, is a widely recognized condition observed in combat veterans. Although it is usually associated with war veterans, the effects of PTSD can also be experienced in victims exposed to a massive disaster. The second psychological effect of a massive disaster is the formation of altered communal processes and behavior, which are equally triggered by the shared catastrophe. In this context, following an overwhelming trauma, vulnerable groups maintain strong communal ties in order to generate coping and resilience strategies to avert future trauma, and rebuild their community. The third and the least addressed impact is the transgenerational dimension of a massive trauma. Investigating transgenerational transmission of Third Reich images’ applicability to African Americans for which shared historical images and a painful collective past have influenced individual members’ psychopathology is significant for the purposes of this project. Volkan, Ast, and Greer’s explain the mechanism of transmission of intergenerational trauma as:

While each individual in a traumatized large group has his own unique identity and personal reaction to trauma, all members share the mental
representations of the tragedies that have befallen the group. Their injured self-images associated with the mental representations of the shared traumatic events are ‘deposited’ into the developing self-representation of children in the next generation as if these children will be able to mourn the loss or reverse the humiliation. Such depositing constitutes an intergenerational transmission of trauma. If the children cannot deal with what is deposited in them, they, as adults, will in turn pass the mental representation of the event to the next generation. (13)

In this view, not only the victims of the original trauma share the same mental representations of the traumatic event, but also their progeny is affected by the impact of the same event. Despite the fact that the traumatic event that generates painful memories antecedes the birth of these descendants, they are not free from the powerful grip of the past in their present lives. Since the affected populations cannot cope with the impact of this trauma in their own lifetime, its haunting memories and images are deposited and then transmitted to the subsequent generation. In this way, a vicious cycle of trauma that the subsequent generations cannot break is created. For Volkan, Ast, and Greer, historical massive traumas are far from being solely static, shared memories of the event. Rather, these traumas can be seen as:

Highly dynamic complexes of recollections, fantasies, effects, wishes, and defenses (i.e., mental representations) whose influences are transmitted over different generations. Persisting in the minds of members consciously, and unconsciously, these complexes have long life-spans- in
some cases, hundreds of years. It is this complex of mental representation that is passed to future generations, who, as ‘carriers,’ must cope with the unmastered psychological tasks given to them by their ancestors. (Volkan, Ast, and Greer 25)

Therefore, descendants of an immediately traumatized population are unconsciously handed down a psychological task, an unfinished business to be resolved. These psychological tasks, psychic cryptonyms, as Abraham and Torok call them, constitute multiple layers of psychic trauma in the affected individuals. Since descendants have never been directly exposed to the impact of the original trauma, the effects of it remain concealed, only to resurface as a latent trauma displayed in various forms of psychological revelations. It is these particular manifestations of an inherited, shared trauma that will be examined in this project. The theoretical and interpretive implications of Volkan, Ast, and Greer’s model of transgenerational transmission of trauma, and their applicability to the study of American slavery will also be further discussed to demonstrate how the characters of the texts carry the weight of their ancestors’ initial trauma and complete the psychological tasks that are unconsciously passed on to them.

As it is pointed out earlier, much of literature on the paradigm of transgenerational legacies of trauma is indebted to the studies on the long-term and intergenerational effects of the Holocaust. Yael Danieli shifts the main focus from the effects of the Holocaust to a myriad of other populations who have also been exposed to extensive traumas. Danieli reinforces the fact that only minimal attention has been paid to
these populations within the field of trauma studies. She utilizes a unique approach to connect various studies on transgenerational transmission of trauma across the world. Therefore, her study incorporates many different international perspectives of and cultural responses to a massive trauma. The experience of the Holocaust may not have a parallel among other traumatized ethnic groups. It is also highly problematic to compare the Holocaust to any other atrocity, since the heinous nature of the events calls for the acknowledgement of its uniqueness as well as its incomparability in history. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the shared legacy of an ancestral trauma also binds all the victimized groups, which can shed light on the discussions on ancestral trauma that is also observed in African American populations.

The major divergence in the experience of the Holocaust and African American slavery lies in the fact that, the period of the Nazi Holocaust lasted noticeably shorter than the institution of slavery. More significantly, the impact of American slavery did not come to an end with the mere act of the abolition of slavery. While there is a beginning, a middle, as well as an end to the period of the Nazi Holocaust, it is impossible to talk about a definite end, or a marked point of termination for the effects of American slavery. The consecutive victimization of African Americans after the abolition of slavery, coupled with oppression, discrimination and racism, persisted to cast a dark shadow on the lives of the subsequent generations. The residual trauma of ancestral slavery also continues to affect the lives of multiple generations.
It is also useful to establish parallels between the psychological trauma of indigenous peoples and that of African Americans for the purposes of this dissertation. The aspects of transgenerational trauma in indigenous peoples display characteristics of “dispossession, deprivation, and discrimination” (Danieli 12). These characteristics bear striking similarities to the experiences of the victims of American slavery in the sense that these two groups share the common denominators of a historical trauma, the subsequent racism that follows, as well as “denigration, the breaking down of culture, and denial of the most basic rights” (Raphael, Swan and Martinek 328). Another indication of transgenerational trauma in indigenous peoples that is also relevant for African Americans is what is referred to as cultural genocide. As in the case of Australian aboriginals and American Indians, African Americans also faced the threat of cultural annihilation, a process which was initiated with the tragic trajectory of the Middle Passage.

The cultural genocide of captivated Africans apparently was not the only cause of psychological wounding experienced by African Americans. The physical and spiritual dimension of the Middle Passage should also be further scrutinized in order to shed light on how the past lives of ancestors interact with that of the contemporary subject in coherent ways. The abyss of the Middle Passage unquestionably claimed millions of lives and shattered the lives of generations to follow. This unfathomable journey, which stripped the victims of their humanity, also left a burdensome heritage to the upcoming generations. For African Americans, the Middle Passage is the primary scene of a surplus of loss, destruction, and suffering. It is also the site, through which the disembodied
voices of the millions reach out to their descendants. The unimaginable emotional, physical and mental anguish that emanates from the terrors of the Middle Passage and enslavement is beyond expression and representation. Yet, the empowering images of these events will not fade until this massive trauma is acted out. As DuBois writes, “The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West” (727). In this oft-cited passage, DuBois describes the experience of involuntary transportation of millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. This journey and the arrival to the Eldorado of the West, was actually a “descent into hell” for the captured Africans, and brought nothing but pain and suffering (DuBois 727). The terror they experienced had various aspects. First of all, they all suffered from the initial trauma of displacement, since they were forcefully taken away from their motherland, families and beloved ones. The second trauma was the phase of the actual journey, during which they fell victim to emotional and physical abuse of all sorts. Cruel whippings, murders and raping of slave women were common occurrences in the slave ships. Many also suffered from contagious diseases due to the lack of sanitation facilities as well as the ill-treatment they received. As Stephanie Smallwood notes, there was no hope of going back home, for this painful journey of African human cargo “followed a relentlessly linear course: the direction of their transatlantic movement never reversed” (6). It was a one-way route without any possibility of returning home, since “they had passed the point of no return” (Smallwood
Consequently, this journey was the ultimate locus of departure for these permanently enslaved people.

In slave ships, the enslaved Africans were usually chained together in slave coffles, which rendered them powerless in the face of unimaginable inhumanities they had to endure. The iron shackles held them restrained physically, and numbed their senses. These shackles, along with many other types of tools, served the purpose of disabling the captured. Preferring death to enslavement, most of these individuals attempted suicide. These attempts of suicide were, in fact, among the many different examples of cultural resistance formed among the slaves. Some of the enslaved also mutinied against their captors. However, these intentions of mutiny were proved to be futile in most instances, and the ones who revolted were immediately disciplined by lethal punishments. Pertaining to the unspeakable violence in the slave ships, Smallwood contends that, “to understand what happened to Africans in this system of human trafficking requires us to ask precisely what kind of violence it required to achieve its end, the transformation of African captives into Atlantic commodities” (36). These enslaved people bore witness to inassimilable forms of violence not only whilst the en route to the New World, but also upon arrival to the shores of the Americas, which would mark the beginning of a lifetime of suffering. Thus, the third but not the last trauma was initiated with the slave ships’ arrivals at their destinations. The ones who could make it to the New World had to face the cruelty of the institution of slavery. Another life expected these people, “who would, in the American port, become ‘black people’, or a ‘negro race’” (Rediker 10). Despite the fact that the institution of slavery was formally
abolished with the 13th Amendment to the U. S Constitution, the effects of this traumatic period still endure in the lives of the descendants of former slaves. The initial trauma in the lives of the captured Africans was substantially caused by the Middle Passage. This trauma, then, was permeated with the institution of slavery, which denied them the basic human right to attain a normal pattern of existence. As Smallwood suggests, “The slave ship at sea reduced African captives to an existence so physically atomized as to silence all but the most elemental bodily articulation, so socially impoverished as to threaten annihilation of the self, the complete disintegration of personhood” (125). The slave ship signifies the primary rupture through which they completely lost their sense of connection to their land and people. More fundamentally, they were stripped of their authentic identities when they stepped foot in the shores of the New World, for they were immediately assigned the inferior identity of a slave.

The indelible memory of the Middle Passage along with the consequential systemic dehumanization, have thus become the source of unresolved grief for African Americans. Even after the abolition of slavery, the constant rejection they have received in the face of the white supremacist culture further stigmatized their very presence, perpetrating subsequent traumas. In addition, the psychological impact of this almost four hundred years of captivity and suffering transcended the actual victims of slavery and persisted to haunt successive generations. Although the psychological complications of this shared historical legacy vary from one person to another, the most pervasive ones can be summarized as feelings of “helplessness, shame, humiliation, and victimization” as well as assuming tasks of “displaced destruction, repair and reconstruction” (Volkan, Ast,
and Greer 24, 35). Reconstructing the past, and repairing the traumatic mental schema that sojourns in their consciousness, then, become the personal legacy of the contemporary subject. In other words, in order to overcome the severe effects of these traumatized mental images that are deposited into their unconscious, the descendants of the enslaved must bring these inherited psychological tasks to conclusion. It is essential that they achieve closure, thus, heal the open wounds.

For enslaved Africans, perhaps, the most essential unfinished task was their inability to bury their dead properly. The bodies of the slaves were simply plunged into the ocean disregarding any spiritual practice of rites, or African funeral traditions. According to African beliefs, the deceased ones would reunite with their ancestors in the afterlife if traditional mortuary procedures were employed. Apparently, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, “the most central element of mortuary practice was lacking; earth” (Smallwood 140). Since they were not provided a traditional burial, these people became lost souls, trapped in between the world of the living and the dead. As Smallwood writes:

[F]or the deceased, death at sea meant an unfulfilled journey to the grave and therefore also to the realm of the ancestors; for the kinsmen of the deceased, his death meant that a thread of the special power and protection only ancestral members of the community could provide was lost to them forever. For the collective of African captives remaining aboard...the death of one of their number left them with the burden of a tormented
soul, trapped here among them because, its migration to join the ancestors had been thwarted. (141)

Therefore, the deceased could not even find peace in death. Although they evaded the pains of slavery in death, the trajectory of the Middle Passage completely impeded the possibility of eternal rest in the ancestral realm. Having been denied a proper burial, the spirits of these deceased slaves continue to haunt the living even centuries after their death. These restless souls, then, become the transgenerational phantoms since they carry within them the unspoken. This haunting presence of the Middle Passage should be exorcised so as to liberate the trapped souls and to achieve an ancestral continuity.

The losses during this journey and its aftermath were so immense that the slave ancestors were impossible to mourn for them at the time of the trauma. Hence, this task of mourning is also passed down to their descendants who “become burdened by memories that are not their own” (Auerhahn and Laub 22). Unless the trauma handed down by the ancestors is confronted and mastered, the transmission of the historical trauma will continue to dwell in the minds of next generations. In order to repair these mental representations of the trauma, claiming cultural inheritances and completing the ancestors’ process of mourning are essential. As Smallwood emphasizes, “For many in the pioneering generations of slaves, there could be no such integration of the terror of Atlantic memory” (207). While Smallwood is right in her observation, her argument fails to consider the fact that the terror of the Atlantic memory continues to retain its emphasis not only in the memories of slave generations, but also in that of their descendants. As it
is mentioned previously, those who were not directly exposed to the massive trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery are still traumatized by their omnipresent impact, for these people possess a dual consciousness. This duality is a permanent one, “not exactly a split or a doubling but a parallel existence” (Langer 95). To be specific, these descendants inhabit two worlds, which are temporally and spatially separate, yet psychically the same. This is the reason why they can gain access to their ancestors’ trauma regardless of temporal boundaries. The trauma of the Atlantic memory “cannot come to closure, because the events that give it shape have not yet exhausted their dramatic content” (Smallwood 207). Despite the fact that the original ancestral trauma is a past event within the limitations of linear time, the traces of this unresolved trauma is still prevalent in the lives of the descendants. The phenomenon of the inheritance of psychic trauma and its implications for the contemporary African American subject, as it is displayed in the narratives of Jones, Butler, Bradley, Perry and Jones, will be further explored in the following chapters.
CHAPTER 2

Trans-temporal Intrusions in *Kindred*

Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) depicts the narrative of a twentieth-century African American woman who is involuntarily transported from her contemporary California home into the antebellum South, where she inescapably confronts the devastating fate of her enslaved ancestors. Butler’s protagonist, Dana Franklin, is a twenty-six year old African American writer who resides in California with her white husband Kevin, in the year 1976. Utilizing a time travel paradigm, Butler sends her protagonist to the year 1813, into antebellum Maryland, whereby she sets out to formulate the vexed interconnectedness between the contemporary African American subject and her nineteenth century counterparts. In this context, Butler’s temporal manipulation generates an original site by means of which her twentieth century heroine communicates with slavery and her enslaved ancestors. As her exile across time and space indisputably signifies, Dana Franklin is not completely free from her traumatizing ancestral heritage of slavery despite the secure geographical, historical and temporal conditions of her twentieth-century existence.

In spite of the fact that the antebellum era, along with the incredible atrocities it represents, seems to be merely the remnant of a distant past, the traumatizing legacy of enslavement has become a persistent reality that continues to affect multiple generations. Dana’s trans-temporal journeys into the antebellum era clearly implicate how the African
American psyche remains traumatized by the impact of American antebellum history of slavery. Hence, her multiple transportations into the antebellum Maryland not only function as a powerful reminder of the contemporary self’s inevitable encounter with the history of American slavery, but also demonstrate a historical consciousness that situates Butler’s narrative in constant dialogue with the historical slave narratives of the nineteenth century.

Dana’s initial confrontation with the traumatic nature of her slave heritage arises on her twenty-sixth birthday, on June 9, 1976. Dana resides in her California home seemingly untouched by and unaware of the trauma of her enslaved ancestors. On her birthday, she is inexplicably summoned to the antebellum Maryland, where she encounters a drowning six-year-old white boy and instinctively saves his life. However, the child’s father points a rifle to her face, and she is transported back to her present day home. This first journey will be one of the six subsequent time travels that Dana will take to her slave-owning ancestors’ plantation. Butler divides her narrative into six chapters that signify these different trips Dana makes to antebellum Maryland. The chapters are entitled as “The River”, “The Fire”, “The Fall”, “The Fight”, “The Storm”, and “The Rope”. As Christine Levecq notes, each chapter “emanate[s] from waves of endlessly recurring conflict” that Butler ventures to convey (532). Perhaps, the recurring conflicts presented in each chapter serve as a subtle reminder of the persistent historical trauma of slavery that continues to affect Dana’s present day identity. Every time Dana is transported through time to the past, the institution of slavery unquestionably renders her as an incapable female slave due to her racial identity. On her second journey to the past,
Dana learns that the white boy, Rufus Weylin, is her great-great grandfather, and he is able to call her back to antebellum Maryland whenever his life is in danger. Dana is able to return to her contemporary home only when her own life is threatened. On Dana’s third trip to the Weylin plantation, her white husband, Kevin is exiled into the past with her. Kevin’s experiences in the antebellum South are significantly different from those of Dana in that Kevin automatically assumes a privileged position due to his race and gender. Throughout her journeys, Dana realizes that she has to ensure the birth of her progeny by keeping Rufus alive until her grandmother Hagar is born. Little does she know that she must play a vital role in “facilitating a primal scene” (Woolfork 24). Despite being born free, Dana’s great grandmother, Alice, is not immune to the sexual abuses of Rufus. Following a failed escape, Alice’s black husband is tortured and sold to other slave owners in the South. Alice also suffers from brutal wounds and is enslaved because of her role in assisting her husband’s escape. Dana coerces Alice into concubinage in order to secure her own generative moment, which is “based on rape, not mutual affection” (Woolfork 24). On her next trip to the past, Dana finds out that Alice has given birth to Hagar, her grandmother. When Alice attempts to run away for the second time, Rufus retaliates by pretending he has sold her children. Grief-stricken over her children’s fate, Alice commits suicide by hanging herself. Directing his sexual attention this time to Dana, Rufus attempts to rape her. Dana stabs him to death and returns to the present, but leaves a part of her arm in the past in her final act of resistance.

The time travel motif enables Butler to establish the symbolic and literal vital link, the significant ancestral connection between Dana and her white predecessor at the
very beginning of her narrative. It is also interesting that Dana “is abducted into the past by a white man”, which suggests the pervasiveness of the white oppression in the 20th century (Woolfork 22). Yet, neither Rufus’ calling her for the first time, nor her first experience in the antebellum Maryland following his call, initiates Dana’s psychological disturbances. As Dana herself informs the readers, “The trouble began long before June 9, 1976” (12). While one can infer that June 9th is the day that marks the beginning of Dana’s troubles since Dana meets Rufus on this particular day, and it is the very first time she is transported to the year 1813, Butler clearly indicates that Dana has started experiencing troubles well before then. The source of her psychological troubles has not been identified; nonetheless, the existence of an unresolved trauma in her life is made clear from the start. Dana’s traumatization, in this respect, can be regarded as having two separate components, one entailing the racist environment of her contemporary life and the other entailing her extensive confrontations with her enslaved ancestors. Yet, the main traumatizing agent in her life, I argue, is the haunting presence of an unresolved ancestral trauma in her life. Throughout the novel Butler also elaborates on this element of transgenerational trauma in Dana’s life by illustrating her experiences of dissociation, dispossession and a split consciousness, which are all considered to be psychological impacts of trauma. Despite the fact that Dana does not have any direct experience with the institution of slavery, she unknowingly carries the weight of her ancestors’ collective traumatic experiences of American slavery, which possessively eradicate her own sense of identity.

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*Kindred* embodies some of the defining features of antebellum slave narratives such as themes of flight from bondage, acquisition of literacy, psychological and physical resistance of slave populations, and recurrent images of violence, whippings, death and mutilation. Yet, Butler’s break from the historical slave narratives of the nineteenth century is manifest in her selection of non-traditional literary devices to reveal the dehumanizing effects of the institution of slavery. As far as Butler’s thematic concern of representing and revising the historical slave narratives, deployment of unconventional patterns of traditional narrative form and utilization of the supernatural are considered, *Kindred’s* contribution to the neo-slave narrative genre cannot be disregarded. *Kindred* is appropriately regarded as one of the pioneering works of neo-slave narratives, thus engaging with the past, present, and the future, regardless of the boundaries of linear passage of time. In other words, Butler employs a time travel device, which becomes an ideal mechanism to scrutinize and amend African American history of slavery. Butler’s time travel strategy also enables Dana to embrace a dual perspective that includes the present and the past, which she concurrently occupies. *Kindred* contains elements from several other literary genres such as speculative fiction, postmodern slave narrative and historiographic metafiction. As Laura L. Beadling asserts, “*Kindred’s* multiplicity of genres offers multiple vantage points on the trauma without endorsing one way as the only way to know or represent slavery” (64). For Butler, the relentless trauma of American slavery cannot be contained or represented within one single literary genre. Thus, she employs various elements from different literary genres to render the unimaginable experience.
Angelyn Mitchell’s work, *The Freedom to Remember* (2002), identifies *Kindred* as a “liberatory narrative”, a new genre she coins, which “reveals the unspeakable—indeed, the unacknowledged—*residuals* of slavery in the context of Black womanhood as it illuminates the enduring effects of our racist and sexist American history in today’s society” (xii emphasis in original). Mitchell’s definition of *Kindred* as a liberatory narrative is appropriate when Butler’s engagement with revealing the horrors of the antebellum era and her formulation of a female character to represent the trauma of enslavement are taken into consideration. In addition, by transporting her contemporary heroine into the antebellum period, Butler establishes intergenerational and trans-temporal connections, by means of which she can elucidate the lingering effects of the racist and sexist past of slavery on present day America. Her selection of a modern day character also points out how the residual trauma of American slavery continues to haunt the present day. Butler’s unconventional plot is not her only revision to the traditional slave narratives. Aside from the supernatural time travel paradigm, another significant deviation from the traditional slave narrative form is Butler’s introduction of a female character. Emphasizing the importance of gender in her fiction, she presents an empowered female heroine at the heart of her narrative. For Butler, it is pivotal to create a female character to be sent to the antebellum era since the chances of a male counterpart’s physical survival are slim if not all together impossible. Butler explains her departure from the traditionally male figure and selection of a female character as follows:
Actually, I began with a man as main character, but I couldn't go on using the male main character, because I couldn't realistically keep him alive. So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He wouldn't even have time to learn the rules—the rules of submission, I guess you could call them—before he was killed for not knowing them because he would be perceived as dangerous. The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn't be killed and that's the way I wrote it. She was beaten and abused, but she was not killed. That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favor. (Rowell 51)

In this lengthy passage, Butler underscores that the means to survival merely rested on the extent to which the individual could submit to oppression, sexual abuse, brutality and violence. Female slaves, in this regard, are not perceived as violent and resistant to abuse. A twentieth century African American male character in the antebellum South would most certainly pose a tremendous threat to the power and privilege of his white counterparts. Therefore, he would be killed even before Butler had a chance to finish her narrative. Yet, her choice of a female protagonist does not guarantee her any protection from the institution of slavery. Dana does not come home untouched by her time in the antebellum South.

In the introduction to her study, Mitchell also calls attention to the parallelism between the main characteristics of postmodernism, which she specifies as
"fragmentation, non-linearity, discontinuity, and cognitive disruptiveness”, and “the enslaved person’s sense of self, memory, history, and culture in the liberatory narrative” (11). In this regard, Dana’s fragmented sense of identity, echoing her predecessors’ impossibility of forming and maintaining a whole, coherent identity under oppression, not only reifies her deep connection to the ones in bondage, but also qualifies *Kindred* as a liberatory narrative. Butler’s pivotal deviation from a linear concept of time in portraying slavery also signifies her desire to disrupt the continuity of history “in order to illuminate what has not been told, what has been ignored, what has been silenced, and what has been forgotten” (Mitchell 21). In employing a rather elusive approach to chronological time, Butler also poses a challenge to the single-focused historical representations of American slavery and draws attention to the residual effects of suffering on contemporary populations.

**Redressing Ruptures in Ancestral Memory through Temporal Displacement**

The utilization of time travel unequivocally facilitates Butler’s aim in drawing parallels between the everlasting impact of traumatic experiences of slavery on present day African Americans and their nineteenth century counterparts. Temporally and spatially dislocating her contemporary subject from her familiar twentieth century home, Butler demonstrates how seemingly distant memories of the painful historical past of slavery remain their traumatizing effect in the psyche of African Americans. Ashraf Rushdy, in his analysis of *Kindred*, also underscores how past and present are
inextricably intertwined and argues that painful memories of the past are not contingent upon conceptions of linear temporality. For Rushdy, Butler’s achievement in *Kindred* lies in how she skillfully constructs memory as a transformative agent through which the remembering subject can be translated into the past (Rushdy 136). As seen from this perspective, the time travel tool provides the contemporary African American subject, namely Dana, with the essential link through which she can elicit and recover memories of her ancestor’s traumatic experiences of slavery. By means of her trans-temporal journeys, not only she bears witness to the atrocities that befall her ancestors, but she is also able to convey a first-hand account of suffering and oppression embedded in the institution of slavery.

Lenore Terr, in “Time and Trauma”, also points to the striking connection between sense of time and trauma. Terr notes that in case of a traumatic experience “durational sense and temporal perspective” are significantly distorted (634). For Terr, the collapse in time sense serves as a defense mechanism through which the victim attempts to thwart the effect of psychic trauma. These distortions also “represent attempts to gain belated mastery over uncontrollable situations” (Terr 652). Terr’s concept of “time-skew”, a post-traumatic disorder in time sequencing, is especially relevant in comprehending Dana’s disturbance of time sense. In *The Encyclopedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders* (2010), Ronald Doctor and Frank Shiromoto define time-skew as “rearranging and missequencing of trauma events” (95). In this respect, alteration in the chronological order of events becomes a defining element in a psychic trauma. Time-skew is also closely related with “the wish to turn back time”, not only in order to
cope with the initial traumatic event itself, but also to “rearrange history in a different way” (Terr 649). Then, it is possible to claim that Butler transports Dana backwards in time “to predict or to alter for the denizens of that faraway age what would be coming, thus time-skew” (Terr 649).

There is little doubt that Butler’s intentional deployment of the spatial and temporal displacement of her contemporary subject, enabled by her time travel device, signifies her desire to expose her heroine to the indelible suffering of her ancestors, and thus demonstrate the lingering effects of slavery on the present day. Yet, a discussion of Butler’s motives for making Dana vulnerable to the trauma of slavery seems fruitful. Butler’s subtle representation of African-American slavery in her contemporary fiction also deserves more elaboration. In order to effectively and realistically “convey the traumatic experience”, the original site of trauma should be recreated since “no second-hand rendering of it is adequate,” Tali Kal argues in Worlds of Hurt (1996) (121). Then, it would seem imperative for Butler to send her twentieth century protagonist to antebellum Maryland in order to provide her with the first-hand experiential knowledge of the original site of trauma. Through Dana’s transportations into the epoch of the antebellum South, Butler is able to restage the omnipresent ancestral trauma of the forgotten history of American slavery. James Baldwin also comments on the impossibility of an accurate rendering of the horrors of enslavement when he astutely remarks, “For the horrors of American Negro’s life there has been almost no language” (69). Hence, for Butler, there remains only one way to reveal the horrors of African American life, to literally send her heroine to the ancestral realm of slavery. In addition,
by empowering her heroine with the ability to travel back and forth in time, Butler attempts to authenticate and validate the traumatic past of American slavery as a relentless presence which hovers between the past and the present like a transgenerational phantom.

The institution of slavery is no longer in practice; however, the psychological trauma of hundreds of years of abuse continues to haunt and inspire African American imagination. As Marc Steinberg aptly asserts, “The bindings of slavery cannot simply be shed by their physical absence” (474). It is perhaps for this reason that Butler chooses to cross formal boundaries of literary realism and transports her character into the antebellum era. In the following excerpt, Butler reveals her motive in sending Dana to the antebellum South: “I wanted to take a character, when I did Kindred, back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head” (Rowell 51). Butler’s own experiences of growing up in an oppressive, racist environment also inspire her to represent, in Kindred, the traumatizing legacy of oppression and enslavement that cannot be truly articulated by the future generations. Regarding a failed escape attempt, Dana herself confesses that, “Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape” (177). Thus, in order to comprehend the conditions of slavery, firsthand experience is necessary. With the guaranteed security of the present, it is always easy to judge former slaves or ancestors for their passivity against the oppression. Yet, when the modern subject encounters with the harsh realities of enslavement, she realizes her present knowledge does not offer any sort of protection from the cruel institution. In an
interview with Charles Rowell, Butler expresses how she used to feel humiliated and embarrassed by the silent attitude of her mother toward incidents of racial abuse. In the ensuing passage, Butler describes her feelings of shame and remorse as a young African American child:

I was occasionally taken to work with my mother and made to sit in the car all day, because I wasn’t really welcome inside, of course. Sometimes, I was able to go inside and hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful. As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it. I didn’t really understand. This is something I carried with me for quite a while, as she entered back doors, and as she went deaf at appropriate times. (Rowell 51)

Instead of directing her anger toward the dominant white race that perpetuates oppressive ideologies, young Butler is enraged at her mother for her obedience. Unable to understand her mother’s motives for remaining passive, she mistakenly associates her mother’s strategies for survival with a state of helplessness. Her mother’s deferential attitude, in fact, is an expression of her utilization of a protective strategy for her child in a context of racism and oppression. As a young child, Butler carries the weight of her mothers’ passive acquiescence to dehumanization she experiences. It is only when she gets older that she “realize[s] that this was what kept me[Butler] fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head” (Rowell 51). This realization of the true meaning of their survival and the reality of hardships they endured is what Butler aims to communicate to her
readers. In order to authenticate the suffering her ancestors withstood to ensure survival, Butler sends her heroine back to the antebellum era, so that she can experience it for herself. Marisa Parham believes that one of the most significant motives of Butler in writing *Kindred* is “to make her readers, perhaps even black readers specifically, to understand that in the same situation, they may not have done any differently than their ancestors” (1320). It is impossible for African Americans to condemn their predecessors without taking into consideration the subjective human experiences of these individuals. In order to effectively evaluate historical events, one must have access to the individual perspective of sufferers. In this sense, Dana must be presented with a first-hand perspective primarily because second hand accounts can neither capture nor convey the horrors of enslavement. She can only comprehend their suffering when she involuntarily joins them in their plight. During her times in the 1800s, Dana, just like Butler herself, comes to realize that compliance is the only way to stay alive.

Butler’s manipulation of time in her narrative assumes a double initiative. One, to convey the sense of timelessness that represents the traumatic experience; two, to endow her African American protagonist with a privileged standpoint by enabling her to revisit the original site of trauma with the possibility of mastering it. Thus, through the distortion of time sense Butler exhibits the disruption of the sense of continuity in Dana’s life, as well as giving her a chance to go back and replay the traumatic past. In other words, Dana travels back in time since she is afforded the unique opportunity to abreact the traumatic events that her enslaved counterparts were denied in the course of history.
Over the course of her repeated travels back and forth in time, Dana manifests symptoms of disorientation and loses the ability to differentiate between the past and the present. For instance, at her California home she feels “strangely disoriented”, “confused”, and “strange” (115). Moreover, she feels as if she is “caught between his [Rufus’] home and mine [her present day California home]”, indicating the loss of her sense of temporal and spatial continuity (115). On her third travel to her ancestral land and time, Dana confesses Kevin that she “can’t maintain the distance” between her present time existence and her journeys to the past and that she is “drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen” (101). In Dana’s mind, the present and the past collide as the boundaries of time vanish. Just before her fourth abduction into the past, Dana’s own home in 1976 does not feel like home to her anymore. Reminiscing on her times in the past, she realizes that her present day house “wasn’t familiar enough” (191). The psychological detachment from her own time and place becomes manifest when she admits that “Rufus’s time was a stronger, stronger reality” and she feels as though she is displaced from her own place in her own time (191). On her fourth journey to the antebellum Maryland, she is surprised when she refers to the Weylin plantation as “home” and is strangely relieved to be “Home at last” (127). During her time in the past, she also realizes “there was no distance at all” between herself and the times of her ancestors (221). Jeffrey Pragar defines Dana’s experience of the condition of timelessness as “the inability to demarcate past from present” and considers it as a prominent symptom of a psychological trauma (229). Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart make a similar point when they note the manifest temporal discontinuities observed in a case of
psychological trauma. Van der Kolk and van der Hart suggest that affected individuals “experience long periods of time in which they live, as it were, in two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life” (176). Dana also literally and metaphorically lives in two seemingly separate worlds: the world of her enslaved ancestors and her present day California home. Therefore, her extended trips into the realm of the trauma of slavery not only demonstrate the generational link between Dana and her ancestors, but also signify her inheritance of their trauma. Her time travels, then, ultimately become the agent through which Butler situates the irresolvable initial trauma within Dana’s present life, which is inextricably bound up with her past of slavery. As Mitchell notes, “Butler needed an inexplicable vehicle to assist her in presenting the inexplicable institution of slavery, its realities and its residuals” (62). In this sense, Butler’s utilization of the time travel motif can be understood as a powerful indication of the ever-lasting presence of transgenerational trauma in Dana’s life. Lawrence Langer describes the experience of a Holocaust survivor as suffering from a “permanent duality...a parallel existence”, which is strikingly similar to Dana’s experience in the sense that she unconsciously switches from one realm she inhabits to another (95). Dana’s own perception of time is distorted, for she occupies two separate worlds free from the boundaries of time. In addition, by simultaneously inhabiting two different temporalities and locations, she assumes a new role as the embodiment of the legacy of the collective, traumatic past of enslavement. After her own experience of the insidious institution of slavery, Dana herself is quick to make the connection between the institutionalized forms of oppression and cruelty in Nazi Germany and American slavery.
Being aware of the fact that she can be pulled into the past any second, Dana wants to know as much about history of slavery as she can so that during her time in the past she will be equipped with the crucial knowledge to survive. Regretting her ignorance about her own past of slavery, she finds herself desperately devouring the books about American slavery. When she comes across one of Kevin’s books about the Second World War, she is puzzled by the link between the historical suffering of African American populations and Holocaust, genocide victims. She ponders:

…a book of excerpts from the recollections of concentration camp survivors. Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred. The books depressed me, scared me…Like the Nazis, ante bellum whites had known quite a bit about torture—quite a bit more than I ever wanted to learn. (117)

There is no doubt her experiences in the antebellum South has a great impact in her establishing connections about the current events in the present and the influence of past in shaping them. Her alienation from her own past seems to disappear gradually as she comes to terms with her ancestral past. The intergenerational connections she establishes during her time travels help her acknowledge the historical facts that still inform race relations in the United States from which she has previously evaded. Emphasizing the character transformation Dana undergoes during her times in the Weylin plantation, Lisa
Yaszek writes that Jewish Holocaust history provides her with “a new framework for understanding African-American history” (1061). In another instance, we find Dana futilely attempting to thwart young Rufus from a white patriarchal slave owner mentality. She brings him a history book written after the abolishment of slavery. The book she brings with her from the present, however, poses a great threat to the patriarchal slave owners. Rufus, reminding her of the fate of Denmark Vesey, who had plotted a slave rebellion and was executed, demands her to burn the book immediately. Her destruction of the book makes her remember the Holocaust “Nazi book burnings” (141). She cannot help but contemplate on the mechanisms through which oppressive societies operated: “Repressive societies always seemed to understand the danger of ‘wrong’ ideas” (141). Dana’s increased historical awareness in regards to the horrors of oppression manifests itself in another occasion when Kevin, referring to their time in the antebellum Maryland, tells her “This could be a great time to live in…I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it-go West and watch the building of the country” (97). Instantly correlating the experience of Native Americans to that of African slaves, Dana answers bitterly: “West…That’s where they’re doing it to the Indians instead of blacks!” (97). Not only Dana equates the cruelty of American slavery to Nazism, but she also draws parallels between the plague of Native Americans who were persecuted and forced to live in reservations and the victimization of the ones in bondage. Dana’s otherwise untypical reaction to oppressive practices connote that her times in the antebellum era, along with the influence of slaves she meets there, results in a behavioral transformation. Dana-
formerly apathetic about issues of race and slavery- is now able to perceive and interpret
the dynamics of oppression and violence.

It is useful to remind readers here that Dana’s travels into the past are not made
possible through the temporal dimensions of her own memory since it is impossible for
her to retrieve memories that she does not yet possess. In this regard, her journeys are not
psychological, but physical since she returns to her twentieth century California home
with corporeal evidence of her times in the antebellum era. For instance, she loses her left
arm (9), and two of her teeth (174) during her time in the past. She also comes back with
thick scars on her back from the brutal whippings she has received (113), and another
scar Tom Weylin’s boot leaves on her face (264).

Bodily Epistemology: Trauma Transgressing Corporeal Boundaries

Lisa Woolfork, in *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture* (2008),
suggests a new approach, referred to as “bodily epistemology”, to analyze the corporeal
dimensions of traumatic experience. Woolfork defines this mode of bodily reference as
follows:

Appearing primarily in works that question the temporal boundaries
between the past and the present, bodily epistemology is a representational
strategy that uses the body of a present-day protagonist to register slave
past…the protagonist suffers from a form of amnesia about the slave past
(they do not know their ancestors, they know little and care less about slavery, they are unaware of the meaning of their contemporary ‘freedom’). The protagonist then finds her- or himself unwittingly transported to the slave past where she or he is confronted with a living, traumatic history that becomes a personal priority. (2)

Woolfork’s emphasis on the corporeal aspect of the traumatic experience of African American enslavement coincides with Butler’s reliance on her twentieth century protagonist’s bodily scars to reflect on the past of slavery especially in conjunction with its implications on the contemporary African American life. By bringing her protagonist home with the physical reminders of the horrors of slavery, Butler takes a corporeal approach to transmit the traumatic experience of the enslaved. These bodily symbols also represent the grip of the past of slavery; one also dominates the current day. In this context, scars on Dana’s body as well as the loss of her arm can be seen as Butler’s utilization of “bodily referents to evoke, signal, or revisit slavery” and her reenactment of the past “not just through the mental techniques of memory, but also through a physical connection” (Woolfork 4-5). In Woolfork’s theory of bodily epistemology, body of a current day protagonist becomes a vessel through which the corporeal signs of multiple traumatic histories are carried to the present day. Dana’s scarred body, then, can be perceived as a gateway to the suffering of her enslaved ancestors as well as an indication of the prolonged legacy of the past of slavery in her contemporary life. In this context, *Kindred* can be considered as an example of bodily epistemology not only due to Butler’s employment of time travel and corporeal referents, but also due to her portrayal of Dana
as having an apathetic attitude towards her past of slavery. Dana hardly remembers the names of her ancestors that are recorded in the family Bible by her grandmother, Hagar Weylin. Although her uncle still keeps the Bible, she does not have any interest in discovering her ancestors or their past lives. It is only in attempting to unravel her connection with Rufus Weylin that she realizes the existence of “So many relatives that I [Dana] had never known, would never know” (28). Dana’s estrangement from her own history of slavery will eventually lead to her understanding that her contemporary life is inextricably intertwined with the lives of her antecedents. To further illustrate Dana’s indifference towards and internalization of racial issues in contemporary America, Dana’s interracial marriage demands further examination. When Kevin and Dana decide to get married, Dana admits that her only relatives, her “uncle and aunt won’t love you [Kevin]’ (110). Her reasoning is not a well-thought one since she explains: “They’re old. Sometimes their ideas don’t have much to do with what’s going on now” (110). Dana believes that the past of slavery and the prolonged effects of racism have no resonance with contemporary race relations in the United States. Kevin’s only relative, her sister, is also openly opposed to their interracial union. Kevin is no different from Dana in the sense that he completely disregards his sister’s reaction “whose husband would have made a good Nazi” (110). Dana’s aunt, who thinks Dana is a little too “‘highly visible’” due to her skin color and prefers “light-skinned blacks”, is slightly sympathetic towards their union with the prospect of lighter skinned children (111). The uncle, however, insists on her marrying “A black man” (111). Instead of trying to work out on the racial hatred of their respective relatives, Dana and Kevin decide to get married in Las Vegas.
and pretend they “haven’t got any relatives” (112). In regards to their marriage, it is possible to claim that avoidance of racial issues is at the center of the relationship. As Sarah Eden Schiff claims, Kevin and Dana “inhabit a world and a relationship of indifference” (112). It is perhaps for this reason that they are both pulled into the past, to confront their respective histories that they have ignored for so long.

Just before Dana is transported into the early 1800s, she feels “dizzy and nauseated” (13, 117, 247), and “sick” (19, 58). Aside from being symbols of bodily epistemology, the physical symptoms of dizziness and nausea can also be seen as powerful reminders of the brutal journey of the Middle Passage. Just like her African ancestors, who were forcefully taken away from their homes and families, Dana must go on this sickening journey across time and space. This experience of temporal displacement also suggests a strong correlation between the traumatic displacements of the Middle Passage and Dana’s own displacement from her twentieth century temporality. Calling attention to the striking resemblance between Dana’s journey into the past and the voyage of the Middle Passage, Robert Crossley writes, “*Kindred* evokes terrifying and nauseating voyage that looms behind every American slave narrative: The Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting voyage of her ancestors” (268). By having Dana experience the same disorientation and removal that her ancestors endured, Butler revives the dreadful images of the Middle Passage. Furthermore, she establishes the transgenerational connection between Dana and ancestors through demonstrating the parallelism between Dana’s repeated journeys and
their analogous dislocation through the Middle Passage. Butler’s contemporary heroine is pulled into the tragic fate of her ancestors by “an irresistible psycho-historical force”, which is, in fact, the call of her own ancestral heritage (Crossley 267). Dana must go back in time to give a voice to her ancestors’ historical trauma. In this sense, time travel can be understood as “a vehicle for the therapeutic scene” (Woolfork 23), or as Schiff puts it, a “psychically curative move…to manipulate memory” (123). In order to transcend this transgenerational chain of suffering, the unspeakable atrocities buried in the pages of history should be revealed. It is only through travelling back and forth in time that Dana can recover and revive ancestral memories and come to terms with her historical heritage. Dana’s unavoidable confrontation with her own psychic legacy of slavery significantly reflects the author’s desire to represent the original trauma of American slavery in a transgenerational frame of reference. Thus, it is plausible to suggest that Kindred communicates Butler’s contribution to the discourse on the relevance of transgenerational theories of trauma in regards to the contemporary African American subjects’ experience of the ancestral trauma of slavery.

In the preceding chapter, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s conception of “transgenerational haunting” and their idea of “buried family secrets” are considered as illuminating notions in explicating the chain of generational victimization that haunts the descendants of enslaved African American populations. In my analysis of Kindred, Abraham and Torok’s notions proved to be useful modes through which to examine and illustrate the lasting impact of ancestral trauma that becomes manifest vis-à-vis Dana’s time travel. To borrow from Esther Rashkin, Abraham and Torok’s concept of the secret
signifies “a situation or drama that is transmitted without being stated …an interpersonal
drama, experienced as too shameful to be articulated, which must be kept silenced” (4).
Abraham and Torok’s phantom, which is situated within the unconscious of the unwitting
individual, thus, originates from the mechanism through which the secret is passed down.
The bibliography on *Kindred* is extensive and most of the critics in their converging and
diverging ways, have agreed that the family secret that is haunting Dana is the presence
of a white ancestor, her great grandfather, in her family line. For example, in his analysis
of *Kindred*, Rushdy argues that “The family secret at the heart of *Kindred* is that Dana’s
great-grandfather is a white slaveholder” (100). It is true that until she is transferred to
the antebellum Maryland, Dana is unaware of the fact that her great grandfather Rufus
Weylin is a white man. Yet, while Rushdy is accurate in his observation, it seems to me
that the real cause of her transgenerational haunting is left largely unaddressed. Dana’s
being “racially mixed” is not the reason she is drawn into the nineteenth century since her
personal narrative is not complete after her discovery of a white slave holder ancestor
(Rushdy 28). My interpretation of *Kindred* takes as its point of departure the double
meaning of the family secret in Dana’s life. The phantom that inhabits Dana, I believe is,
in fact, her present knowledge of her active role in ensuring the rape of her great
grandmother Alice Greenwood. Throughout the narrative, it is possible to observe that
Dana is tremendously troubled by the psychic charge of the plotted rape and her being an
accomplice in staging it. The family secret, the traumatic knowledge of Alice’s imminent
rape that initiates Dana’s own family, is the phantom of the secret transmitted to her
intergenerationally. This unspeakable secret is buried alive in the pages of history until
Dana is sent to the antebellum era without any conscious knowledge of the family secret. During her time in the ancestral land, Dana is faced with the dilemma of assisting Rufus in the sexual abuse of Alice order to guarantee her own birth and the existence of her present family. As Woolfork aptly illustrates:

> Not only is repeated rape a trauma for Alice, who must endure it bodily and emotionally, but Dana must also live with the traumatic knowledge that her family line was generated by coerced sex. In addition, acting partly on a survival impulse and partly forced by Rufus, Dana must participate in her traumatic primal scene by encouraging Alice to submit to Rufus’s sexual demands...She needs this sexual violence to happen if she is to exist. (25)

The traumatizing knowledge of the coerced rape is the shameful secret of her ancestors Dana discovers, but cannot reveal. The significance this traumatic secret holds for Dana is that she “must come to terms with the sexual violence and oppression that mark her own existence” (Spaulding 45). Her evident culpability in Alice’s rape is what is tormenting her soul. Perhaps, Dana is more agonized by the fact that Alice is her psychological double. In this respect, the doubling between the two women can also be explained as a symptom of the haunting presence of the phantom that Dana cannot evade. Evidence that Dana resembles Alice physically is diffused throughout Butler’s narrative. For instance, upon seeing them together at Alice’s cabin, Rufus cannot help but notice the striking resemblance of the two women, he proclaims, “Behold the woman...You really
are only one woman” (228). Expressing how much they look alike Alice utters, “all that means we’re two halves of the same woman” (229). On another occasion, Rufus exclaims, “You’re so much like her[Alice], I can hardly stand it…You were one woman…You and her. One woman. Two halves of a whole” (257). Dana’s physical resemblance to her enslaved ancestor has drawn much critical attention. For example, while Tim A. Ryan considers Dana and Alice as “virtual mirror images of each other” (134), Guy Mark Foster refers to two women as “doppelgangers” and “character-doubles” (158). In the same vein, Sandra Govan argues that, “Dana and Alice are virtual doubles of each other. Physically, they look alike; intellectually and emotionally, they function as two halves of the same woman, flawed duplicates separated by the dictates of their respective historical time and the resultant sexual-political consciousness each maintains by virtue of their particular social circumstances” (93). Although the scholars’ assertions referenced above are plausible, the parallelisms between Dana, the descendant, and her enslaved ancestor seem to be grounded in more than their physical appearances. The two women, despite the distinctive mandates of their respective historical periods, share some significant characteristic attributes. In this sense, the two women cannot necessarily be seen as “opposite[s]” (Ryan 134). Furthermore, it is arguable that Alice is ignorant, passive and dependent while her 20th century counterpart, Dana is knowledgeable, assertive and independent (Govan 93). By mainly focusing on how Alice and Dana are shaped by their different historical times, namely the 19th and 20th centuries; critics tend to portray Alice as a powerless figure simply disregarding the significance of her final act of resistance. Despite the fact that Alice is enslaved and powerless against
the white master Rufus, she is able to resist to the conditions of slavery and ultimately asserts her personal agency through resorting to suicide, “her only possible path of resistance and rebellion” (Wood 94). As Dana herself confesses to Kevin, she does not have her ancestors’ “endurance” (246). With her suicide; Alice takes her destiny in her own hands and exerts control over her own physical body, demonstrating that despite her existence as an enslaved woman, her soul is free. Although she cannot resist physically, Alice in the end, is able to resist the white patriarchal ideology “mentally and emotionally…as such she forms an obvious counterpart to Dana” (Levecq 545). Along similar lines, Reed believes that “By killing herself, Alice has found new life in Dana’s soul” (73). Reed and Levecq’s readings of Alice’s suicide suggest that the two women ultimately become one upon the tragic death of Alice. Thus, Dana is symbolically joined with her maternal heritage permanently.

In the prologue of Butler’s narrative, the reader is immediately exposed to the dreadful news of Dana’s losing “an arm on [her] trip home” as well as “about a year of [her] life and much of the comfort and security [she] had not valued until it was gone” (9). The loss of her arm ostensibly indicates the residual impact of the physical and mental anguish of her enslaved ancestors on Dana’s present life. It is also noteworthy that Butler does not allow her protagonist to return to her twentieth century reality unscathed. In an interview with Randall Kenan, Butler explains her decision to bring Dana back with an amputated arm as such: “I couldn’t really let her come all the way back. I couldn’t let her return to what she was, I couldn’t let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite
whole” (498). Butler believes that the lingering effects of a racial trauma cannot be overcome by time or distance as exemplified by the loss of Dana’s arm. By skillfully demonstrating the repercussions of the original trauma on the present day, Butler emphasizes the symbiotic interplay between the past and the present. Dana’s physical loss of a body part is “only one manifestation of a loss of wholeness” as Steinberg contends (473). On a psychological level, Dana’s arm “that is relegated forever to another, irretrievable era” is a strong indicator of her own “psychological dispossession” (Steinberg 469). Dana’s enduring a physical loss also symbolizes the fragmentation of her own self. Her severed arm, then, stands for “a fractured and disjointed self” who is denied emotional and psychological wholeness (Wood 95). For Butler, it is unimaginable to experience the brutality of American slavery first-hand, and return unharmed. In this sense, Butler implies that the reverberations of the encounter with the history of American slavery scar one permanently and these physical scars go beyond the surface, transcending the physical dimension. As Spaulding observes, “The trauma of losing her limb during her final act of resistance to slavery also symbolize the extent to which the past scars us even in the present” (59). Anne Donadey makes a similar claim in her interpretation of the loss of Dana’s arm as “a reference to limbs that were broken off family trees through the discontinuities of history around the prevalence of white male rape of the enslaved black women and because black family members were purposefully severed from one another through being sold to different owners” (72). Donadey’s reading of Dana’s dismemberment points to the modern subject’s inevitable confrontation with her ancestral past that is built on sexual and psychological exploitation of enslaved
African American women. The severance of her arm, as Donadey notes, is also a distinct metaphor for the broken familial ties during slavery.

Dana’s concurrent presence in the antebellum era and the present day inevitably affects her sense of identity. She does not return to her California home untouched by this dual, corporeal presence in two separate worlds. Witnessing her own family line’s traumatic past of unspeakable inhumanity, Dana undergoes a character transformation. While her apathetic self diminishes, she no longer disavows her connection with her ancestry, and she reaches a new understanding of her historical heritage. Yet, she also comes back with a fragmented sense of identity as the traumatic experiences leave her with a split consciousness, which intensifies the sense of alienation that constantly haunts her. As the boundaries of time and space become blurred, she loses connection with her twentieth century reality. Focusing on the negative transformative aspect of a traumatic experience, Langer, in another context, explains: “The survivor does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again. The two worlds haunt each other…” (88). Langer’s above description clearly illustrates Dana’s own transformative encounters with unspeakable atrocities, suffering and loss. In her contemporary life, Dana suffers from the transgenerational consequences of an ancestral trauma. If a traumatic experience cannot be “placed in time, with a beginning, a middle, and an end”, as van der Kolk and van der Hart explain, then, the traumatic past of abuse and shame will continue their haunting presence in the imagination of present-day America (177). Dana serves as an example of how the
traumatic experience of American slavery reinvents itself through an intergenerational link that bridges the distance between the past of slavery and present day. Since this traumatic experience is timeless and ahistorical, Dana is unable to situate the collective trauma of enslavement within a historical, linear time frame and continues to repeat the same trauma in her twentieth-century life. However, Dana is presented with the ability to abreact to her ancestor’s trauma as highlighted at the climax of the novel, when Rufus attempts to rape her. Unlike Alice, who is denied an individual agency except in suicide, Dana “defends herself against the primal traumatic experience” (Schiff 122). By means of time travel, Dana is given the chance to relive the ancestral trauma that haunts her with the possibility of changing the outcome. As Schiff observes, “By sinking the knife into his side-Dana-fantastically-rewrites, possibly even unwrites, the narrative of her ancestor’s primary trauma” (122). The primary trauma, in an important sense, performs a crucial role in Dana’s time travels. Not only, it is an indication of the transgenerational trauma that Dana suffers from throughout the course of the narrative, but also it demonstrates that survival against all odds is possible. However, Dana’s narrative does not come to a closure with the death of Rufus.

In the epilogue, Dana and Kevin travel to Maryland to discover the fates of the slaves in Weylin plantation after Rufus’ death. The only information they can find is an old newspaper article writing about Rufus’ death and a fire that destroyed his house. As Parham maintains, “in the last pages of Kindred we are left with an image of Dana and Kevin, scarred, dismembered, and years beyond their proper ages” (1326). For Dana, it is not only a bodily fragmentation she experiences after her times in the past, her visits to
her historical ancestral heritage leave their permanent psychological marks on her. The encounter with her own traumatic ancestral history of inhumanity and loss, conjoined with the knowledge that she could not play a reparative role in this history still haunts her as exemplified by her trip to Maryland. As Ruth Salvaggio writes, "what Dana comes to realize at the end of her journey is that her past will always be a part of her present--not that she is doomed to suffer its horrors, but that she will always bear the mark of her kindred" (qtd. in Steinberg 33). Thus, Dana’s experiences in the past, along with all the atrocities she has witnessed, will continue to have their enduring legacy in Dana’s life. Retaining fond memories of her ancestors, she will always remember the sacrifices made to ensure her identity as a free woman in the United States.
CHAPTER 3

Unresolved Ancestral Grief in *The Chaneysville Incident*

David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident* (1981) portrays the narrative of John Washington, an African American historian, who embarks on a spiritual journey in an attempt to redefine his identity by constructing an ancestral connection, through which he reconciles his legacy of slavery with his contemporary self. John’s spiritual journey is not necessarily an inward one towards an awareness of his authentic self, nor is this journey confined to his own temporal and physical existence. In fact, John’s narrative embodies the personal histories of four generations of his paternal ancestry. Despite his contemporary presence, temporally and geographically removed from his ancestors’ lives, his journey reaches out to non-physical realms where his enslaved ancestors reside. Furthermore, transcending the tempo-spatial limits of his contemporary existence endows John with an entry point through which to access the muted stories of his own lineage. John, a college professor, resides with his white psychiatrist girlfriend Judith Powell, in the year 1979. Reminding us of Dana in *Kindred*, he, too, is a modern subject, likewise summoned by an ancestral memory that compels him to discover the very roots of his own identity. While Dana makes a literal trans-temporal journey to the original site of trauma, namely the institution of slavery in the United States, John’s journey remains to be a psychological one. The narrative is nonlinear and told in flashbacks, moving back and forth in time. Bradley’s nonsequential timeline not only allows the reader the
subjective perspectives of the antebellum and postbellum eras, but also authenticates the everlasting bonds between these two. The disruption of the time-space continuum also suggests the impossibility of setting temporal boundaries for traumatic histories. Most significantly, it is through these alternating timelines that Bradley engages his protagonist in constant dialogue with his predecessors.

John leads an urban life away from his rural Bedford home, until he receives a call informing him the impending death of his surrogate father, Jack Crawley. Urged by the news of Jack’s deteriorating health condition, John returns to his childhood home to reunite with the man who raised him. During the final days of Jack’s life, the old man tells him a series of stories that evoke his childhood memories. With his return home, not only will John revive his childhood and adolescence traumatizations through flashbacks, but he will also discover the meaning of his father’s sudden death, which is essentially connected to the Washington family’s ancestral past of slavery. John’s father, Moses Washington, a peculiar moonshiner, dies in the woods while hunting, and his death is officially recorded as a hunting accident. John’s journey is initially prompted by the desire to seek answers to unravel the hidden facts surrounding his father’s mysterious death. By means of Jack’s stories and his father’s records and journals, John carefully accumulates historical events of his past and reconstructs the antebellum story of twelve fugitive slaves led by own his great grandfather, C. K. Washington, a conductor on the Underground Railroad. The tragic events takes place in Chaneysville, which is a pre-emancipation Underground Railroad site for fugitive slaves. By piecing together historical evidence, John discovers the fate of the runaway slaves that commit mass
suicide on this particular stop of the Underground Railroad. The fugitives, including John’s great grandfather, C.K., willingly embrace death in a final effort to halt the risk of being recaptured into enslavement. Upon exploring the gravesite of the fugitive slaves, John uncovers another mystery, the symbolic meaning of his own father’s death. John realizes that Moses followed the footsteps of his ancestor by taking his own life at the same exact spot of the Underground Railroad. In doing so, Moses has become the ultimate carrier of this traumatic memory across generations and time. Captivated by the plight of his formerly enslaved precursors, John embarks on this transformative journey into his own ancestral past, whereby he unavoidably confronts the legacy of slavery.

Bearing the invisible marks of the inevitable reverberations of the historical trauma of enslavement, John’s family history validates how the contemporary black self is vitally connected to his racial identity and cultural heritage. In this regard, his narrative, which spans nine days in present time, becomes a perfect vehicle to trace the intergenerational transmission of paternal trauma that defines the modern hero’s identity regardless of the spatial and temporal boundaries separating him from his enslaved ancestors.

Bradley’s narrative opens with a phone call from John’s mother summoning him to Chaneysville to attend to Jack on his deathbed. The call arouses in him a feeling of uncanniness immediately: “Sometimes you can hear the wire, hear it reaching out across miles; whining with its own weight, crying from the cold, panting at the distance, humming with the phantom sounds of someone else’s conversation…whining, crying,
panting, humming, moaning like a living thing” (1 emphasis added). John’s description of the telephone line as a living thing is significant in the sense that it indicates a ghostly presence emanating from his hometown. The phone call can be seen as the literal and metaphorical call of his fugitive ancestors, for not only John describes it in ghostly terms, but also the moaning, crying, panting sounds evoke the images of the suffering of his ancestors in their final moments. Another powerful reference to the transgenerational phantom associated with his hometown can be observed in John’s fear of the other side of the Hill. John, as a young boy, believes that the far side of the Hill is “guarded by ghosts”, which is another indication of his perception of his hometown as the site of a haunting entity (27). Later in the novel, Judith refers to John’s feelings of horror and anxiety characterized by the Hill when she exclaims: “There’s something here that terrifies you” (261). Identifying his family’s past with suffering and death, John tries to remove himself as far away as possible. In his Philadelphia home, John is nonetheless haunted by the historical trauma that plagued his ancestral bloodline for centuries. Thus, from the very first lines of the novel, the existence of a transgenerational phantom in his life is made apparent. John is not the only one who is haunted by these disembodied ancestral voices; Jack also tells him that the fugitive slaves “ain’t dead. They’re still here. Still runnin’ from them dogs an’ whatnot…the sound you hear is the sound of’em panting” (63). Bradley’s allusions to the ghostly presence of the fugitive slaves reveal the ongoing effects of violent histories on the present lives of Jack and John. Thus, it is possible to argue that a haunting family secret comes into existence as a response to the

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traumatic collective suicide of the runaway slaves guided by John’s great grandfather. The transgenerational haunting, then, becomes the common family secret that unites Zack, C.K., Moses, Jack and John, for they are successive generations of the same family with the exception of Jack. Although Jack does not belong to the Washington family genealogically, his role as a substitute father to John and his closeness to Moses make him a spiritual member of the family.

This collective traumatic event at the core of John’s narrative, as Esther Rashkin argues in another context, “have been experienced by someone else, who transformed the event into a secret and transmitted it transgenerationally” (44). John, in this sense, is the unwitting recipient of this traumatic event in his family line that is passed down to him. Neither he is aware of the existence of the phantom stemming from this tragic event, nor does he realize the source of his own father’s agony until he discovers the tragic history of his ancestors. The only tangible data passed on to John by his father is an incomplete journal that belonged to his great grandfather C.K. Moses fails to communicate the family secret to his own son, thus the traumatic story is transmitted as a phantom instead of a memory of the Washington family. As Colin Davis suggests, Abraham and Torok’s phantom “is the presence of a dead ancestor in the living Ego...disturb[ing] the lives of their descendants even and especially if they know nothing about their distant causes (374 emphasis in original). John does not have any conscious knowledge of the traumatic story of generational suicides at this point, yet he suffers from its ramifications, as exemplified by his inheritance of the transgenerational phantom. In this mechanism, John becomes the vehicle through whom the phantom of his great grandfather communicates.
“undisclosed traumas of previous generations” (Davis 374). Ashraf Rushdy in *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001) also utilizes the theories of Abraham and Torok in his reading of the novel. Rushdy writes that, “Bradley deals with family secrets that imprint themselves in behavioral patterns of later generations…[he] represents a contemporary subject who has to deal with and act on the discovery of a death and a burial in order to create a space for the reader to understand the transgenerational aftereffects” (83). Although Rushdy successfully employs Abraham and Torok’s theory of the transgenerational phantom in his analysis of the novel, he focuses mainly on the family secret of the Washington family, failing to refer to the phantom that this family secret generates. My reading of Bradley’s novel considers Abraham and Torok’s transgenerational specter as central to the modern subject’s current dilemmas.

It is important to clarify here that, for Abraham and Torok, the family secret that haunts successive generations is generally a shameful one that is to be concealed. In John’s narrative, however, the family secret that causes transgenerational haunting is an honorable one. Thus, this secret should be revealed, so that the story of these brave fugitives will not be lost to history. Furthermore, as Davis insists, the secret “should be put into words so that the phantom and its noxious effects on the living can be exorcised” (378). It thus becomes imperative for John to verbalize the tragic story of his ancestors so as to break free from the suffocating grip of transgenerational trauma in his present life. In order to establish an authentic self, removed from the traumas of the past, John should bring an honorable closure to their deaths. Contemplating on the meaning of death, John
wonders; “I began to think about what a man’s dying really means: his story is lost. Bits and pieces of it remain, but they are all secondhand tales and hearsay, or cold official records that preserve the facts and spoil the truth” (48). Perhaps, it is for this particular reason that John bears the weight of revoicing the stories of his enslaved ancestors. By listening to these distant voices of his ancestry, he must reconstruct their silenced histories. He is the last one in this generational link to establish continuity with his African roots, and his possession of this knowledge carries an ancestral debt. He should transcend the formal constraints of time and achieve a symbolic return to the past. As Matthew Wilson observes, John cannot fully comprehend the meaning of his family secret “until the moment he enters ancestral time and can translate the voices on the wind” (104). Through fully embracing and synthesizing with the ancestral realm, the indistinct sounds in the wind gain a deeper meaning for John.

**The Primal Scene: The Collective Suicide of the Enslaved Ancestor**

Despite his modern day existence in suburban Philadelphia, John suffers from a recurrent nightmare in which he constantly finds himself surrounded by the images of infinite whiteness. The repetitive nature of his nightmares points to an ongoing, unresolved problem in John’s life. As is Moses, John is seized by his ancestral past, as symbolized by the persistence of the nightmares in his contemporary life. The trauma of enslavement that ultimately leads to mass suicide is transmitted to John through several generations of his family. Since he is the recipient of this traumatic knowledge, it
becomes insurmountable for him to divorce his present life from his family history. His failure to break from the past can also be seen as another reason why this nightmare haunts him for fourteen years. John describes the nightmare in the following terms:

Something had shackled me in the dreaming state, and I could not open my eyes. The escape for me had not been up into wakefulness but down into deeper slumber; not out of the dreams but into them. There, at the bottom of it all, there was only one dream. Not even a dream; just an all-encompassing sensation of icy coldness, and a visual image of total white...That was the dream, the coldness and the whiteness growing to envelop me, like an avalanche of snow, deceptive in slow motion, covering me, smothering me. And I could not stop it. I could not free myself. I could not wake up. Not on that night. And not on any of the nights that followed. (149)

In order to avoid the nightmare altogether, John sets his alarm clock so as to be awakened at half-hour intervals, yet, with no success. The harder he struggles to fight this terrifying sensation of whiteness smothering him, the deeper he sinks into the depths of the nightmare. The image of overpowering whiteness is significant for its association with the white race that captured and subjugated John’s ancestral bloodline. In this sense, John is reliving the trauma of his enslaved ancestors in his dreams. The all-encompassing whiteness that suffocates John, then, can be understood to be a direct reference to the white masters that kept his ancestors in bondage for centuries. It is thus little wonder why
Bradley uses the word “shackle” to refer to the physical restraint he experiences in the dreaming state. The word shackle significantly alludes to the confinement of John’s enslaved ancestors in shackles. The same iron shackles and chains that take away their freedom, now bind John to the catastrophic experiences of his predecessors.

Despite the existence of these psychic bonds, John’s displays an ambivalent emotional attitude towards his past. For instance, before his trip to his hometown, he admits that he “knew nothing about the Hill any longer, I had made it my business not to know” (17). John’s reluctance to acknowledge his history reveals the presence of a past traumatic event associated with his family’s past. After leaving his hometown for college, he shuns all the elements in his life that remind him of his past. In his relationship with Judith, he also avoids the subject at all costs. His decisively indifferent attitude towards his family creates an atmosphere of uncertainty in the relationship. Judith feels resentful towards John’s secrecy about his family for he never “talk[s] about home” (69). On the bus ride back home, however, John starts to acknowledge the futility of evading his past altogether. Upon seeing the familiar sights, he feels an inseparable connection to his home with all the values it represents, regardless of how hard he strives to repudiate them in his newly established life. He understands that a physical removal from all the reminders of his tragic past will not grant him any immunity from its mental torment. Despite his futile attempts to prove otherwise, he finally admits to himself the impossibility of leaving it all behind. In his words:
...how strange home is: a place to which you belong and which belongs to you even if you do not particularly like it or want it, a place you cannot escape, no matter how far you go or how furiously you run; about how strange it feels to be going back to that place, and, even if you do not like it, even if you hate it, to get a tiny flush of excitement when you reach the point where you can look out the window and know, without thinking, where you are; when the bends in the road have meaning, and every hill a name. (14-15)

Jack is apprehensive about John’s physical and psychological distancing from and negation of the past. With a final effort to retain John’s long lost engagement, he devotes all his time and means to exposing him to his family history, which centers around the powerful figure of his father, Moses. Emphasizing Jack’s pivotal role in introducing John to his paternal roots, Edward Pavlić maintains that, “Jack calls John to the healing vulnerability of contact with his ancestors” (273). While he is waiting outside Jack’s cabin, John surrenders to painful memories as he reminisces on his first conversation with Jack after his father’s death. Jack tells him that his father ,“a real hateable man”, was in fact proud of and worried about his son (34-35). Jack also communicates him that before he died Moses asked him to take care of his son “ if anything was to happen to him, to make sure you[John] learned how to be a man” (35). Adhering to Moses’ legacy, Jack spends the last days of his life exposing John to his father’s distinct perspective of masculinity. Through telling various stories of Moses’ past, Jack introduces John to unique aspects of his father’s identity that were incomprehensible to him as a child.
During this storytelling process, John not only learns how to hunt and survive in the woods, but also his father’s views of the white society. Growing up in a climate of oppression, aggravated by his personal experiences with racism, leads Moses to dislike the white race as a whole. Jack fittingly describes Moses as a man who “didn’t have no love for white folks” (85). The old man’s stories immerse John in his family history of oppression, violence and suffering. It is also through one of the old man’s stories that John first learns about the Chaneysville legend of:

a dozen slaves who had come north on the Underground Railroad, fleeing whatever horrors were behind them, and who had got lost just north of the Mason-Dixon Line…and who, when they could no longer elude the men who trailed them with dogs and horses and ropes and chains, had begged to be killed rather than be taken back to bondage. (62-63)

The first time John hears about the Chaneysville incident, he can neither recognize the significant implications of the story for his own life, nor does he realize the connection between his father’s self-imposed death and this heroic collective suicide of the fugitive slaves. Unbeknownst to John, this unresolved family legacy is transmitted to him by the agency of Jack’s storytelling. Yet, John is unaware of the essential fact that this legend is, in fact, his own past. This ancestral memory of the successive suicides instigates the haunting nightmares from which he suffers incessantly. With this transmission, John becomes the sole repository of the suffering of his ancestral lineage that is attributable to the history of slavery. The traumatic experiences of the Washington family, which extend
far beyond John’s ancestors’ lifetime, are thus carried into the present and continue to affect successive generations. During his time in the cabin, John learns another valuable lesson from Jack that somewhere within every man is, “a hidden agenda. And he will respond without hesitation, without thought, almost without knowledge, certainly without will. All you need to do is guess the beginning of it” (77 emphasis mine). Jack tells John that there is an untouched, unconscious part in every individual that is significantly connected to his or her past; it is only by discovering this hidden agenda that one can influence another. The hidden agenda Jack speaks of can also be understood as an essential allusion to family secrets transmitted to the unwitting individual of the same family line. Through unbreakable ancestral connections, this family secret becomes the hidden agenda that exists within John outside of his knowledge or will.

Upon reaching Jack’s cabin, John instantly feels uncomfortable: “The scene depressed me—it spoke of decay. Of death” (30). Entering the ancestral land, John finds himself confronted by the haunting memories of his past. The old man’s cabin reminds him of death, decay and rupture, calling attention to the dead ancestor whose phantom lodges inside John. Such powerful allusions also evoke the suffering of his ancestors whose lives were stolen by the most tragic means. The persistent references to death, decay, and illness also denote the ordeal of African slaves during the voyage of the Middle Passage. Pain, suffering, illnesses and death were ordinary occurrences in the slave ships, as were suicide attempts. The captured slaves resorted to self-immolation, as it was the only viable means of escape from the brutalities of slave catchers. In eliciting the horrifying images of the Middle Passage, and demonstrating their pertinence to the
contemporary subject, Bradley successfully integrates the trauma of enslavement into the present day. The slave suicides of the Middle Passage also strongly resonate with the generational suicides of the Washington family in the sense that at the very core of each suicide there is the desire to go home and reunite with ancestors.

In the plight of the Middle Passage, the self-inflicted choice of the captured ones took on a double meaning; one, it was the ultimate escape from enslavement, two, they believed they would unite with their beloved ones at death. Flying away home to Africa also represented the final attempt to reclaim their human agency, which was utterly negated by the institution of slavery. The eternal return to the homeland through death also reminds us of the myth of the “The Flying Africans”, which inspires Zora Neale Hurston, Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison’s fictions. John refers to this myth when he expresses that in African traditions, “the deceased …were still believed to be living—they had simply ‘gone home to Guinea’” (211). The myth of the Flying Africans demonstrated the possibility of escaping slavery by maintaining an alternative form of existence by flying back home to Africa. The myth “alludes not only to the imagination of supernatural power and the soul’s return from exile, but also to the ideological choice of suicide that was often made by enslaved Africans. This logical and defiant act of rebellion actualized the return to Africa”, Lorna McDaniel explains (32). What is most crucial in these captured victims’ deliberate act of suicide is that it denotes an individual, autonomous choice for liberty. Although they were physically constrained, there were no limits to their spiritual freedom. Instead of passively yielding to the conditions of slavery that eradicate their humanity, they resisted by terminating their lives. Committing suicide
was the only path they could follow in response to the violence and dehumanization of slavery. Hence, for the enslaved African, self-destruction was, as Terri L. Snyder reveals, not only a “form of defiance”, but also an “honorable escape from slavery” (41, 42). Considered from this perspective, an unmistakable similarity manifests itself between the self-inflicted deaths of C.K. and Moses and the myth of their captive African ancestors. In suggesting this analogical parallelism between the suicides of African slaves in the Middle Passage and C.K. and Moses’ suicides, Bradley validates the ancestral connection that is attributable to the atrocities of slavery. The determination to defeat slavery, intensified with the desire to reunite with the roots, is a shared central concern, which lies at the core of these tragic suicides.

Within the context of this myth, the concept of suicide does not connote weakness; rather it becomes an act of strength. Thus, John’s ancestors’ story ceases to be a shameful secret that should be concealed. Instead, it becomes an eternal symbol of the struggle against slavery. By resorting to suicide, the runaway slaves claim absolute control over their own destiny and death. With this final act of defiance, John’s ancestors reclaim their independence through death. As Jack insists, “A man has to have a say…a man with no say is an animal” (41-42). The act of suicide, by means of which they reestablish their agency, gives the fugitive slaves this final say that Jack speaks of over their own lives. Through this voluntary self-murder, which becomes an ultimate act of self-assertion, they resist to the oppressive ideology that equates them with animals. It is also by retaining the final say that they regain their freedom and humanity in death.
Through a retelling of this African myth, Bradley skillfully deconstructs the popular stereotype of the inarticulate, passive slave victim and demonstrates the significance of revealing untold stories of slavery. In this approach, he challenges the prevailing myth of the content, passive slave and epitomizes the notion of slave resistance and struggle that influences John’s entire lineage. John’s reconciliation of the myth of the Flying Africans with his family’s history of suicide enables him to construct a meaningful, heroic family narrative out of the traumatic history of suicides. Since he is the last and only male successor of the Washington family, it is his responsibility to reclaim this ancestral past by “transforming stories of suicide into stories of strength and propelling them into the future” (Snyder 43). Only through an understanding of the real meaning of their suicide can he transform this paternal history of suicide into an honorable family narrative. His articulation of the transgenerational dimension of slavery allows John to reconcile himself with his family history of generational suicides. In addition, the realization of this significant aspect of his legacy affirms his pivotal role in “transforming the crossroads of despair, suicide and separation into an intersection of power, transcendence, and reunion” (Snyder 62). John becomes the chosen descendant to bridge the temporal and spatial gaps between the past and present by means of transmitting this heroic story of his ancestors to next generations. The pertinence of the legend of flying Africans to John’s own ancestors and his own life also suggests a strong linkage and continuity between the present day race relations and the collective past of slavery. Moreover, this significant connection enables John to reify an alternative version of African American history of slavery that glorifies heroic courage and sacrifice of his
enslaved precursors. In this new version, his father conjoined with other “exemplary black men...becomes a goad in John’s mind, an ineluctable impetus towards self-exploration and the need to find a true sense of identity in a given cultural context”, as Klaus Ensslen claims (290). The tragic family narrative that he uncovers is thus transformed into the inspirational agency John has sought to redefine his self in relation to his heritage. Upon his further inquiries into Moses’ and C.K.’s death, John comes to realize that his father’s legacy does not only consist of the books and papers he leaves behind, but of a sense of “power”, the invincible power of his ancestors who bravely stood up to the institution of slavery (162). Thus, John inherits the strength of his heroic runaway ancestors who defied slavery and achieved immortality. In this sense, his family narrative not only reinscribes painful memories of enslavement, but also equips John with an empowering ancestral connection.

Becoming ever more immersed in Jack’s stories, John gradually comes to believe that “the stories were not just stories. They were something else: clues” (45). Jack’s stories are far from being the mere figments of the old man’s imagination, they are the call of his enslaved ancestors who are reaching out to John to tell their tragic story. With this revelation, John assumes the responsibility for piecing together these clues to reconstruct their story. Reminiscing about his childhood days brings back the memory of the day his father was buried. During the funeral ceremony, young John is surprised to discover that he is strangely familiar with the tune of the song they sing for him. He recalls that, “Moses Washington had hummed it for as long as I could remember” (21). Although he knows the tune by heart, it is the first time he hears the words: “And before
I’ll be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord, and be free” (21 emphasis in original). Nine-year-old John is unable to establish any sort of connection between the rebellious words of this African American spiritual and his father’s suicide. Furthermore, he does not grasp the true meaning of freedom for his enslaved ancestors since he belongs to a contemporary period, seemingly distanced from the antebellum era and all the horrors it represents. However, growing up in a racist environment, John himself is not exempt from racial prejudice and hostility. He recalls various incidents of how the elderly protected young boys of the town from being targets of racial violence. Since African Americans were not welcomed in the swimming pool, coffee shop, or the white barbershop, the grown-ups devised ways of dissuading them from attempting to go to these places. For instance, young boys were always taken to an African American barber forty miles away from their hometown since the white barber in town “did not know how to cut a colored man’s hair. Wasn’t that they didn’t want to, now; it was just they didn’t know how” (65 emphasis in original). The subtle mechanism of protection is set up by the elderly to shelter the young boys of the town from the harsh reality of racism. Similarly, when they wanted to swim in the swimming pool, they were told about “the eye-burning chemicals in pool water”, and they “could swim in the river for free and buy sodas with the money” (66). Having experienced the white terror first hand, the African American community endeavored to minimize the encounters with the white world so that the young boys would not grow up to be permanently scarred and “bleed the same way we[the African American community] did every damn day” (66).
As John discovers more about his father and the past, the sense of avoidance, which was the defining emotion of his relationship with his own roots, starts to disappear. His determination to find an escape route from his past, as symbolized by his emotional and physical detachment, is gradually replaced with feelings of respect towards, and acceptance of his paternal heritage. Throughout the narrative, John progresses from an elusive, alienated self to an authentic self that honors his ancestry and cultural heritage. John’s spiritual transformation becomes manifest during the arrangements for Jack’s funeral. When Jack dies, John insists that Jack is buried with his personal belongings, which can be seen as the strongest indication that he embraces a traditional African concept of death, “wherein the soul passes into but another phase of continuous existence” (Bolling 146). Rejecting the European view of death as the ultimate end of human life, he carefully places the items Jack might need in his afterlife into his coffin. John believes that Jack’s soul will persist beyond death and thus buries him with his shotgun, boxes of bullets, a new outfit, a jar of whiskey, chewing tobacco and a new pair of shoes along with his old pair “just in case the new ones hurt his feet” (214). John’s observation of African traditions in Jack’s funeral can be seen as the primary marker of his transformation. It is also highly symbolic that this process starts immediately after the legend of the fugitive slaves is shared with him. No longer following the traditions of his own progressive era, John adopts African notions of afterlife in which “dead and living are viewed as having reciprocal and unifying functions rather than dichotomous ones” as Martha Adams Sullivan extrapolates (161). Life and death, in this view, are not split entities, for they are considered as mutually dependent on another. In this context, death
does not define eradication, but rather seen as a continuation of a different form of existence. Thus, it is not simply antithetical to life, entailing a binary opposition. On the contrary, it is “inherently related to life; it is another dimension or phase of the same phenomenon” (Sullivan 161). The other dimension can be understood as a distant realm of existence, which is not necessarily separate from the physical world since they are inextricably interconnected. The deceased ones, then, are not lost and gone forever, but embody another form and continue to live among the living. Elizabeth Beaulieu illustrates the essential function of ancestor in West African cosmology as follows:

Typically, in Western notions of the spirit, death marks the soul's movement to heaven or some other static afterlife. In contrast, for West Africans, spirits of the deceased remain on earth, dwelling among the living in rivers and trees, and also through their descendants. For the West African, there is no separation between the spiritual and material worlds. The ancestors live on a spiritual continuum between worlds and generations. Therefore, even though an individual's physical body may be gone, s/he remains present as spirit, as ancestor. (4)

The dead ancestors are believed to communicate with the living through various forms with the aim of connecting the past generations with their descendants. From within their realm, the ancestors relate to their successive generations, creating a dynamic web of interconnectedness. As John affirms, “black people didn’t die”, they “simply took up residence in an afterworld” (208). This African notion of dead ancestors interacting with the living also significantly coincides with John’s experience of the transgenerational
phantom. Since death is only a passing from the corporeal to the spiritual, neither C.K. nor Moses is actually dead in the Western sense of the word. They dwell in John and continue to exist outside the limits of linear time. In this regard, for the modern subject, the phantom is not only an ancestral call, but also a reminder of the psychic ancestral bonds that link him with his bloodline. It is upon embracing this dual aspect of his identity can John finally hear the sounds and “smell the awful odor of eternal misery” of his enslaved precursors (214). After spiritually reuniting with his ancestors, John can feel the suffering of millions of lost souls displaced and tortured. He realizes that he has indeed lied to himself in eluding the sounds of his ancestors in the wind. As a high school student, John feels like he is equipped with the “power of knowing” what the sounds in the wind are (383 emphasis in original). He easily dismisses Jack’s belief that the wind carries the panting sounds of the Indians who died in the mountains since he feels empowered by the scientific explanation of how distinct sounds in the wind are formed. He considers Jack as “an ignorant old man, no better than the savages who thought that thunder was the sound of some god’s anger” (383). At this stage in his life, John is still in denial of the spiritual dimension of the African culture that transcends scientific explanations. Nevertheless, he can still hear the sounds, the singing that “filled me [John] with cold fear” (383). He promises himself that he would never go to the mountains and hear the sounds in the wind. He discovers the futility of his promise when he realizes that he still hears the singing for he “had stopped hearing, but I[he] had not stopped listening” (383).
Physical Symptoms of Ancestral Pain on the Contemporary Body

Martin J. Gliserman, in his analysis of the novel, contends that a strong correlation exists between John’s abdominal pains and the unresolved tension in his life. Therefore, the stomach pains he ail from can be understood as somatic symptoms of an unresolved anxiety in his life. Gliserman suggests that the conflicting aspects of John’s past life and present life are accountable for these recurrent pains in his stomach. In his assessment, the tension emanating from these two paradoxical worlds results in a bodily symptom, namely the unexplained stomach pains. Gliserman believes the source of John’s distress to be “rooted in the hero’s historical quest, in the history he discerns, in the primal rage developed within his family with its rage, and his fear of the relationships (and women)” (154). While Gliserman is correct in his observation that the tension embedded in John’s life is primarily induced by his traumatic family history, he fails to address one important aspect of his traumatization. The abdominal pain John experiences is not necessarily generated by this tension, but by the integration of the transgenerational phantom within him. Gliserman’s observation is accurate in the sense that John “is disabled by untold traumas” of his paternal family line, however, it is necessary to add here that these untold traumas also lead to the formation of the phantom (154). In fact, John’s bodily symptoms arise due to the inhabitation of an ancestral specter. In this sense, the constant chill he experiences in his belly can be understood to be a subtle reference to his inheritance of this specter. For instance, John’s “growing old tensions” leads to “a
sudden chill at the base of my[his] belly” (24). As John admits, it is the haunting legacy of Washington family history that causes this persistent feeling of uneasiness in his belly. As Gliserman aptly comments, John “carries both the pain of history and the pain of failure in his belly” (150). The burden of the tragic histories of multiple generations in his family line generates this lack of feeling and numbness in his stomach “which never seemed to get enough warmth” (5). Coldness is also strongly associated with death and decay, which can also be traced back to the ordeal of the Middle Passage. Perhaps, John endures the agony of his ancestors whose bodies were thrown overboard, into the cold waters of the Atlantic. In this regard, it is possible to say that the coldness he experiences in his stomach represents cold, lifeless bodies of his enslaved ancestors. The symptoms emerge as physical manifestations of John’s inheritance of “a sustained history of pain—slavery and its aftermath” since he is “the bearer of five generations of loss” (Gliserman 150, 159). The pains in his belly, then, not only indicate the phantom lodging in him but also embody the pain and loss of his ancestors. Moreover, these pains, perpetrated by the traumatic history of his ancestors, become a means through which they communicate with him from their burial ground, the Atlantic Ocean. This ancestral connection occurs yet on another level, this time on the physical one as signified by the corporeal referent of belly pains. As characterized by this duality, Bradley brings the enslaved and the contemporary descendant together by establishing a physical connection besides the psychical one. As symbolized by John’s experience of abdominal pains, Bradley adopts a corporeal approach to represent the traumatic history of slavery and its effects on the present day. Woolfork’s theory of bodily epistemology emerges as a useful tool to
scrutinize the reasons for John’s belly pain. John’s symptoms can be read as a “representational strategy [that] references the slave past by imagining and addressing the lived experience of slavery in bodily terms” (Woolfork 4). In this context, his body becomes an ethereal bridge through which the corporeal symptoms of ancestral pain are carried into the present day. The chills in John’s stomach, then, should be understood as the reminder of the unresolved historical pain and its implications on the present day. The pains will accompany him until the family secret is revealed and transmitted to the ensuing generations of the Washington family.

Racial Reconciliation through the Shared Historical Narrative

The traumatizing family secret in John’s life is not only symbolized by the existence of a phantom, but also by the subtle links between the male characters of John’s ancestry. John’s adoption of his father’s values, especially his distrust of the white race, when read in terms of relationship with Judith, suggests an unmistakable correspondence between John and his paternal lineage. Judith and John are unable to build a trusting relationship, for John’s inheritance of racial distrust hinders any means of communication between them. As John admits, he “could never really trust her” (150). Just like Moses, who never trusted any white person in his life, John does not trust Judith despite their five-year long relationship. The overwhelming feeling of uncertainty he feels towards Judith disables him to such extend that he cannot establish any kind of intimacy with her. As W. Lawrence Hogue aptly observes, John “is tied or is entrapped, historically and
ideologically, to a version of history or a racial narrative that mistrusts white people” (448). The narrative that Hogue talks about is Moses’ historical and cultural narrative of race that haunts John in his present life. In other words, John carries his ancestors’ collective wounds of slavery, which refuse to heal unless a counter-narrative is created. By means of various dialogues between the interracial lovers, Bradley also signifies racial tension to be the central dilemma in their relationship. For instance, John cannot open himself completely to Judith; either can he surrender to the relationship fully, since he believes she does not grasp what her whiteness means to him. Sensing the underlying cause of John’s mistrust, Judith exclaims, “I’ve got this horrible skin disease. I’m white” (73). Although Judith is aware of the impact of race relations on their relationship, her privileged standpoint prevents her from identifying the emotions lying underneath the surface. Jeffrey B. Leak is accurate in his observation that Judith’s “position in John’s life is characterized by invisibility, a state of being more readily associated with African American experience” (116). Perhaps, this feeling of racial invisibility that has defined his entire family line is what John wants to inflict on a white subject, Judith. By maintaining an indifferent, almost hostile attitude towards Judith, John is taking a symbolic vengeance for all the atrocities committed by the members of her race.

Another significant example of this pattern of racial revenge occurs when John rapes a white girl immediately after his brother Bill’s funeral. He explains Judith that this rape is the repercussion of accumulated feelings of rage and retribution against the white race for his brother’s death in Vietnam. His increased resentment towards the white race reaches a peak when he hears the news of his brother’s tragic death. As Leak contends,
“Since many of the men fighting in the war were often poor, black, or both, John was aware of the racial double standard perpetuated by both his country and community” (118). Repeated instances of racism, intensified with the materialization of the double standard take its toll on John’s psyche. He is conquered by such a powerful rage over racial humiliation that he assaults the white girl whom he perceives as the representative of the entire white race. Rape is, undoubtedly, a violent expression of dominance, control and power. For John, his transgression is an act of vengeance on the white society, which he condemns for his brother’s death. As he admits to Judith, he raped her because “[s]he was white” and when he “looked at her” all he could see was her “whiteness” (75). The overwhelming image of whiteness that haunts him in his dreams finds its parallel in the white skin of the girl. In an attempt to explain his violent act, Judith asks him if “it makes sense to blame white people, just because they’re white…” (75). John admits that he does blame the white race for all the suffering and misery of African Americans. He bitterly adds, “Things have happened and it’s somebody’s fault, and it sure as hell wasn’t ours” (75-76). John’s answer proves that he does not feel any sort of remorse about the rape. He still finds the white race accountable for the death of his brother and the subsequent suffering that follows. His rhetorical decision to refer to his own race as “we” also indicate that he cannot think beyond the reductive concepts of racial identity. Furthermore, his deliberate formulation of we versus you points to the separation he feels from Judith whom he sees as representing the entire white race.

Pavlić considers “racial animosity” to be the dominant emotion in the relationship, and adds, “the relationship probably developed out of John’s need to abuse
‘a daughter of the confederacy’ and flourished by his catering to Judith’s sub-conscious need to repent for ‘her’ ancestors’ oppression of ‘John’s’” (177). While I agree with Pavlić’s assessment that John’s desire for vengeance and retribution for justice ultimately lead to his emotional abuse of Judith, there is no evidence to suggest that Judith feels guilty about or responsible for the atrocities perpetrated by her own race. On the contrary, Judith is portrayed as limited in her understanding of the plight of the enslaved, and equally ignorant of the subsequent racial issues that stem from a history of oppression. Several interactions between the two lovers point to John’s consideration of Judith as incapable of understanding the suffering of his race (73, 160, 384, 390, 450). For instance, upon hearing the news of Jack’s passing, Judith offers to drive to Bedford for the funeral. Judith’s presence in his hometown is unthinkable for John since “she did not [even] understand- she thought he was dead” (160). The primary difference in their opinions is closely intertwined with their adoption of two separate views on death, namely Western and African. While the latter stresses that in Africa “the decedent did not die-he simply took up residence in an afterworld”, and “it is common for the living to report seeing the deceased, and carrying on conversations with him” (208), the former embraces “the Christian sense of the term, dead” (209). Judith cannot relate to the African conceptions of life and death as interconnected realities, and thus she is unable to perceive Jack’s death as the passage into afterlife. Shaped by a Western notion of death, she cannot grasp the real meaning of Jack’s death as it is for John. While John believes in African notions of afterlife, in which the spirits of the departed continue to influence the living, Judith simply thinks of Jack’s death as the ultimate end of the human life.
Despite his recognition of the African conception of a cyclical life, wherein death does not terminate human existence, John admits that neither tradition provides any satisfactory answer in regards to the concept of life and death. Juxtaposing Western and African notions pertaining to the meaning of human existence, John ponders whether it can ever be explained:

No, the quandary is that there is no comfort for us either way. For if European knowledge is true, then death is cold and final, and one set of our ancestors had their very existence whipped and chained and raped and starved away, while the other set—a larger proportion than any of us would like to admit—forever burns in hell for having done it to them. And if the African belief is true, then somewhere here with us, in the very air we breathe, all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering—all of it—is still going on. (emphasis in original 213)

Considering the implications of death from two conflicting perspectives grant John a solid framework to analyze each view respectively. After deliberating of the relevance of each view, John embraces the African belief of death, which affirms his new sense of identity that permanently unites him with his ancestors. With this newly acquired vision, he can also see the pattern of generational suicides in his family line under a new light. In this tradition, the self-immolation of the runaway slaves and “its ritual reenactment by Moses Washington become affirmative heroic gestures (‘going home’ in the sense of
joining their ancestors) rather than symbols of suffering and resignation” (Ensslen 289). The continual suffering of the enslaved that extends to their descendants can also be found at the heart of the African belief. With every breath he takes, John will experience the weight of the atrocities inflicted upon his or her ancestors. The phantom that is generated by this traumatic encounter is in fact the most relevant evidence that all of this dehumanization is still going on (213 emphasis mine). Persistent effects of this psychological trauma, that has taken the form of the phantom, incapacitate multiple generations. The African notion of death also significantly coincides with my argument that the narrative reveals the traumatic family secret through the transgenerational phantom.

It is possible to say that the most significant doublings in John’s paternal family line are between John and his father Moses, and Moses and his grandfather C.K. Undoubtedly, the most convincing evidence between Moses and C.K. is found in his desire to walk in C.K.’s footsteps in his final journey. In addition, Moses, like his ancestor, becomes a successful moonshiner, as well as an influential figure in town. He also marries a woman and has two children in exactly the same way as C.K. John and Moses spend more time apart than they do together since Moses commits suicide when John is nine years old. However, despite the limited time spent together as father and son, certain behavioral similarities can be observed between the two. For example, they both love to read and enjoy strong toddies. Furthermore, as Jack mentions, John hunts just like his father (44). Moses’ treatment of his wife Yvette also mirrors John’s treatment of Judith in the sense that father and son both act indifferent and occasionally cruel towards
their women. Nevertheless, the most compelling evidence that they are psychic doubles is suggested when John decides to follow his father by going on a hunting trip instead of returning to his contemporary life as represented by the city, his job and his girlfriend.

In his determination to solve the mystery of his father’s death, John treks through the wilderness. As Jane Campbell notes, John “enters C. K.’s mind” and by doing so actualizes the “ultimate communion with his ancestor” (149). It is through this convergence of the minds that he can recreate the story of his ancestor and the fugitive slaves, which then leads to his discovery of Moses’ suicide. With his spiritual journey, John realizes that creating a new world for himself out of ancestral wounds necessitates a process of return. This return, however, should not simply be thought as a physical one, it is rather a spiritual one through which he can enter into a continuous dialogue with his ancestors. Moses tells everyone that he is going hunting before he commits suicide at the same spot where C.K. takes his own life. John realizes that Moses actually went on a hunting trip; he was hunting for his ancestor. His death, then, was not an end, but a new life in which he would be joined with C.K. John admits that it was “not suicide. I was wrong about that…I thought I had discovered it was suicide. But what it really was was a…hunting trip’” (388). Moses “was looking for a man”, for his grandfather, C.K., and he found him through death (388). Unable to understand the meaning of hunting as it is for John, Judith exclaims, “That sounds…crazy, she said’. ‘You’re talking about a man chasing after ghosts’”. John corrects her, “‘Ghost isn’t the right word…Ancestors is a better term’” (388). With this revelation, John grasps that the haunting presence in his life is his own ancestors. His former negative reactions to the phantom are replaced with
acceptance and sympathy. The phantom he previously associated with his poignant family history gains an alternative meaning after his discovery of the symbolic meaning of his father’s death.

The commentaries on the hunting metaphor have concentrated primarily on two significant themes of the novel: one, John’s role as a historian to hunt down, figure out and reassemble the facts of his family’s history, two, the capture of C.K. and his fugitive followers after literally being hunted for forty miles. For instance, Martin J. Gliserman argues that “Bradley’s metaphoric view of hunting has the perspective of historically being hunted” (152). In a similar vein, Wilson writes that “Washington as historian/hunter…finishes the story of C.K” by adopting the trope of hunting (104). In these readings, the validity of the hunting metaphor in John’s experience of the transgenerational phantom and its implications on John’s present life remains unanswered. In addition to signifying hunting for a buried past, the trope of hunting crucially stands for John’s own hunting for freedom from his ancestors’ legacy. The family secret of his paternal lineage continues to hunt John until he deciphers the story and passes it on to ensuing generations as an honorable family narrative.

Only by fully embracing the past of his enslaved precursors and reaching a historical understanding of their plight can the healing from the past begin. As Rushdy notes, “He must close the historical gaps in his family history before he can continue with his own future” (92). John not only reconstructs the story of his ancestors by means of which he achieves an ancestral unity, but he also shares it with Judith. In doing so, he
takes the first deliberate step to resolve the racial tension between them, which will ultimately enable him to escape from his fathers’ reductive racial narrative. As John bitterly acknowledges, “There was a lot that I needed that she would never understand. For she was a woman and she was white, and though I loved her there were points of reference that we did not share. And never would” (384). John comes to realize that the racial and cultural differences between them are insurmountable. Yet, he accepts these differences and admits that he loves her in the end. Therefore, even if John initiated the relationship for retribution in the beginning, his attitude towards Judith softens in time as he realizes the possibility of an interracial union. Despite her race, Judith gains his trust by physically and emotionally accompanying him throughout this journey into his family’s past. With the actualization of trust between the two lovers, the symptoms of his abdominal pains along with the feeling of coldness he constantly experiences start to disappear. As John admits, “I realized that there would be no questions. And then I realized that something strange was happening. Because I was no longer cold” (413). Since the racial barriers are conquered, there will not be any further questions or dilemmas in the relationship. John’s emotional transformation is completed with this ultimate acknowledgement of the intimacy and trust between them. At this moment, John’s own reality collides with C.K.’s as their stories coalesce. As C.K.’s lover Harriett warms the coldness “inside, the glacier in his [C.K.’s] guts”, John feels a growing sense of warmth in his own body (413). In this brief moment, the ancestor and the descendant become one as they also reunite with their respective lovers. The freezing coldness is now replaced by the warm, loving hands that “cup[s] the base of his belly” (413).
When they discover the graves of C.K. and the fugitive slaves on the hillside, John and Judith notice a unique pattern in the way they are buried. They are not laid to eternal rest randomly at the spot they surrendered to death. They were buried next to a white family graveyard, and somebody “took the time to bury them…figure[d] out who loved who” (431). It is a white man, miller Iames, who not only buries them next to his own family gravesite, but also carefully arranges their graves after figuring out who belonged together. Iames’ placing these lifeless bodies next to their beloved ones reveals his respect and compassion towards the fugitive slaves. Upon finding their bodies, this white man provides them with a proper burial, honoring their heroic suicide. The discovery of the gravesite remains highly significant for John as it unmistakably points to the possibility of racial healing between the two races. As Leak puts it, “In this moment of intimacy and historical engagement, John and Judith, to a limited degree, transcend their racial history” (125). Iames’ humanistic gesture proves John that racial reconciliation is in fact imaginable and differences can be overcome in time. After reimagining C.K.’s suicide and comprehending its significant connection to his own father’s death, John carefully puts the “books and pamphlets and diaries back where they belonged, ready for the next man who belonged them” (431). It is at this very moment that the transgenerational phantom entombed inside John is exorcised. This act of restoring the clues he has discovered and preparing them for the next one points to an indisputable fact; the legacy will be carried forward to his own offspring. One can argue that since the family secret is revealed, the fugitive slaves, as well as C.K. and Moses are set free. However, John’s deliberate act of putting the materials together for the next
person indicates the regeneration of the transmission of the family legacy. The transgenerational phantom stemming from this family secret, then, will continue to haunt upcoming generations.

In the last scene of the novel, John sends Judith home and sets all of his tools, pens, pencils, ink, pads and cards on fire. Pouring “kerosene freely over the pyre” (431), John wonders:

I was a bit careless, and got some of it on my books, but that would make no difference…And then I left the cabin for the last time…As I struck the match it came to me how strange it would all look to someone else, someone from far away…I wondered if that someone would understand. Not just someone; Judith, I wondered if she would understand when she saw the smoke rising from the far side of the Hill. (431-432)

The ambiguous ending of Bradley’s novel has received various different interpretations. For instance, Campbell suggests that, “John’s final tribute to the ancestors comes when he builds a fire, the ultimate act of power” (150). While Campbell’s observation indicates that John achieves communion with his ancestors by having a final say with this act of burning his tools, Anita Wholuba argues that John commits suicide in the end of the novel. Wholuba writes, “His use of the word ‘pyre’ intimates death; he points out that it did not matter that he spilled kerosene on his boots; and he wonders if Judith would understand, adopting a tone that suggests that he will never know” (101). In her assessment, John follows his ancestors and reunites with them through self-immolation.
since he is careless about the kerosene and wonders if Judith would understand his final
gesture. Rushdy’s reading of the ending extends Bradley’s theme of suicide and suggests
that John “respond[s] to the discovery of his great-grandfather’s emancipator suicide and
his father’s sympathetic suicide by committing a ‘symbolic suicide’” (71). For Rushdy,
John’s burning his research tools implicitly expresses his symbolic suicide. While I share
with Campbell, Wholuba and Rushdy that John conjoins with his ancestors at the end of
his spiritual and physical journey, my reading suggests that the fire metaphor reflects the
extermination of the transgenerational phantom inhabiting him. Since fire connotes
annihilation, in lighting the match, John terminates the burden of the past and exorcises
the phantom. He does not end his own life with this act; he sets the grip of the
traumatizing family past on fire and starts a new life with Judith.
CHAPTER 4

The Enslaved Body As a Site of Traumatic Memory in *Stigmata*

Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata* (1998) chronicles the intersecting lives of three generations of women who remain trapped in the traumatic residue of American slavery. The novel alternates between three different temporal frames: those of Ayo, her granddaughter Grace, and her great-great granddaughter, the protagonist, Elizabeth (Lizzie) Du Bose. Ayo’s story occurs between the years 1846-1900, and includes the memories of her life in Africa, her capture and the ensuing voyage of the Middle Passage followed by her life in bondage in the New World. Grace’s story starts in 1914 and continues to 1958, and Lizzie’s contemporary life covers the years between 1974 and late 1990s. Perry, following her precursors discussed in the previous chapters, also abandons narrative realism and relies on supernatural fiction to reconstitute the trauma of the primal scene for African Americans. By means of the supernatural devices of ancestral haunting, reincarnation and bodily possessions, Perry blurs the physical, temporal and spatial separations between the past of slavery and the free present to such an extent that they become significantly indistinguishable from one another in her narrative. Her allusions to transgenerational haunting, ghostly figures, and most significantly, the
novel’s title *Stigmata* also refer to a spectral presence existing beyond the contemporary temporal realm of the modern protagonist. *Stigmata* thus becomes another appropriate text to trace the indelible marks of transgenerational trauma of enslavement on the contemporary African American subject.

Readers are introduced to Lizzie after her story of ancestral haunting comes to a close. She begins to narrate her story from a psychiatric institution to which she is confined. Lizzie shares with the readers that: “I’m at the end of pain and the yelling, the crying and the cringing. The voices no longer hound me. My world is neat and unstained. There is no more blood, but there are scars” (2). From the very first pages of the novel, with the images of hounding uncanny voices and blood, the existence of a ghostly, transgenerational entity is introduced. Thus, early in the novel Perry presents the haunting legacy, the family secret Lizzie unknowingly carries in her contemporary consciousness. Furthermore, the corporeal references to the scarred body of Lizzie add a physical dimension to her psychological haunting. In a comparable theme to Dana of Butler’s *Kindred*, Lizzie is literally possessed by the ancestors of her maternal lineage. The phantoms of the two women in her family, her great-great grandmother Ayo and her own grandmother Grace quite literally extend far beyond their graves, and reach out to their descendant by paranormal means. As Rashkin maintains, Abraham and Torok’s phantom “holds the individual within a group dynamic constituted by a specific familial (and

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7 On the recurrent images of scarring in African American Literature, see Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975).
sometimes extrafamilial) topology that prevents the individual from living life as his or her own” (27). Lizzie’s contemporary identity and her individual consciousness start to vanish with her inheritance of the familial legacy of slavery. She is unable to live her own modern life, for she is physically and mentally entrapped in an interconnected web of catastrophic experiences of her family line.

The traumatic memories of her maternal lineage, namely the violent journey of the Middle Passage and the unimaginable horrors of slavery, are inscribed in Lizzie’s twentieth century consciousness. Perry, however, complicates the concept of a contemporary consciousness that is detached from a historical and a collective one, as it becomes problematic for the reader to distinguish between the multiple layers of consciousness that pervade Lizzie’s own. As Madhu Dubey observes, “Within the temporality of haunting, the past breaks into the present like a ghostly intruder and the distance between then and now dissolves into a disorienting sense of simultaneity” (789). The haunting Lizzie experiences emanates from two distinct sites of memory, the memories of Ayo and Grace respectively. Her haunted soul, then, does not only belong to her own twentieth century era, but also persists beyond metaphysical realms where her maternal ancestors dwell. Hence, Lizzie’s own memories, and those of her own maternal lineage all converge in her own consciousness.

On the one hand, the spiritual and physical merging can be seen as Perry’s attempt to re-envision and recapture what has been lost to history, yet, on the other, this can be read as the unburied voices of the enslaved ancestors seeking justice in the modern
world. In this sense, Perry’s employment of multiple voices in the narrative takes on a double meaning. One, it enables her to carry the original trauma of enslavement into the present day, and two, it provides the readers a firsthand account of the reality of the institution of slavery, thus authenticating the dehumanizing story of millions that fell victim to the peculiar institution. The narrative multiplicity in conjunction with the disjunctions in temporal and spatial domains generate breaches in the novel that point to an immense psychological trauma. In addition, the disjointedness Perry employs in her narrative parallel Lizzie’s fragmented sense of identity. Disparate voices and diverging experiences of Lizzie’s antecedents hover between the realms of the living and the dead, thus taking permanent refuge in her body. The phantoms of her ancestors demand a voice through which they can narrate their stories and seek retribution for the injustices of the painful past. As Abraham and Torok claim, “The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious— for good reason. It passes-in a way yet to be determined—from the parent’s unconscious into the child” (qtd. in Rashkin 28). Due to the severity of the traumatic experiences of the Middle Passage and the subsequent horrors of enslavement, the traumatic event is never properly registered in the conscious mind, yet it is transformed into a psychic phantom that haunts ensuing generations.

Lizzie, then, becomes the agent through which her ancestors regain their voice, which was denied to them in their lifetime. Through literally inhabiting Lizzie’s body, they also assume a corporeal presence and reclaim their own bodies, which once belonged to the white masters. As Camille Passalacqua aptly comments, “The figurations of the female body in Stigmata offer what Ayo’s trauma erased—a corporeal language of
dignity and respect that must be recuperated out of the violated, wounded, scarred, discarded, suffering, and sometimes dead black female bodies” (152). It is possible to say that the original trauma of displacement that haunts the entire family line is initiated with the abduction of Ayo from her motherland, Africa. With this primal breach, a traumatizing family secret comes into existence and is transformed into a phantom that will continue to affect multiple generations of the same family. This transgenerational phantom, first takes the form of Ayo and haunts Grace, and when Grace passes away, she also returns as a phantom, and finds a voice in Lizzie’s body. Thus, Lizzie’s haunting is multilayered in that two ancestral phantoms lodge in her body to remind her of unhealed wounds of slavery and their persistent legacy.

It is noteworthy in Woolfork’s comment that Ayo’s experiences of the Middle Passage and the subsequent horrors of enslavement “permanently imprint themselves on Ayo’s sense of self and transcend her body after death” (48). The enslaved body of Ayo, relegated to corporeality by the Atlantic Slave Trade, crosses generational divides to occupy a central position in the reformation and transmission of traumatic memories. Through this transmission, the subsequent generations of women are made to “relive pivotal moments in Ayo’s life in the diaspora and are physically marked with her wounds” (Woolfork 48). Ayo displaces the traumatic memories of her slave past onto her descendants and creates a generational link of traumatization that is originated from the primal scene. Grace and Lizzie are not only psychologically possessed by fragmentary recollections of Ayo’s life, but also bear the physical wounds of their enslaved ancestor on their contemporary bodies. For instance, Lizzie explains to her doctor that she is
physically marked with “permanent remembrance of the power of time folded back upon
himself”, and carries the scars of the history of slavery on her own body as a living
“proof of lives intersecting from past to present” (204). The scars she bears not only
witness the horrors that the enslaved female body is made to suffer, but also authenticates
the vital connection between the enslaved ancestor and her present day descendant. In
accordance with Lizzie’s definition of the scars of captivity, Saidiya Hartman defines the
pain inflicted on black bodies as “the history that hurts-the still-unfolding narrative of
captivity, dispossession, and domination that engenders the black subject” (51). The
contemporary African American subject is not liberated from the pains of history since
the wounds of the past are still open and bleeding. In this sense, the physical markers of
slavery surface in the bodies of the descendants and become tangible realities, existing
beyond physical boundaries of time. As Lisa A. Long aptly posits, “Without the bodily
transubstantiation of distant suffering there is no apprehension of the past” (461). These
tortured bodies refuse to perish, for their stories are incomplete, and their quest for justice
unfulfilled. Since historical representations and oral stories cannot adequately describe
the horrors of slavery, a corporal experience is deemed necessary to transmit the pain of
the scarred bodies of the enslaved into the present world.

On her fourteenth birthday, Lizzie inherits a trunk from her grandmother Grace,
which consists of three significant items from her ancestral past, the journal of Ayo, a
faded quilt made by Grace and a blue piece of fabric that also belonged to Ayo. These
items are particularly rich in symbols since each offers Lizzie a different vantage point
through which to attain a visceral experience of her maternal past of slavery. Upon her
possessions of these items from her family’s past, Lizzie begins having visions, loses consciousness on multiple occasions and bleeds from inexplicable wounds. Perceiving these mysterious occurrences as a sign of her deteriorating mental health, her parents institutionalize her. Further, doctors fail to understand the repeated, intrusive phenomena she experiences and diagnose her with schizophrenia with suicidal tendencies. Lizzie is thirty-four years old when she is finally released from several mental institutions to where she has been committed. At the end of her journey in and out of these institutions, Lizzie comes to embrace her past and learns to live with the traumatic memories of her forebears. Lizzie’s parents, as well as the doctors, fail in their attempts to cure Lizzie’s disease since they try to interpret and cure the wounds of enslavement from an emotionally detached, present perspective. They exhibit a sense of indifference towards their history of slavery and approach the issue with an apathetic 20th century sensibility. After her ordeal, Lizzie is equipped with the subjective perspective and firsthand knowledge of the past and at this point in the narrative, the process of her recovery begins. She decides to make a quilt that will narrate the story of her enslaved ancestor that she will pass on to subsequent generations, thereby continuing the family legacy.

With her inheritance of the trunk, Lizzie not only inherits the traumatic memories of her ancestors that become a defining aspect of her present day identity, but she also possesses Ayo’s physical wounds that mysteriously manifest themselves on her body. It is important to emphasize here that the location of Lizzie’s scars is not haphazard since the circular marks on her wrists and ankles, and whip scars on her back correspond to Ayo’s physical scarring from the shackles during her capture and her wounds from her
life as a slave. Ayo, as a young girl, is kidnapped and transported across the Atlantic under unspeakable conditions of slavery. She is, then renamed as Bessie and sold to a plantation where she starts her new life of constant terror and misery. Ayo tells Joy how they erased her sense of self by giving her a new name: “Ayo got los when she crossed the water. Bessie kinda took over. She had to think like her not like Ayo from Afraca” (50). Ayo’s renaming in the New World not only signifies the erasing of her identity but also marks the ultimate breach from her African heritage. As Tunde Adeleke puts it, “Clearly, the deconstruction of the African identity and background was central to the acquisition of mastery over the slaves, and it began with the practice of stripping the slaves of their African names and renaming them” (30). Her renaming is only the beginning of the lifelong dehumanization that Ayo will have to endure.

**Breaking the Traumatic Silence**

Ayo asks her daughter, Joy, to write her story, so that her tragic story will be remembered and passed on long after her death. She communicates to Joy that, “This is for those whose bones lay sleepin in the heart of mother ocean for those who tomorrows I never knew who groaned and died in that dark damp aside a me. You rite this daughter for me and for them” (7). Ayo narrates her memories to honor and preserve the memory of nameless, unclaimed bodies that lay in the depths of the Atlantic. Her journal bears witness to such indescribable atrocities, and serves as a tangible record of the suffering it so vividly documents. As Corinne Duboin writes, Ayo’s journal “mirrors the victim’s
imperative need to break silence and share resurfacing memories” (290). In this context, Ayo’s journal performs a double function. One, the untold stories of Ayo’s people will enable their descendants to utilize the history of their ancestors to renegotiate their identities in the present. Two, with this journal, the resilience of the enslaved ancestors will also be passed on so that these victims will not only be defined by their plague, but also by their courage and strength against extreme adversity. It could easily be surmised that by having Joy dictate her memories, Ayo intends to claim agency to her own narrative and finds a voice amidst the oppressive silence. In this sense, writing becomes an act of healing, a therapeutic way of transforming trauma. Despite her limited mastery of the language and inability to write, Ayo never loses the determination to tell her tale and transmits her traumatic memories through the agency of her daughter’s pen.

In his essay “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” Dori Laub also emphasizes the significant role testimony plays in transforming traumatic memories into narrative memories. Laub theorizes that for survivors of a traumatic event, recovering from trauma necessitates retelling of the event. Through reconstructing and narrating the traumatic incident, survivors can integrate this traumatic experience into their present lives. Laub writes, “There is, in each survivor, an imperative to tell and thus come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (emphasis in original 63). Laub’s idea of buried truth unmistakably correlates with Abraham and Torok’s concept of family secrets and return of the dead. In Lizzie’s story, the buried family secret haunting the modern subject is the presence of an enslaved
ancestor in her maternal lineage. In order to pacify transgenerational phantoms that return from their graves to complete their unfinished business, their stories must be narrated. In a similar vein, Van der Kolk and van der Hart note that, "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it" (176). By having Joy dictate her memories, Ayo weaves together her fragmented memories into a coherent narrative, by means of which she can achieve liberation from her poignant experiences.

Perry’s narrative abounds with the horrifying scenes of violence, abuse, murder and death, which elucidate Ayo’s experiences of the Middle Passage. In spite of the fact that neither Lizzie nor Grace physically experienced the horrifying transatlantic voyage, they are both plagued by the nightmares of “water and blood and death” (56). Ayo’s memories of the Middle Passage, the “point of rupture” for Ayo, precede the births of Grace and Lizzie (Hartman 74). Nevertheless, both women suffer from the physical marks as well as the affective impact of the traumatizing experience. As Lizzie narrates:

We hurt, our body hurts. Arms and ankles and back...Ayo is there, reminding us who we are. And we can’t stop the sea from rolling beneath us and we can’t stop the fear. The chains go on over our skin, no matter how much we holler. We don’t understand what the white ones say and
they don’t understand us, but they know they are hurting us, don’t they?

(57)

The impact of Ayo’s poignant memories exceeds the boundaries of linear temporality and they are inescapably transmitted into her descendants’ present lives. These memories are so deeply ingrained in her consciousness that their effects still resonate in the present, incapacitating the lives of her descendants. Upon her experiences of bodily scarring and mysterious transportations back to the horrors of enslavement, Grace decides to move to Detroit in order to escape the family legacy, abandoning her family in Alabama. For her, the physical pain that Ayo inflicts on her becomes so unbearable that she fears she is losing her sanity. As Trudier Harris contends, Grace desperately attempts to find a new life free from “the pain of enslavement and punishment that is heaped upon her body through the stigmata that epitomize Ayo’s experiences” (140). The stigmata, which also gives its name to the novel, then, is the embodiment of the permanent marks of slavery that still continue to affect the present generations. The destruction that the traumatic past of slavery caused is so severe that it becomes impossible for the descendants to relinquish the tragic past and move on unscathed.

The Christian notion of resurrection finds its parallel in Ayo and Grace’s rebirths in Lizzie’s body just as the sufferings of the enslavement are compared to Jesus Christ’s ordeal. Despite the title of the novel Stigmata has religious connotations and Lizzie’s body marks can possibly be linked to the crucifixion wounds of Christ, Lizzie cannot be read as a religious figure whose suffering will redeem the sins of humanity. Lizzie does
not bear the wounds of Christ on her body, for her enslaved forebear is the one who inflicted them. Hence, the scars she bears can be read as the materialization and transgenerational transmission of the horrors of the enslavement. In order to elucidate the supernatural dimension of her narrative, Perry creates a Catholic priest whom Lizzie encounters in one of the mental institutions where she is treated. The priest confirms the possibility of reincarnation and believes Lizzie when she explains that her scars are “A legacy. Two lifetimes ago. I was a slave then” (212). Father Tom has a different approach to her scars as he calls her a “healer”, thus not only validating her experience but also giving her the reason for her inexplicable suffering (213). Ayo’s pains and trials are carried into the present day for a significant cause. As Father Tom reveals, “Maybe you’re marked so you won’t forget this time, so you will remember and move on” (213). In ways comparable to Ayo’s journal, Lizzie’s body serves as a physical reminder of the pains of enslavement, which should always be remembered and passed on so that the future generations will celebrate the ones who endured and survived such atrocities.

Illuminated by the priest’s conception of stigmata, Lizzie describes her experience as “A mysterious physical trauma. I wasn’t praying when it happened, though. I was remembering. Remembering something unbelievably traumatic” (214). As Lizzie reveals, what haunts her is the unregistered, traumatic memories of Ayo. She remembers the painful events of Ayo’s life that actually occurred over a century ago. In an interview with Corinne Duboin, Perry suggests the possibility of subsequent generations’ inheriting the pain of their ancestors. Perry states, “In addition to inheriting physical traits and household objects, we inherit other people’s pain, other people’s prejudices, we inherit
other people’s versions of history” (637). In order to represent the transmission of painful memories of the ancestors in her fiction, she turns to speculative fiction and integrates the supernatural elements of haunting, reincarnation, bodily possessions into her narrative.

The title of Perry’s novel both enacts and transforms the Christian meaning of stigmata in that, she utilizes it “to promote a proximate connection to black traumatic history” and illustrates that “Just as Christ’s wounds speak to Christians today…Ayo’s wounds can do the same for her descendants” (Woolfork 58, 60). These glorious wounds inflicted on the modern subject become reminders of the price her enslaved ancestors paid for the freedom she exercises today. The contemporary heroine owes her ancestors an irreducible debt of gratitude for the strength and resilience in surviving the unimaginable, and for curing the nation of the curse of slavery. Within this context, Woolfork’s analysis successfully illustrates how “the novel works to counter cultural apathy regarding slavery” (50). The ignorance of the past of slavery should be addressed and recuperated by establishing ancestral connections across time and space. The contemporary subject is transported into the past so that she can bear witness to the violence and suffering, thus overthrowing the apathy surrounding the plight of millions of Africans. In one of the most memorable scenes of the novel, Lizzie is pulled into the past again and finds herself inside the slave ship that carries its human cargo to the New World. In her own words:

The ground slowly rolls under my feet. I smell-taste-sweat and blood and months of misery. The scent knocks me dizzy for a moment and I stumble
forward. Then I am pulled, jerked. I open my eyes, but there is a void in front of me...I see the deck, the water beyond and the line of dark bodies going jerkily forward into the ghost-land...The rail is under my palm, the weight of another person dangles from my wrist. The bottom of my foot scrapes the top of the rail; I try to ignore the sound of the chain dragging along the wooden deck...The man attached to my wrist whispers to me urgently in some strange tongue. When I turn to look at him, there is some slow-crackling fire in his stare. I am to go, his eyes say, and he’ll go with me. (85-86)

In the passage quoted at length above, Perry elicits a horrifying, vivid picture of the brutal journey of the Middle Passage as seen from one of the captive’s, Ayo’s perspective. Ayo’s presence in Lizzie’s body reveals itself when she is uncontrollably cast into this intolerable journey, which marks the beginning of a lifetime of enslavement. The reader, along with the twentieth century African American subject, bears witness to Ayo’s first-hand account of violence, torture and sufferings. There is a strong suggestion that historical accounts of the traumatic journey that attempt to convey this ordeal from a physically and temporally detached standpoint cannot render an authentic representation. Accessing the truth necessitates an actual return to this primal scene of trauma. Perry evokes the inhumane conditions of the slave ship with the powerful images of suffocating stench of blood and sweat. The suffering Ayo and other captives endured, intensified with the terrors of this transatlantic journey paralyzes her with fear. In such an atmosphere of constant atrocities and with no hope, self-inflicted death becomes the only
viable option. Slave suicides, a recurrent theme in representations of the Middle Passage, also arise in Perry’s narrative. Bound together by chains and shackles in a slave coffle, Ayo and her male counterpart resort to suicide by throwing themselves overboard. Entrapped in Ayo’s body, Lizzie finds herself in the depths of the ocean. Her cousin Ruth, who witnesses the scene of drowning in the present day Alabama, pulls her out of the water, saving her life. Nevertheless, Lizzie comes back from this nightmarish episode with physical evidence of water and blood, which indisputably validates her out-of-body experience.

As suggested earlier, both Grace and Lizzie are haunted by the indirect or second hand renderings of Ayo’s primal trauma. The obscuring of the confines of individual and collective memory enables the members of ensuing generations to inherit and relive the past memories of their ancestors. As Lizzie confesses to her father, “I remember something that I know can’t be true” (100). She does possess memories of her enslaved ancestor despite the fact that she was born a century later than the events she remembers. In this context, the individual memories of Grace and Lizzie, are conjoined by that of their ancestor creating, to borrow a phrase from Marianne Hirsch, an interconnected web of “postmemory ” (106). Hirsch defines postmemory as a “structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience (106 emphasis in original). In this context, her concept of postmemory can be seen as the mechanism through which the traumatic experiences of the past are reenacted by subsequent generations of the initial trauma victim. Hirsch goes on to contend that:
Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before…To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. (Hirsch 106, 107)

As Hirsch points out, trauma, by its very nature, is an event beyond human comprehension and an accurate representation of the traumatic experience is impossible. The emotional intensity surrounding the traumatic event is so agonizing that its impact remains intact even after its direct bearer is deceased. The memories of the catastrophic event, as if frozen in time, retain their emotional intensity and are permanently stored until they are reembodied by unwitting descendants. The memories associated with the traumatic experience continue to haunt the following generations, conquering and superseding their own contemporary memories. It is possible to observe this paradigm of overpowering inherited memories in Lizzie’s temporary episodes of memory loss. For Lizzie, the possession of her inherited memories and experiences become so unbearable that she cannot properly function in her present day reality. She loses her sense of personal identity as “her identity becomes intricately and dangerously entwined with the essences of Ayo and Grace” (Long 470). The phantoms residing in her body are so
assertive that Lizzie’s own consciousness starts to fade as her identity merges with those of Ayo and Grace.

Although Hirsch’s discussion of postmemory is valuable to refer to the unconsciously inherited ancestral memories, Hirsch fails to explain the process of the transmission of traumatic memories of victimized generations. Her notions of intergenerational and transgenerational transmission of trauma also remain limited only to memory as she discounts corporeal aspects of psychological trauma that is also manifested through various means in the subsequent generations. Memory by itself does not specifically account for the structure of transmission of transgenerational trauma. Hirsch believes that memories of past generations are remembered “only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (106). This, however, is a debatable point, for Hirsch does not take into account those who do not have any kind of direct or indirect experience with the traumatic event, but still display the symptoms associated with it. From this point of view, her theory fails to give a reason for the same phenomenon experienced in ensuing generations who, by nature of their generational gap or mechanisms of detachment and denial, are not exposed to stories, images or behaviors of the primarily traumatized ancestors. This is nowhere more apparent then Lizzie’s unconscious inheritance of the fragmented memories of her great -great grandmother Ayo. Lizzie’s mother, Sarah, carefully detaches herself and her family from her family’s traumatic history of slavery so that Lizzie can grow up completely unaware of the past traumas of her ancestors. Thus, neither Lizzie’s reenactment of the traumatic memories of her ancestors nor her bodily scarring can be explained merely by the concept of
postmemory. Neither Lizzie, nor her mother is in close proximity to the catastrophic events of their maternal ancestry. Yet, while Lizzie suffers from transgenerational haunting and remains possessed by the traumatic memories of Ayo, Sarah does not. Likewise, while Grace is tormented by the painful memories of her grandmother, Joy does not experience the traumatic episodes of her own mother. In the narrative, however, no evidence is suggested as to the reason why the transgenerational transmission of trauma skips a generation.

Reenacting Trauma Through Multiple Voices within One Body

On numerous occasions, Lizzie refers to two separate identities tied together in her body when she feels she is “Old and young. Old and young at the same time” (45). The traumatic past of enslavement is not a fixed construct any longer, for Lizzie can concurrently occupy the past and the present. Since the past ceases to be in linear continuum with the present and future, its effects are transformed into the present time. The collapse of the linear temporal structure physically and mentally entraps Lizzie to such an extent that she is stuck “between adjacent worlds” (53). That Ayo’s soul residing in Lizzie’s consciousness becomes most apparent when Lizzie explains to her doctor that she is “just a typical nineteenth-century nigger with an extraordinary gift. The gift of memory” (204). Ayo’s identity manifests itself once again as Lizzie is dominated by the intensity of the enslaved woman’s memories. Unable to find an escape route, Lizzie ultimately surrenders and identifies herself as her great-great grandmother. Perry further
dramatizes Lizzie’s imprisonment in the scene when her doctor asks her to document her experiences. When the doctor insists Lizzie’s episodes to be dreams, Lizzie asserts: “I don’t need to write anything down. I’m not going to forget. Do you think I can forget my own life?” (205 emphasis mine).

Another instance of this occurs when Lizzie states how she feels out of place and disoriented in her current day reality in the following words: “that creepy feeling begins to sneak up on me again, that feeling of looking back into time at some distant point and feeling more familiar with that place then where I am now” (65). Her familiarity with another era preceding her own birth can be explained with the transgenerational phantoms of her ancestors incorporated into the contemporary subject. From another perspective, it is possible to interpret Lizzie’s experience with the African concept of circular time, in which cycles of birth and death are endless. Hence, reincarnation and afterlife can be seen as possible occurrences. As Perry blurs the tempo-spatial distinctions between the past and the present to demonstrate the limits of a linear temporal setting in representing catastrophic events, she suggests circular time as an alternative perception of time and history.

The notion of circular, ever-repeating time as opposed to a linear one aligns well with the concept of reincarnation, which Perry illustrates through Lizzie, and Grace’s current life symptoms of Ayo’s painful past life experiences. Similarly, the circular approach reflects an unbreakable cycle and harbors the possibility of rebirth after death. The circular notion of time can also be directly linked to Ayo and her African roots. Ayo
explains to Joy that, “I come from a long line of forever people. We are forever. Here at the bottom of heaven we live in the circle. We back and gone and back again” (7). African cultures conceptualize death as just a beginning, not as the ultimate cessation of life. Thus, when considered through the lens of an African conception of time and death, Ayo is still alive. Her soul, lodged in the consciousness of her descendants, continues to live in the present. Upon witnessing the haunting of her sister Grace, Lizzie’s Aunt Eva, embraces a circular view of time and she explains Lizzie that “The past- that’s what you call it-is a circle. If you walk long enough, you catch up with yourself” (117). Her words offer Lizzie a sense of relief from the troubling idea that she is insane. Eva also calls Lizzie by her sister’s name “Grace” acknowledging the phantom of Grace lodged inside her (emphasis in original 119). As Lizzie reveals, “I had confirmation that Eva did understand, she knew who I was” (218). Hence, Lizzie’s supernatural experiences are authenticated by another member of the same family. Both Eva and Ruth bear witness to the out of body experiences of Lizzie and are aware of the transgenerational trauma that affects multiple generations of their family.

Before she dies, Ayo also tells Joy that this cycle of generational trauma will continue with her granddaughter, Grace. Ayo is aware that her tormented soul will persist to live and narrate the story of her lost life. She reveals Joy that “She[her granddaughter Grace] can’t get here cause I’m in the way...But when I’m gone she come to take my place. She gon know thangs the one that’s comin. She’ll know things and that knowin be a gift from me her family that’s lost” (33-34). Ayo’s oracle comes to fruition as both Grace and her own granddaughter Lizzie literally carry the traumatic historical wounds of their
ancestor. Ayo’s story is not an individual family story; it represents a cycle of collective pain, which also needs to be addressed on a collective level. Her story, along with the stories of millions of others, should be recorded and preserved for many generations to come, so that the grave mistakes of the past will not be repeated.

It is imperative for both Ayo and Grace to return from their graves to haunt their descendant since they both have an unfinished business in the world of the living. For instance, while Ayo reincarnates to speak of the plight of the millions of Africans, Grace admits that her unfinished work is “reclaiming my sixty-one-year-old daughter” (93). Grace, possessing Lizzie’s body endeavors in vain to explain her daughter that life is “nonlinear” (93). Sarah, however, experiences what Stuart Hall calls as “the profound historical forgetfulness…a kind of historical amnesia, a decisive mental repression” regarding the reality of her family’s past of enslavement (25). The past, which she associates with the pain of being abandoned by her mother at an early age, is nothing but a distant, foreign entity to her. Furthermore, she does not have any conception of the African circular version of time, thus she cannot grasp the possibility of reincarnation. Sarah insists, “You may see it as a circle. But it always seems like a line to me…The past is past” (93). At this stage, Sarah is still in denial of the resonance of her family past in her present life. Being entrapped in Lizzie’s body, her mother Grace desperately attempts to find a way of reaching her to tell her the truth. As Lizzie exclaims, ‘I want to stand up and declare myself to her, cry, ‘I am the circle! The circle stands before you!’” (94). The pain of Grace in having to abandon her child also powerfully resonates with the devastating experience of enslaved mothers whose children were taken away from them.
It is possible to infer that by separating Grace from her family, Perry establishes the parallelism of the lives of three women on yet another level. For instance, Grace’s displacement from her home in Alabama echoes Ayo’s traumatic displacement, being the initial loss of her home in Africa. In a similar manner, Lizzie’s numerous relocations from one psychiatric hospital to another give the reader a sense of disorientation which all three women share as a reminder of their haunting legacy. As Duboin suggests, Lizzie’s contemporary dislocations can “be read as the disenfranchisement and official marginalization of black women, the continuation of a forced exile and wandering within a predominantly white, patriarchal society” (295). Duboin’s analysis becomes especially relevant when the prevalence of racist and sexist oppression of African American women in today’s society is considered. Thus, the parallelism Perry conveys not only demonstrates the close proximity of the modern subject to the times of slavery but also portrays a clear picture of the repetitive pattern of victimization and its constant resonance in the current day.

At the end of her ordeal, Lizzie finally feels cured of all the haunting phantoms of her family’s past. Her recuperation is initiated with her acceptance of her family legacy and its undeniable resonance in her present life. By means of her physical and psychological connection with her enslaved ancestor and the reconciliation of ancestral memories, she ultimately achieves a sense of belonging. Lizzie communicates the reader that she is redeemed from the suffocating grip of the past that has plagued her for so long:
I am free, I remember. These things can’t hurt me anymore. The story on these diary pages belongs to me, but they don’t own me. My memories live somewhere spacious now; the airless chamber of horrors has melted into the ground. I guess psychotherapy, psychiatry and long-term residential treatment really cured me of something. Cured of fear. Made me live with every part of myself every day. Cured me of the certainty that I was lost. (46-47).

While, her physical and mental entrapments in the past of slavery allow Lizzie to grasp and appreciate the meaning of her freedom, Ayo transforms her traumatic memories into narrative memory and achieves immortality. Following the same tradition, Grace transforms them into a quilt, which can also be understood as a vehicle to pass on the family legacy to the next descendant. Lizzie also inscribes her memories and Grace’s story to a tangible piece of art, again a quilt for the upcoming generations to witness the pain and understand the value of their freedom. As Duboin writes, “Both Grace and Lizzie feel the need to make a quilt so as to tell the stories of haunting forebears and free themselves from their traumatic hold” (294). Lizzie’s acceptance and integration of the traumatic memories of enslavement cure her of the fears that plagued her.

By means of reincarnations and transgenerational haunting, Ayo transmits her painful memories into the present and Grace reunites with her daughter Sarah. The transgenerational phantoms of Ayo and Grace can now be exorcised since their mission in Lizzie’s world is complete As Harris contends, “The circle of which Ayo spoke can be
complete only when the relationship with Sarah is repaired, for that has been the primary
tear in the mother/daughter fabric” (146-147). Grace, utilizing Lizzie’s body,
communicates her daughter that she came back to reclaim her. While they work on the
quilt, she tells Sarah her story of ancestral haunting and the reason she had to abandon
her. Sarah is engulfed in feelings of “grief, fear, disbelief, revelation” (227). In disbelief
she exclaims: “‘If you are my mother,’ she says, ‘then tell me…about that day…’” (229).
Sarah demands to know about the day she was abandoned in order to confirm that her
own daughter is in fact the reincarnation of her mother. Grace/Lizzie narrates the story of
Ayo’s possession of her mind and body. When Grace’s story is finished, Sarah has tears
in her eyes. She “finishes the stitching” of the quilt, thus bringing her mother’s story to a
full close (230). Grace shares with the reader that “The circle is complete and my
daughter sits across from me with the gap finally closed” (230). The mother and
daughter, torn from each other by the realities of slavery, finally reunite. The rupture and
haunting created by the memories of enslavement also come to a full circle, symbolizing
the beginning of a new life free from the burden of the past. The phantoms of Lizzie’s
ancestors can be laid to rest now that their unfinished business in the present is complete.
As for Lizzie, she learns from the first hand experience not to take her current day
freedom for granted. She must remember and continue to tell the tale of her ancestors
who were stripped of their humanity and never knew freedom.
CHAPTER 5

Unsettling Racial Boundaries: The Ambivalent Identity in *The Known World*

Edward P. Jones, in *The Known World* (2003), presents a distinctive approach to the familiar historical and social context of American slavery. Despite the fact that *The Known World* utilizes the history of American slavery as its subject matter, Jones’ unique perspective in handling this complex issue sets his novel aside from conventional accounts of slave narratives. While the latter engages in a predominant frame of reference, which puts white racial supremacy at the center of the power relations between the white and the black, the former constructs an unconventional narrative of slavery by obscuring these very dynamics. In *The Known World*, Jones skillfully inverts the familiar world of race relations and puts it in a completely different framework by taking the reader to the world of black slave owners in the antebellum South. By subverting the long-held historical assumptions that rest on the notion of the white dominant slave owner, Jones complicates the boundaries that encompass power relations between the two races. In other words, by introducing an inverted system of racial hierarchy, Jones, as Katherine Clay Bassard notes, “reconfigures the coordinates of race, gender, and power as multiple and sometimes contradictory sites for the (dis)location of black subjectivity” (407).
This paramount departure from the familiar context of traditional slave narratives not only qualifies his novel as a neo-slave narrative, but also presents a challenge to the prevailing notions of master-slave relationship, which is at the core of the foundation of American slavery. More fundamentally, Jones’ alternative vision pertaining to the institution of slavery compels the reader to reimagine issues surrounding racial identity and race relations. Susan V. Donaldson in “Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South”, emphasizes the ways in which Jones poses a challenge to the concept of mastery and the historical accounts of slavery “by exposing the daily operations and limits of power and domination, excavating the counternarratives blocked by these operations, and ultimately revising both the content and the form of the historical record” (268). Jones’ paradoxical narrative of American slavery that takes black slave owners as its subject matter, then, intends to scrutinize the traditional slave narratives as well as the notion of mastery. Furthermore, his narrative demonstrates how the institution of slavery equally destroys lives of both black slaves and black slave owners. This unconventional focus also allows Jones to epitomize the collapse of the system of slavery for all parties involved, regardless of their race. His reversal of emphasis regarding the dominant racial dichotomy not only functions as a critique of the conventional narratives of slavery that merely center on the idea of enslavement, but also signifies his intention of repositioning the genre by means of countering the predominant discourses on American slavery. There is little doubt that Jones’ preoccupation with the historical period of American slavery informs his themes of race and identity in The Known World. In this sense, Jones’
deconstructive revision of the historical knowledge of slavery can be regarded as a significant contribution to the genre of neo-slave narrative.

Sharing with other contemporary revisions of traditional slave narratives, Jones abandons literary realism to focus on the internal voices of his characters. Therefore, in contrast to traditional narratives on slavery, such as Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), *The Known World* does not follow a linear or cyclical pattern of narration determined by chronological frameworks. Rather, “chronology in the text is flexible and fluid”, and the narrative is structured around flashbacks and inner thoughts of various characters (Harris 177). This disjointed sense of temporality as well as shifting perspectives that Jones employs allow the reader to feel the timelessness that surrounds the trauma of slavery. The narrative does not provide a logical sense of time since the collective experience of this epoch, presented through many different voices, is not limited to a particular, objective time reference. Thus, the non-linear nature of narrative is certainly not a coincidence. In fact, it points out Jones’ intentional focus to represent the authentic experience of trauma that captivates the past, the present, and the future. Through the personal histories and complex patterns of temporality interwoven with flashbacks, Jones conveys how each individual suffers from the manifold aspects of the traumatic experience of slavery.
The Irreducibility of the African American Social Stigma

Jones’ narrative is set in a fictional county of Manchester, Virginia in 1855, ten years before the abolition of slavery in the United States. The novel opens with the death of a black slave owner, Henry Townsend, who “was a black man of thirty-one years with thirty-three slaves and more than fifty acres of land” (5). From the very first pages, Jones presents his radical vision of American slavery by putting Henry, a black slave master, at the center of his narrative. Henry is, in fact, as Michael P. Johnson and James L. Roark in *Black Masters: A Free Family of Color in the Old South* (1984) explain, “one of a quarter of a million individuals in the slave states in 1860 whom well-spoken whites referred to as free Negroes or free people of color. Four million other Afro-Americans were slaves in 1860” (xi). As these historians of the antebellum South, Johnson and Roark suggest, Jones’ novel is built on this lesser-known historical fact of American slavery that African American slave owners as well as free African Americans existed in the 19th century. The protagonist, Henry, is only one example of a quarter of other black plantation owners in the antebellum South during the mid-nineteenth century.

Here, it becomes useful to explain the concept of freedom experienced by free African Americans, for the conditions of their freedom were dramatically different from those of their white counterparts. In the antebellum South, being a free African American did not necessarily entail a total exercise of freedom since these people were still very much at the bottom echelon of white hegemonic structure. As Johnson and Roark

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explain, “White laws and white expectations hobbled an Afro-American’s every step toward full freedom” (30). Hence, the racial division between the white and the black were still absolute. In addition, the white legal institutions sustained racial subordination of African Americans, perpetuating this vicious cycle of oppression. Although in theory, free African Americans were considered to be privileged compared to their enslaved counterparts, they were still disadvantaged based on their color, and still susceptible to the oppressive practices of whites in practice. Johnson and Roark explain the limited freedom free African Americans experienced in the following manner:

In the daily round of life, every free person of color had to be constantly on the guard against committing some act that a white person might consider an act of insolence: a sharp word, a careless boast, failure to remove one’s hat, or neglecting to give a passing white man proper deference on the street. Any of these and dozens of other acts might be interpreted as insolence and justify a white man in ‘correcting’ a free person of color…free people of color knew so well the high risks of not conforming to white expectations. (48-49)

Thus, free African Americans had to be very careful in their daily encounters with the white race. Even a single act of disrespect towards white people could jeopardize their status as a free individual. The concept of disrespectful conduct was, of course, highly subjective in nature and could be intentionally manipulated by the white race. An act of insolence could be any far-reaching idea since there were not any written rules or any
legal definition in regards to the so-called acts of insolence. Therefore, unfortunate incidents of falling prey to white atrocities existed as an inevitable reality for free African Americans. In order to avoid such antagonistic interactions, they had to maintain their inferior status by means of submissive behavior. However, it is worth noting that these degrading roles enforced upon them harmed their sense of self-worth and eventually led to familial disintegrations. James P. Corner describes the enforced adaptive roles exercised by black slave families in the following terms:

The slave family existed only to serve the master and in order to survive physically, psychologically and socially the slave family had to develop a system which made survival possible under degrading conditions. The slave society prepared the young to accept exploitation and abuse, to ignore the absence of dignity and respect for themselves as blacks. The social, emotional and psychological price of this adjustment is well known. (qtd. in Leary 123)

There is little doubt that this survival strategy saved numerous lives by offering a momentary escape from the vicissitudes they confronted. Nonetheless, it would not be wrong to assert that the long-term negative consequences of such degradations have remained in the psyche of African Americans, only to resurface at a later stage in their lives. Furthermore, the indelible memories of this dehumanization did not only haunt the immediately affected, but also continued to haunt the successive generations. The
traumatizing legacy of this ever-present humiliation is also reflected in multiple negative behavioral patterns of various characters of *The Known World*.

**Reversing the Master-Slave Dialectic: Identification with the Aggressor**

For Henry Townsend, the virulent effects of slavery and racism in his life could be described as a double-edged sword since he is a former slave himself. Henry is born into slavery, and he spends his childhood and teenage years working for a white plantation owner, William Robbins. His parents, Mildred and Augustus Townsend, are also the property of Robbins until Augustus saves enough money to purchase his freedom, and later purchases his wife’s freedom. Henry is only nine years old when his father frees his mother, leaving him in the care of the white master Robbins. Upon his departure, Henry’s father promises that he will come back for him: “Before you can turn around good,” he said, “you be coming home with us.” Young Henry “tried to make sense of the word home” (16 emphasis in original). Growing up in slavery and experiencing the loss of his parents at a very early age, Henry no longer knows where he belongs. His loss of connection with his own family is initiated with this tragic rupture. Further, the separation from his family leaves an indelible scar on Henry’s psyche, which devours his entire life.

Orlando Patterson’s conceptions of “natal alienation” and “social death” which he introduces in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982), is significant in order to illustrate the sense of alienation that haunts Henry throughout his life. Patterson’s
natal alienation refers to an individual’s forced separation from his or her generational, as well as cultural ties. As Patterson notes, it is “the loss of ties of birth in ascending and descending generations” (7). There is no doubt that this notion is best exemplified when it is situated in the context of the experience of slavery. The impact of the loss of cultural, social and natal ties on the black psyche manifests itself in multilayered ways. One of the most important components of natal alienation in relation to slavery is the fact that it is “perpetual and inheritable” (Patterson 9 emphasis added). The inheritable nature of the alienation is also central to the theories of intergenerational and transgenerational transmissions of trauma. As these theories also demonstrate, the recurrent pattern of alienation which has become corollary to slave life is transmitted from the parent to the child, thereby engendering a generational cycle of loss. In this sense, natal alienation not only entails an inherited and infinite condition of isolation cast on numerous generations, but also hinders the formation of communal bonds. From this agony of natal alienation arises “the social death of the slave” (Patterson 38). More significantly, Patterson considers slaves as socially dead individuals since they belong neither to their families nor to their community. In regards to the social aspects of natal alienation, Patterson writes:

Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of
his ancestors… Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experiences of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forbears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (5)

In this lengthy passage, Patterson is keen to demonstrate how slaves are allowed no other destiny than the one designed by their masters. They are completely deprived of the most basic human right of claiming their familial and cultural heritage. It is essential to indicate at this juncture that the enforced deracination of the familial and communal ties also leads to the formation of an unconscious transgenerational bond that connects the descendants to their ancestors. In this sense, the notion of natal alienation plays a significant role in passing the trauma and family secrets of ancestors to subsequent generations. Given the conditions of their enforced estrangement, it is unimaginable for slaves to have viable access to their ancestral heritage or memories. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that these individuals inherit the traumatic memories of their ancestors via invisible transgenerational bonds. Therefore, they can never find any relief from the perpetual trauma of slavery. This condition also holds true for Henry who suffers from a deep sense of natal alienation. His natal alienation that is intensified with his heritage of parental and ancestral trauma, both engendered by his slave past, plagues him for the rest of his life. Perhaps the most striking psychic manifestation of his traumatic past is his identification with his white master. Identification, in a very general sense, can be defined as “a subject’s unconscious introjections and assimilation of
another person’s self-images-and the ego functions associated with them-through interactions with that other person” (Volkan, Ast and Greer 35).

There is no doubt that Henry’s experiences on Robbins’ plantation induce his admiration for the white master, whom he perceives as an invincible figure. Growing up without a biological father, he eventually forms an emotional attachment to his master through his daily interactions with him. However, this attachment, which results in his identification with the white master cannot be a healthy one, for the white master is actually the source of his own grief. As a matter of fact, Robbins is “the one who had limited his world in the first place” (113). Nonetheless, given the impossibility of altering his situation as a slave, Henry chooses to identify with the aggressor as it is his only chance for survival. His choice also demonstrates the consequences of lack of parental influence in Henry’s life. In order to fill the void emanating from the absence of a paternal figure, Henry attempts to assimilate and subsequently mirror Robbins’ ideology. Despite the fact that he and his family incessantly suffer under this white master’s rule, he unconsciously internalizes his oppressive practices. Sarah Mahurin Mutter’s reading of the novel suggests that, given his former identity as a slave, Henry’s willful choice “to actively participate in a chattel system as a slaveowner is strange, and deeply ironic” (135). While it is true that Henry’s choice is ironic, it is also plausible that Jones’ creation of Henry as a slave owner is not haphazard since Henry’s sacrifice of identity will be the price he pays for perpetuating the institution of slavery. Moreover, Henry’s decision is a strong indication of his inability to deal with his unresolved trauma of slavery. As Anna Freud, in *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense* (1948) explains, “By impersonating the
aggressor, assuming his attributes or imitating his aggression, the child transforms himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat” (113). Thus, it is possible to agree that Henry becomes a surrogate to his master so as to reverse the feeling of helplessness that defines his entire life. It is only by disavowing his slave status and playing the role of the perpetrator that Henry can validate his existence. In intergenerational theories of trauma, the phenomenon of the identification of the aggressor is also reflected in the victims who unconsciously assume the role of the aggressor in order to avoid the negative associations of their victimized identities. In this sense, Henry’s identification with Robbins becomes the epitome of his solitude slave self that yearns for freedom.

In a similar paradigm, Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), investigates the underlying reasons for the psychic alienation of colonized populations. Attempting to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of psychic alienation observed in colonized groups and the subsequent identification with the oppressor, Fanon employs a psychoanalytic approach to analyze the two races. He argues that neither race can escape their predetermined destinies since “[t]he white man is sealed in his whiteness. The black man in his blackness” (9). Since they are unable to alter their pre-fixed identities, each race has to play the roles that are ascribed to them. Yet, according to Fanon, the possibility of the salvation of the black man rests in his ability to adapt to the conditions of the white world. Fanon’s phenomenon of psychic alienation and his distinctive approach to the issue of racial power relations are also communicated through Henry in *The Known World*. Fanon contends that “for the black man there is only one
destiny. And it is white” (10 emphasis mine). Thus, for Henry, there remains only one route to follow in order to prove his identity, which is to declare to the white world that he can measure up to its standards. Since white standards are the only standards through which he can assert his existence, Henry’s choice of mimicking the role of the white master becomes inevitable. In this sense, his attempts to imitate the white master also demonstrates his tragic efforts to regain his humanity, which has long been lost to slavery. As Fanon demonstrates, the internalization of white values leads to the disintegration of identity. Of the psychological implications of Fanon’s title Black Skin, White Masks, Gabriele Schwab writes that “More devastating even than suggested in the title Black Skin, White Masks, the racial transference of whiteness is not limited to the surface of a mask. A mask can be taken off. The whiteness Fanon talks about goes to the core of the self. Identity trouble here is based on a tenacious unconscious identification with the white aggressor” (93). As Schwab suggests in a different context, Henry’s identity trouble stems from the fact that his real identity is buried under the white mask that he can never remove. Henry’s sacrifice of selfhood, which is characterized by his identification with the aggressor, gives rise to an unsettling identity conflict. Thus, having enslaved in a white dominant ideology, Henry manifests the prominent symptoms of psychic alienation and a fragmented identity. Despite his futile attempts to integrate within the white race, he cannot escape from the unavoidable fate of his ancestors and remains an isolated individual for the rest of his life. He can find solace neither in his own race nor in the white world, for he cannot belong to either of these worlds.
It is possible to suggest that Henry’s sympathetic attachment to his master is also the predominant cause of his psychological and physical distancing from his own family. Henry’s father, Augustus, keeps his promise and buys his son’s freedom from William Robbins. However, the negative repercussions of growing up without parental influence are unmistakably ingrained in Henry’s character. Due to the fact that he is separated from his parents at an early age, the natural transmission of black cultural values from his parents is “particularly disrupted”, as Beverley Raphael, Patiricia Swan, and Nada Martinek suggest (333). In addition, he is unable to form any sort of “vital attachment” to either his family or the black community, which impedes the development of his conscience (Raphael, Swan, and Martinek 333). Without any cultural values, a sense of conscience, or a guiding paternal figure, he becomes a lost soul who is destined to fail.

The indications of Henry’s identification with the aggressor that owes its roots to his natal alienation as well as the intergenerational transmission of trauma are primarily observed in his decision to own slaves. Following his former master’s example, Henry’s first action after gaining freedom is to buy a slave for himself, thus starting his own plantation. He buys his first slave, Moses, from William Robbins and makes him his overseer. Moses’ initial reaction after finding out that he is going to be the property of another black man is incredulity: “It took Moses two weeks to come to understand that someone wasn’t fiddling with him and that indeed a black man, two shades darker than himself, owned him and any shadow he made” (8-9). In the eyes of the black slaves that Henry owns, the inversion of the conventional white master-black slave power dynamics is bitterly ironic. Moses has a hard time believing the fact that a black man like himself
is, in fact, his master. He thinks, “it was already a strange world that made him a slave to a white man, but God had indeed set it twirling and twisting every which way when he put black people to owning their own kind. Was God even up there attending to business anymore?” (9). Slavery itself is a highly questionable institution, yet Moses finds himself in an even more complex situation. While contemplating on this contradictory presence of a black slave owner, he questions the intentions of God in designing such a strange world in which black men subjugate their own race. Elias, the second slave Henry buys shares with Moses the same ambivalent attitude towards God who thrusts them into slavery. Adding an additional layer to the already traumatizing condition of enslavement, God ironically deems them subservient to a member of their own race. For Elias, the institution of slavery is definitely not a sane God’s creation. Therefore, it is no wonder why he “never questioned a world where colored people could be the owners of slaves” (9).

In this very act of buying himself a slave, Henry symbolically obliterates his own slave past and starts a new life as a powerful black slave owner. Although he is determined to be as successful as his master William Robbins is, he fails to fulfill the most basic requirement of being a slaveholder, to discipline his slaves. Henry unconsciously transcends the vague line separating a black master from his own slave in the initial months of his newly acquired position as a black slave owner. Robbins discovers Henry wrestling with his own slave as if they are equals, indicating Henry’s failure to detach himself from his property. It is at this point that he learns another valuable lesson from Robbins:
the law expects you to know what is master and what is slave. And it does not matter if you are not much more darker than your slave…You are the master and that is all the law wants to know. The law will come to you and stand behind you. But if you roll around and be a playmate to your property, and your property turns around and bites you, the law will come to you still, but it will not come with the full heart and all the deliberate speed that you will need. You will have failed in your part of the bargain. You will have pointed to the line that separates you from your property and told your property that the line does not matter. (123)

This reinforcement of Robbins’ lesson of his obligation to draw a strict line between his property and himself teaches Henry to separate his feelings from his duties as a slave master. He slaps Moses with a saw twice for no apparent reason other than Moses’ suggestion to work longer on that particular day. Unable to juxtapose his visceral identification with the aggressor, which demands him to be a cruel master, with his own black identity that cries out for mercy, Henry continually struggles with the inner turmoil of what is right and wrong. Despite the fact that he holds the naive belief that he would be “a better master than any white man he had ever known”, Henry is defeated in his attempts to fulfill this role since “the kind of world he wanted to create was doomed before he had even spoken the first syllable of the word master” (64 emphasis in original). Henry fails to realize that his desire of becoming a benevolent master is futile, for inhumane treatments of slaves are an inevitable reality for slaveholders. His wish is doomed from the very beginning since the institution of slavery does not accept the idea
that slaves are human, and there is no such thing as humane slavery. As Jones explains in
*Publishers Weekly,* “no matter how much good you want to do, once you step over that
line, into the role of master, you become the very thing you despise” (qtd. in Mutter 236).
Thus, realizing the impossibility of his predestined intent, Henry hardens over time.
Echoing Robbins’ principles, he does not hesitate to punish his slaves in cruel ways.

Henry’s decision to own slaves not only results in his marginalization from his
own slaves, but also irreparably harms his relationship with his parents. His essential
departure from his father’s mindset towards slavery severs the terminal bond between
them, causing an alienating natal void responsible for Henry’s further retreat into his own
shell. Henry’s catastrophic divergence from his own parent’s path and inclination towards
his white masters’ practices are manifested through his fascination with John Milton’s
famous line: “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven”. In *Paradise Lost* (1667),
Milton’s Satan, the fallen Lucifer, utters these words to God upon his banishment from
heaven. Satan’s choice of eternal damnation also foreshadows Henry’s own choice of
being a master rather than being subservient to anyone. Just like Milton’s Satan, Henry
opts for eternal damnation and asserts his identity through becoming a perpetrator. Henry
thinks that “only a man who knew himself well could say such a thing, could turn his
back on God with just finality” (134-135). Realizing the destructive consequences of
Henry’s flawed judgment, his teacher, Fern Elston, tries to “make him see what a horrible
choice that was, but Henry had made up his mind about that and I could not turn him
back” (135). On a symbolic level, Henry’s admiration of the Devil’s choice, which
condemns him to eternal suffering, represents his own choice to identify with the
aggressor. Therefore, instead of patterning himself on his father, Augustus Townsend, who swears not to let a slave owner set foot on his house, Henry becomes one himself, choosing to side with Satan. In a bitter irony of fate, the first slave owner that sets foot on Augustus’ house is his own son.

On hearing his own son’s purchase of human property, Augustus cannot contain his rage: “You mean tell me you bought a man and he yours now? You done bought him and you didn’t free that man? You own a man, Henry?”(137 emphasis in original). This incident marks a turning point in their relationship as a father and son. The bitter disillusionment felt by both sides remains to be the defining emotion that governs the father-son relationship. Augustus can never forgive Henry for perpetuating the victimization of his own people. Henry, on the other hand, fails to understand his father’s reaction to his owning slaves. Henry believes he has not committed any wrong with his purchase of human property, and his father should in fact be proud of his power. He exclaims, “I ain’t done nothin I ain’t a right to. I ain’t done nothin no white man wouldn’t do” (138 emphasis mine). Henry’s assimilation of the white supremacist values is evident in his statement that he acted as a white man. Becoming increasingly distanced from and bitter towards his family, Henry finds comfort and fulfillment in his identification with the oppressive white master. He is also proud to build himself a house for which, “even white people will say, ‘What a nice house that Henry Townsend got’” (136 emphasis added). Henry strives to prove himself to the white race in every step he takes. In seeking the approval of white people, he turns his back on his own people, disregarding their plight.
This heartbreaking scene between her husband and son that Mildred Townsend witnesses causes her to reminisce on her early memories of Henry. Through Mildred’s interior monologue, Jones gives a voice to the deep agony she shares with her husband upon discovering their only son’s ill-fated decision. She remembers how they desperately tried to protect their son from the violence of slavery. She recalls the advice they have given him in order to teach him the line that separates the black from the white. Jones writes:

If a white man say the trees can talk, can dance, you just say yes right along, that you done seem em do it plenty of times. Don’t look them people in the eye. You see a white woman ridin toward you, get way off the road and go stand behind a tree. The uglier the white woman, the farther you go and broader the tree. But where, in all she taught her son, was it all about thou shall not own no one, havin been owned once your own self. Don’t go back to Egypt after God done took you outa there. (137)

Henry fails to understand his parents’ commitment to human freedom and equality. Despite his parents’ efforts to raise him as a conscientious black man, Henry assumes the role of the aggressor. His ultimate disconnection from his family also indicates his desire to find rest from his traumatic past of slavery. Since his parents are the reminders of his slave past as well as the state of helplessness that has plagued him his entire life, he chooses to repudiate the past and to escape his father’s legacy. Augustus, still enraged over his son’s ill-fated decision to own slaves, beats him with a walking stick, saying
“Thas how a slave feel!…Thas just how every slave every day be feelin” (138). Henry, taking the stick from his father, breaks it over his knee and answers back, “Thas how a master feels” (138). With this final act of violence, Henry declares his newly acquired position as a slave owner, thus, permanently separating himself from his parents and the traumatizing past they represent.

Joy DeGruy Leary in *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005) analyzes the ongoing effects of the slave experience and internalization of white standards on African American populations. By pointing out to the prominent role the history of slavery plays on the certain behavioral patterns of these groups, Leary incorporates her analyses into the transgenerational trauma theories. In her investigation of certain behaviors, images and negative self-perceptions commonly recognized in African Americans, Leary extrapolates that these dysfunctional behaviors owe their roots to the past traumas of slavery as well as the persistent oppressive conditions. She terms these transgenerational adaptations as components of “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome”, which she defines as “a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today” (125). For Leary, one of the most pervasive indications of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is the “adoption of the slave master’s value system. At this value system’s foundation is the belief that white, and all things associated with whiteness, are superior; and that black, and all things associated with blackness, are inferior” (139). What Leary describes as the adoption of the slave master’s value system is what perfectly encapsulates Henry’s distorted mindset. Henry values nothing more than
the white standards and devotes his entire life to measuring up to the white social paradigms. In this sense, he is naive in not realizing that no matter how many slaves he owns, he is still a black man in the eyes of the white world. Nor does he grasp the very fact that he is never going to be an accepted member of the white race due to his racial identity.

Although Henry perceives himself as a prominent slave owner, he is completely unaware of the paradoxical situation that still makes him a registered slave under Manchester County’s legal system. The act regarding freed slaves stated that former slaves should leave the Commonwealth within a year so that they would not give the other slaves “unnatural notions” (15). The only condition that they could stay in the state was when “they lived as someone’s property, and relatives and friends often took advantage of the law the keep loved ones close by” (15). In other words, these former slaves still had to retain their slave identities in order to be permitted to live in the same state. Therefore, the fact that Augustus buys his son’s freedom from Master Robbins does not mean that Henry is a free man. In reality, Henry is “listed forever in the records of Manchester as his father’s property” (16). While Henry remains trapped in his slave identity forever, his new position as a free black slave owner remains to be an illusionary one. As Bossard maintains, “An unfree Henry is not free to imagine a world in which the master-slave power line can be deconstructed or transcended, and he is thus doomed to replicate the social hierarchy that originally oppressed him”(415). Thus, Henry can never achieve freedom, nor can he break away from his traumatic past of slavery for he is never granted an existence outside the system of slavery. Consequently, he is defeated in his
futile attempts to restore his identity beyond the boundaries of the “known world” of slavery.

On a different register, Henry’s ignorance of the fact that he is still a slave under the law can be considered as a powerful implication of Abraham and Torok’s notion of “submerged family secrets and traumatic tombs” (Rand 18). On a symbolic level, Henry can be seen as buried inside a traumatic tomb of his concealed slave identity. In spite of his belief that he is a free man, the unspoken family secret of his being a legal slave traumatizes him for the rest of his life. Although he is excluded from the reality of his position as a slave and in a constant denial of his traumatic history of slavery, he unconsciously inherits this secret along with his own traumatic past. Thus, Henry spends his entire life in a “psychic tomb” engendered by his “inassimilable life experiences” (Rand 22). It is not until he is on his deathbed, in his last moments that he comes to realize that his whole life was an illusion. Jones writes:

…death stepped into the room and came to him: Henry walked up the steps and into the tiniest of houses, knowing with each step that he did not own it, that he was only renting. He was ever so disappointed; he heard footsteps behind him and death told him it was Caldonia, coming to register her own disappointment. Whoever was renting the house to him had promised a thousand rooms, but as he traveled through the house he found less than four rooms, and all the rooms were identical and his head touched their ceilings. (10-11 emphasis added)
Just like the plantation he falsely assumes to be his own, the freedom offered to him is a deceptive one, for he does not own either his freedom or his house in reality. Therefore, his dream of being a free black plantation owner is doomed from the very beginning since he is only renting his freedom as well as his house. The house that is given to him in reality is no different from the slave cabins with its identical rooms and low ceilings. The rooms in the house function as a constant reminder of his eternally fixed identity as a slave. What Henry owns is not a plantation but a slave cabin to which he is still attached in the eyes of the white world. He has been promised unlimited possibilities, yet, what he truly receives is a small, dilapidated house that cannot even accommodate him standing upright because of its low ceilings. He does not fit into this house since he no longer belongs to his own black community; likewise, he is denied access to the wealthy, white plantation life due to his African American identity. The institution of slavery does not keep its promise as Henry dies with a deep sense of futility and failure.

Henry does not live long enough to see that the institution of slavery he willfully perpetuates also results in the death of both of his parents. Despite the fact that Augustus is a free black man, he is sold back into slavery by a white slave patroller. The white patroller, Travis, is not satisfied with how Augustus travels acting as if he is a truly free man. He says: "I hate the way you just ride up and down these roads without a care, without a 'Yes sir, ain't it a good day, sir?' Without any kinda ‘May I kiss your sweet ass today sir?'" (212). Augustus’ lack of compliance with the role of the submissive, meek slave, undoubtedly agitates Travis. Driven by the motive to assert his superiority, he simply eats Augustus’ freedom papers, thus invalidating their existence. With this trivial
act, Augustus’ freedom for which he has worked his entire life ceases to exist, and he is transformed into a slave immediately. The seemingly infinite freedom that he possesses, in fact, becomes the epitome of the infinite plight of African Americans. In this sense, Jones constantly reminds readers that in this “known world” of slavery, not one single African American is free from the terrors of the white world.

When the white Sherriff Skiffington finds out about Augustus’ kidnapping, he cannot help but wonder if “the cord of a man born into slavery ever be cut forever and completely, even if he had been free for some years? Was he not doomed by virtue of the color of his skin? (311). Hence, the freed African Americans, just like their enslaved counterparts, can never create a new identity untouched by the trauma of slavery. As Augustus’ inescapable fate demonstrates, the cord that links these people to slavery can never be discarded. Skiffington’s questioning of the validity of the freedom of African Americans also foreshadows the death of Henry’s free mother. Skiffington, who “had no trouble doing his job to keep the institution of slavery going, an institution even God himself had sanctioned throughout the Bible”, shoots her for housing a runaway slave (43). Skiffington uses Christian religion to justify the racial division and enslavement of African Americans. Although he is portrayed as empathizing with the racially oppressed on some occasions throughout the novel, Skiffington secretly dreams of raping his own slave, Minerva, whom he perceives as his daughter. His perverted attitude towards his own daughter and his final act of killing Mildred point towards the corrupted nature of the inherent mental schema that Jones’ white characters hold against their African American counterparts.
Black on Black Violence as a Symptomatic Response to Intergenerational Trauma of Slavery

In *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), Fanon ascribes the phenomenon of black on black violence and crimes, which is articulated in Henry’s treatment of his slaves, to the internalization of the negative traits of the oppressor. Fanon believes that the prolonged traumatic and emotional effects of slavery, along with a constant sense of powerlessness engender feelings of hostility and trigger acts of violence (52). Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that Henry’s oppression of his own race stems from his inner desire to overcome his feeling of impotence that accompanies him throughout his short life. His aggression towards his own slaves, then, can be seen as a strong indication of his inability to cope with his own history of slavery. As Fanon asserts:

The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people...While the settler or the policeman has the right the livelong day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother. (52)
Fanon’s statement above is especially relevant when considered within the framework of a black master-black slave relationship. The internalization of the violence that is deposited in his bones, in Fanon’s terms, results in Henry’s oppression of his own people. Unable to stand up against the unrelenting white oppressor, Henry directs his feelings of helplessness and anger inwards, to his own community. As it is suggested earlier, the white master’s attitude towards his slaves significantly correlates with Henry’s treatment of his slaves. For instance, just like Robbins, Henry keeps a slave inventory book in which he records the details of his human property. In a similar manner, through the exercise of absolute power over his slaves, Henry also attempts to keep them under control. Regardless of the common bond of racial identity that unites them, Henry orders whippings, rations the portions of food to his slaves, and shackles a runaway slave. Elias, the runaway slave, is punished with disfigurement for his disobedience. What Henry decides as a method of punishment is physical mutilation since “a whipping would not be enough, that only an ear would do this time” (89). Imitating the white master’s methods of punishment, Henry takes on the role of Robbins in order to reassert his powerful position as the master. In another instance, he sends a young slave boy, Luke, to work for another white man’s fields during the harvest despite the oppositions from his slaves. As predicted by the adult slaves, the young boy cannot endure the hard working conditions and dies in the fields. Henry receives $100 as a compensation for the loss of his slave, for which he shows no remorse in accepting in exchange for human life.

In The Known World, Henry is not the only character who demonstrates the symptoms of the internalization of violence. The psychodynamics of oppression and
violence also manifest themselves in other black characters in their abuse of the members of their own race. In order to gain approbation and patronage, many black characters adopt white supremacist values and subjugate their own people. The existence of various episodes of black on black violence throughout the novel indicates that the dehumanizing institution of slavery is culpable for transforming former victims to perpetrators of oppression. Leary also sees a strong correlation between the acts of violence perpetrated by African Americans and the insidious effects of the historical trauma of slavery. She writes:

> Slavery was an inherently angry and violent process. White people modeled anger and violence in every aspect of enslavement. Individuals were forcibly captured, chained, and regularly beaten into submission over hundreds of years. Any group of people living under such harsh conditions would eventually learn the ways of their captors. (137)

The prevalence of black on black violence, then, must be understood as the prolonged impact of historical and ongoing oppression. Having been victimized for centuries predisposes these people toward the white model of violence. Assimilating the violent behavior patterns of their captors, they eventually emerge as a perpetrator themselves. Along similar lines, David Ikard, in “White Supremacy under Fire”, scrutinizes Jones’ treatment of African American characters who voluntarily proliferate the institution of slavery. Ikard explains:

> …the novel’s African American characters who willingly participate in slavery are a reflection, in large part, of the tenacity and corrupting
apparatus of white supremacist ideology on African American consciousness. In such an ideologically warped milieu where African Americans are socially conditioned to see white dominance and the brutal exploitation of black bodies for capital gain as natural, the emergence of African American slaveholders becomes a radical indictment against white supremacist ideology. (65)

In this sense, it is possible to claim that Jones’ African American characters that willfully exert power over the members of their own race are not pure villains but victims of the white supremacist ideology. Therefore, Jones utilizes these characters to illustrate the consequences of the assimilation of white hierarchical dictates of race and power. Having internalized the inhumane ways of the white oppressor, Jones’ African American characters inevitably “turn ‘against their own kind’ for individual gain” (Ikard 66). Their complicity in perpetuating the institution of slavery, then, can also be ascribed to the notion of the identification with the aggressor. It is nevertheless useful to acknowledge that the real culprit is the institution of slavery that abuses these people for the sake of its own preservation.

Of the notions of the identification with the aggressor and black on black crimes, Maurice Apprey, in “Repairing History: Reworking Transgenerational Trauma”, contends that the cultural memory of oppressed groups “observe and ultimately transform received hatred from an Other group” (9). He suggests a four-step heuristic strategy in order to explicate how cultural memory stores hatred in its preserves to use it at a later
stage. The key steps of his strategy are “line, character, transgenerational haunting, and figure” (9). Apprey describes the first component, line, in the following terms:

Under the rubric of line, we may think of a broken line, a cut, an incision, a gap or a rupture. Representative of this notion of line might be the sense of lost ancestry manifested as an absence in African-American lineage. Into this cut, as it were, may be inserted a world of lived experience where the oppressed has lost sight of the original enemy. Influenced by this absence, a people may attack its own, as in Black-on-Black crime. (9 emphasis in original)

Apprey’s explanation of the “line” indicates that the root cause of black on black violence is the urge to find the culprit for all the vicissitudes inflicted upon African Americans. By associating his concept of line with the losses African Americans have suffered from, Apprey demonstrates that there is an open wound at the heart of African American cultural memory. For Apprey, it is this void, compounded with the negative repercussions of the daily assaults on their identity, which triggers this animosity toward their own race. Apprey’s second element of his strategy is “character”, which he attributes to the practice of branding that “once existed in the original mandate of slavery” (10). Branding slaves signified an absolute and eternal ownership. By marking or branding their slaves, masters forfeited the possibility of freedom as well as confining them to a lifetime of slavery. Additionally, branding meant giving a new character to slaves, which also meant stripping them of their former, authentic identities.
Apprey’s conception of “transgenerational haunting”, which is the third element of his model, is the application of Abraham and Torok’s original concept of the transgenerational phantom to African Americans. In his extended model, Apprey shares with Abraham and Torok that “a contemporary generation is unwittingly possessed by an earlier generation”, and adds that this possession “preserves history, but in a poisonous, unmetabolized version” (12). Thus, the ongoing effects of the historical trauma manifest themselves in black on black crimes and violence. The descendants of the victims may exhibit the aggressor’s behavioral patterns of cruelty, but this time only to inflict it upon their own people. The traumatic experience that generates transgenerational haunting secures that the painful history is retained in the memories of all the affected generations. The transgenerational phantom seeks and ensures retribution by demanding descendants to give a voice to their suffering in reconstituting history. Yet, what is passed on for the sake of preserving history is also capable of corrupting countless generations. As Apprey notes, “The generation that is ‘frozen’ with the trauma might ‘inject’ messages, precepts, and mandates into the next one. In turn, the recipient generation may stage or enact in another way the experience of the previous one” (17). In this regard, the effects of the transgenerational phantom is not only limited to the inheritance of grief since the recipient generation can reenact the trauma by internalizing the cruelty of the oppressor and inflicting it upon the members of their own race. Apprey’s fourth element, “figure”, is closely related to the practices of physical disfigurement and mutilations that slaves suffered. Apprey’s figure, then, reifies the “dehumanization” underlying the institution of slavery (12).
Apprey’s model demonstrates that the residual effects of the trauma of slavery are not only destructive for the aggrieved people but also for the oppressors. The cruelty of the white race finds its parallel in African American appropriation of the same patterns of violence. Therefore, Apprey believes that in order to epitomize the prevalence of black on black crimes, the white supremacist culture and their prolonged impact on African American consciousness should be analyzed. As the work of Apprey illustrates, the traumatic history of slavery performs a double function in the lives of persecuted groups, that is, either they assume the role of the aggressor and oppress their own people or they remain passive, victimized by the eternal wound of slavery. Apprey’s study further reveals that behind every act of aggression that African Americans bring upon their own race, the omnipresent history of slavery continually emerges.

In *The Known World*, it is possible to find many instances that display how the social-psychological dynamics associated with the internalization of oppression and violence operate. Henry, his wife Caldonia, her mother Maude, their teacher Fern, and the overseer Moses are among many characters in the novel that demonstrate the symptoms of the identification with the white oppressor. In “Reinventing the Self in the Face of Received Transgenerational Hatred in the African American Community”, Apprey claims that African Americans who are corrupted by the white oppressive ideology “may heap cruelty, that once originated with external transgressors, onto their own kind’ (32). To begin with, Caldonia, who takes over the plantation, does not free their slaves upon Henry’s death. Although she is portrayed as sympathizing with her slaves on occasional instances, once she gains authority and control, she does not hesitate to perpetuate the
current system of slavery in the plantation. She never contemplates setting the slaves free. Augustus hopes that she would put an end to this system by setting the slaves free. Notwithstanding the light he sees “in her that had failed in his own son”, she does not make any arrangements to free the slaves (65). Caldonia’s act sadly proves that she is not going to be any different from her husband in her treatment of the slaves. Her assimilation of the white model of oppression becomes more evident in her treatment of their overseer, Moses.

After Henry’s death, Caldonia orders Moses to report daily incidents at the plantation. Their frequent meetings become more intimate each day, and they end up in a sexual affair. This affair underscores how Caldonia holds a similar view of slavery with both of her husband and her mother. Her mother, Maude, who often refers to her slaves as her legacy, secretly poisons her own husband in order to prevent him from freeing their slaves against her own wish. Maude also engages in a sexual affair with one of her slaves. Her repeated sexual abuse of her own slave, Clark, can also be traced in Caldonia’s treatment of her own overseer, Moses. It is possible to observe the pattern of intergenerational transmission when Caldonia starts to exploit Moses to satisfy her own sexual desires, following her mother’s example. For Bassard, “the most disturbing aspect of Caldonia’s character is the way in which she uses her power as slaveholder for the purposes of sexual exploitation of a black male slave” (413). Caldonia abuses the power that her inheritance brings without considering the possible consequences of her actions. The fact that “she had been making love to another woman’s husband” does not even bother Caldonia (300). While Moses hopes to “cross an irrevocable threshold”, and
eventually become “Marse Moses” by means of their affair, Caldonia asks herself if this affair “between a colored woman and a colored man who was her slave...a kind of miscegenation”, completely denying the identity of Moses (286, 292, 300). Her consideration of their affair as a kind of miscegenation indisputably points to Caldonia’s rejection of seeing Moses as her equal despite the fact that they are sharing a sexual relationship.

Another crucial indication of the assimilation of the white abusive discourses can be observed in Moses’ relationship with his own family. Moses lives under the delusion that one day he would replace his master Henry and become a slave owner himself. Despite having endured the plight of slavery, Moses never thinks of freeing his fellow slaves if he becomes the master. As Ikard suggests, “Moses feels despair and helplessness toward the institutions and people that oppress him and is compelled to identify with the oppressor rather than the oppressed” (81). By following his former master Henry’s footsteps, Moses aspires to be his successor. Similar to Henry who assimilates the white racial supremacist ways of his own master Robbins, Moses identifies with another oppressor. This perpetual cycle hints at the contagious nature of the effects of the white racial supremacist practices. For instance, upon Henry’s death, Moses immediately assumes the position of the oppressor and orders the slaves to work even on their rest day. The prospect of power as well as the internalization of the white supremacist ideology also corrupts him as he plans to rid himself of his wife and child in order to be with Caldonia and rule the plantation as a slave owner. Jones writes:
That evening was the first time Moses would think that his wife and child could not live in the same world with him and Caldonia. Had they made love in silence, as before, he would not have begun to think beyond himself. But she had spoken of tomorrow, and that meant more tomorrows after that. Where did a slave wife and a slave son fit in with a man who was on his way to being freed and then marrying a free woman? On his way to becoming Mr. Townsend?...Where does a man put a family he does not need? (292-293)

Moses is naively ignorant to the fact that Caldonia does not have any intention to set him free, let alone marry him. She simply uses him for her own sexual desires. Moses, on the other hand, is not a completely innocent character who is sexually exploited by his master. He plots his family’s escape and sends them away as soon as he can in order to attain his ultimate position as a slave owner. He is ready to dispense her wife and son without even thinking of the dangers that await them outside. “With them gone, there will be no obstacle, he believes, to marrying Caldonia”, as Harris comments (189). After assisting his family in their escape, Moses constantly pursues sexual encounters with Caldonia so that he can “walk through that back door again without knocking” (321). When he asks Caldonia when she is going to manumit him, Caldonia, far from realizing the seriousness of the situation, dismisses the question by simply revealing that she does not want to talk about it. Moses is puzzled since he thinks, “he could not be her husband without first being free, not a proper husband anyway with authority over anyone and everything” (324). From his comment, it becomes obvious that what Moses actually
seeks to accomplish with their sexual encounters is absolute authority over the other slaves, as well as the complete ownership of the plantation. Marriage to Caldonia, then, becomes Moses’ only way of survival in this system of slavery. However, as Harris notes, “Moses has failed to realize the impact of class and status upon his aspirations. Caldonia may have sex with him ‘on the floor’ but she never invites him to her bed” (190). Caldonia never considers marrying him due to his inferior social status.

The strongest indication of Caldonia’s unequal treatment of Moses can be found in her persistent intent of only having sex with him on the floor, since this is where he belongs in her view. Moses will never measure up to the status of black slave owners, thus he is doomed to sleep on the floor as opposed to the master’s bed. For both parties, this affair will serve no other purpose but to be the means through which each would fulfill their selfish interests. Thus, Jones explicitly reveals that their sexual affair is not driven by love, it is merely “a twisted love affair in which each is seeking a kind of power at the expense of the other” (Bassard 413). Yet, Moses’ dream is going to be a short-lived one as the complex power relations between the two that he naïvely disregards would eventually invade emphasizing the impossibility of leaving the past of slavery behind.

On another occasion, instead of helping his fellow friend, Elias, Moses harasses him when he is caught trying to escape, unaware of the fact that he is going to share a similar fate. Mirroring his former master Henry’s ways, Moses orders Elias’ wife, Celeste, to work in the fields despite the fact that she is six months pregnant. That day Celeste loses her baby in the fields. When Caldonia questions why he has put her life in
danger, Moses answers: “‘She playactin’...They all playact sometime. I ain’t never seen a one that don’t playact sometime’” (328 emphasis added). It is noteworthy that Moses uses the word *they* to refer to the other slaves, deliberately detaching himself from his own people. His rhetorical usage of *they* and *one* when mentioning the members of his own race can be seen as a powerful indication of his ultimate internalization of the white supremacist ideology. He does not consider himself as one of them any longer, since he falsely assumes that sleeping with Caldonia has rendered him immune to the fate of his fellow slaves. As Ikard astutely maintains, “Moses reflects how prolonged exposure to and brutalization under white supremacist slavery regimes corrupts the cultural and moral consciousness of the enslaved” (80). The consequence of such a tragic flaw would be serious, as Moses is captured and cruelly punished by means of dismemberment. By crippling Moses, the slave catchers imprison him within the confines of the “known world” of slavery for the rest of his life. Just like his master Henry, Moses cannot emancipate himself from the fate of slavery.

As witnessed through the multiple narrative voices in the novel, within the familiar boundaries of Jones’ “known world’, it is impossible to attain freedom or an identity other than the one rigidly defined by the dominant culture. Even the legally free African Americans in the novel are not, in fact, free as exemplified by the inescapable fates of Augustus, Mildred, and Henry. Henry is born as a slave, and unbeknownst to him, he lives and dies as a slave. The tragic irony of Henry’s (un)freedom, then, becomes the embodiment of the trauma of slavery that can never be overcome. Despite his futile attempts to reconstitute a new self by means of his human property, Henry can neither
truly embrace, nor transcend his own slave identity. In spite of the loss and disintegration of several characters, the novel does not end on pessimistic tones. Jones offers the possibility of healing and freedom to the former slaves. Through his use of shifting narrative perspectives and nonlinear patterns of temporality, Jones presents the future lives of the undefeated slaves of the Townsend Plantation. As Carolyn Vellenga Berman maintains, these narrative strategies also foreshadow “sudden and brutal reversals of fortune, while reassuring us with the prospect of survival: that this unknown world, our own, would also come to be” (235). The omnipotence of the narrator also informs that the former slaves of the Townsend Plantation successfully make it to the North and establish a life free from the shadow of the institution of slavery. We also learn of the abolition of slavery and the fact that Manchester County is “divided and swallowed up by other counties” (377). Thus, while the ones who attempt to perpetuate the “known world” remain trapped within the confines of it eternally and collapse just like the Townsend Plantation, the others who can establish an existence outside the “known world” ultimately survive.
CONCLUSION

This study has intended to elucidate how the repercussions of the traumatic legacy of enslavement can be manifested in the future generations in various forms, as demonstrated in the motivations and behaviors of protagonists in *Kindred*, *The Chaneysville Incident*, *Stigmata* and *The Known World*. In these texts, the continuing impact of slavery on the modern subject is represented through inheritance of ancestral trauma and undisclosed family secrets. The concept of transgenerational trauma provides a new vantage point from which to analyze the motivations of characters, who have not experienced the violence of slavery, but remain crippled by its transgenerally transmitted effects. Upon application of the theories of transgenerational trauma and psychic phantom, in each protagonist, I have discovered the potential symptoms of the unresolved grief and trauma of the preceding generation. In *Stigmata* and *The Known World*, for instance, the residual effects of the legacy of trauma results in “psychic wounds that black people inflict upon each other” (Harris 133). While *Stigmata*’s Lizzie is physically tortured by her own grandmother, *The Known World*’s Henry does not hesitate to oppress and enslave his own people. In *Kindred*, *The Chaneysville Incident* and *Stigmata*, the impact of the history of enslavement on the contemporary subject is so traumatic that neither protagonist can fully live free from the burdens of the past. As Ron Eyerman contends, “slavery is not something relegated to the past, it is forever present” (188). The
traumatic memories of slavery haunt the protagonists until what is lost to slavery is redeemed. While *Kindred* and *Stigmata* utilizes supernatural devices to stage an actual return to the antebellum era, *The Chaneyssville Incident* presents a rather symbolic return to the past. In *Kindred, The Chaneyssville Incident* and *Stigmata*, the modern subjects are represented as apathetic to their shared history of slavery. In order to challenge this apathetical attitude, Lizzie and Dana are physically transported into the antebellum era, where they can witness the horrors of the Middle Passage first hand, and recover the stolen humanity of their ancestors.

The haunting presence of a phantom dominates three narratives in this study, namely *Kindred, The Chaneyssville Incident* and *Stigmata*. Through my readings of these novels, I have shown how enslaved ancestors reach out to their descendants through distinct patterns of communication, disclosing their traumas, and seeking justice in the modern world. The psychic phantoms of enslaved ancestors return from their graves to haunt their progeny until their unspeakable secret can be captured into words. *The Known World’s* Henry, despite being a free man with slaves of his own, cannot eradicate the impact of his own legacy of slavery. Henry’s upbringing by a white master also leads to an identity conflict, as he identifies with the aggressor. Henry’s narrative, just like the other three novels examined, is centered on a traumatizing family secret. His formerly enslaved parents hide from him the poignant fact that he is still a registered slave under the law. While in *Kindred*, the unspeakable family secret is Dana’s coercing the rape of her own great grandmother to ensure her own survival, John’s family secret, which haunts him as a transgenerational phantom, is the collective suicides of his paternal
lineage. Lizzie’s family secret, without a doubt, is the emotional and physical torture of her enslaved ancestor under bondage. The transgenerational ghosts are not laid to rest until their secret is out and their unfinished business in this world is fulfilled. Another significant similarity in these traumatic family secrets is, each of the secrets is bound with the horrors of the Middle Passage and the subsequent forms of oppression embedded in the institution of slavery.

My selection of narratives written by both female and male writers also allowed me to interpret the certain experiences of each gender in response to the trauma of enslavement. I have found that male and female protagonists do not significantly differ with respect to the exhibition of symptoms associated with trauma. Their coping mechanisms, however, bear no resemblance since female protagonists form bonds to survive their ordeals, while their male counterparts opt for solidarity. In women’s narratives, healing is offered through female solidarity. Lizzie and Dana are able to form solid bonds with their maternal lineage, through which they can give meaning to their traumatic experiences. With ancestral reconciliation comes the possibility of integration of traumatic experiences, then can the process of recovery begin. In addition, while male protagonists turn to hostility and aggression in their confrontations with the traumatic events, female protagonists proved to possess greater resilience to traumatic experiences. For instance, both John and Henry are portrayed as aggressive in dealing with their legacy of slavery. The impact of racism and discrimination pervading every aspect of his life leads John to rape a white woman and abuse his white girlfriend. Similarly, the residual impact of centuries of dehumanization takes its toll on Henry. He resorts to
violence, as it is the only viable means to assert his identity. In the end, he is tragically defeated in his illusion of becoming a wealthy slave owner.

As the narratives discussed in this dissertation illustrate, the unhealed wounds of slavery remain open until descendants of enslaved individuals revisit the original site of trauma. It is through this symbolic return that these descendants can give voice to those who are deprived of speech by the institution of slavery. In order to authenticate the traumatic memories of slavery, the contemporary subject is made to bear witness to the horrors of the Middle Passage. Healing is offered through the integration of the painful past into the present. The amnesia surrounding the history of slavery can only be overcome by recognizing the ordeals endured by their ancestors. Reconciliation with the ancestors enables the modern subject to realize the pains of the past and sacrifices made to ensure their independence. The theories of transgenerational trauma and phantom offer a new perspective from which to examine the traumatic transfer of painful memories across temporal boundaries. Finally, investigating trauma narratives written by African American female and male writers contributes to an ongoing dialogue about the intersections of the painful history of the Holocaust and African American slavery, as well as numerous other violent histories, opening up a multitude of possibilities for further research.
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