This thesis presents the author’s perspective on the influence(s), audience(s), and rhetoric(s) of America’s neo-slave narratives, and attempts to explore the cultural work that neo-slave narratives do within the field of African American Literature. Beginning with a consideration of the creation and usage of Antebellum slave narratives, the author transitions into a discussion on neo-slave narrative texts by exploring a critical perspective expressed by the literary scholar H. A. Rushdy. Believing Rushdy’s proposition that the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement were two influential events behind the creation of neo-slave narratives in the 1960s, the author attempts to further explore what actual elements of these movements were, and continue to be, appropriated by neo-slave narrative authors. Through an analysis of two texts: Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, and James McBride’s *Song Yet Sung* the author focuses on the particular elements of these social movements, as well as the responses that these contemporary authors have had to these events that have been incorporated into the plots of their neo-slave narrative texts.
THE RE-FORMATION OF IMAGINATIVE TESTIMONY: A LOOK AT
THE HISTORICAL INFLUENCES AND CONTEMPORARY CONVENTIONS OF THE
NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE GENRE

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The Re-formation of Imaginative Testimony: A Look at the Historical Influences and Contemporary Conventions of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the African American literary tradition, the slave narrative has been of upmost importance, if not indeed, the actual impetus for black writings in the United States. First, written in sole autobiographical form throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, slave narratives have been executed through several other genres since the twentieth century, and thus, exhibit myriad characteristics that literary scholars have sought to both define and explore. In addition to the expansion of the generic expression of slave narratives, the audience(s), rhetoric(s), and influence(s) (the who, what, and why) of the slave narrative form have also changed in significant ways since the stories of black slaves first emerged, providing a rich and complex subject of study for scholars as well.

The first examples of slave narratives emerged in Europe and the New World after the Trans-Atlantic slave trade had been maintained for over two centuries. The year 1760 is most widely recognized as the first time in which a slave narrative was published in the colonies; Briton Hammon has been documented by many scholars as the first person of African descent to share his personal story of survival entitled: *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon* (1760). Some historians and scholars also suggest that the slave narrative genre may have commenced in the colonies as early as 1745 with the *Declaration and Confession of Jeffrey, a Negro*.[ii,iii] Slaves such as Hammon and Jeffery were the very first spokesmen of the black race in Europe and the New World, who not only represented characteristics and qualities of their race, but truths about the nature of white men and women in Europe and the colonies as well. As the Americas developed and more black slaves were transported there, the African American slave experience also further developed, thus providing the impetus, and the material for the first actual African American slave accounts that were published. Just like early black autobiographers such as Jeffery and Hammon who first told of their enslavement in Europe, during the late nineteenth-century African American slaves also began to orally share the narrative details that composed their recollections of the slave experience. In his book *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, William Andrews identifies this purpose as being two-fold, he writes:

> During the first half of this century of evolution, most Afro-American autobiography addressed itself, directly or indirectly, to the proof of two propositions: (1) that the slave was… ‘a man and a brother’ to whites, especially to the white reader of slave narratives; and (2) that the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk (1).

Early African American slave narratives were written not only to tell of their authors’ harrowing lives as slaves in the American South, but more so, to satisfy a need within African American slaves themselves to speak in favor and defense of the black subject in America; a being whose attitudes and abilities were (and in many ways still are) unfairly assumed to be harmful, ignorant, and therefore, useless to the dominant white American population. In order to achieve this objective, early African American autobiographers related stories of their experiences of slavery
in such a way that they, as Andrews asserts above, first defended the proposition that the black man was indeed an actual man, then supported the idea that this man indeed had honorable capabilities worth recognition by his white brothers and sisters of America. IV As time continued and social, political, and economic practices in America evolved, so too did the purpose behind the creation of slave narrative texts.

With the establishment of the Abolitionist movement within Europe and America between the years 1830-1870, the slave narrative was largely employed as a tool of condemning the practice of slavery. As Andrews explains, “…black American autobiography evolved into a complex ‘oratorical’ mode best exemplified in the narratives of ex-slaves who had become master rhetoricians on the antislavery lecture circuit”(1). Bearing their stories, and in many cases, their bodies as proof of the cruelties committed against them, many African American slaves were sought after by white abolitionist for their first-person testimony and their physical scars, a combination that easily became the most effective attack against slavery and those who supported the practice. V However, as invaluable as slave testimonies prove to be to examinations of American history, “as a class, no group of American autobiographers has been received with more skepticism and resistance than the ex-slave”(Andrews 3). VI In order to remedy this problem, abolitionists began to serve as amanuenses and editors of the slave testimonies that they presented to their audiences; lecturers provided verbal introductions for the slaves who would speak and bear their bodies, and buffered the slave testimonies that they published in short tracts and pamphlets with “editorial prefaces, footnotes, and appended commentary”(Andrews 20). Seeing as many slaves could not read or write, editors also often took total control over the stories that they were told throughout the process of recording, editing, and publishing.

Serving as translators of the slave narrative from oral to written form, many amanuenses had to fulfill a wide range of tasks in order to see their work through to completion. As Andrews explains, “Editors of early Afro-American autobiography assumed the right to do everything to a dictation from ‘improving’ its grammar, style, and diction to selecting, arranging, and assigning significance to its factual substance”(20); this last task often involved an editor choosing which pieces of a slave’s testimony would actually make the final publishable version that would be disseminated to the general public. This, in turn, also added to the skepticism with which many white Americans received the slave narratives that they read in anti-slavery literature; as Andrews writes, “Even if the editor faithfully reproduced the facts of a black narrator’s life, it was still the editor who decided what to make of these facts, how they should be emphasized, in what order they ought to be presented, and what was extraneous, or germane”(20). With abolitionist editors making the final decisions on what would be featured in the literature that they used to advance their cause, many began to read slave narratives as little more than propaganda, evaluating them instead as false stories packed with anti-slavery rhetoric in order to elicit a certain response from those who read them. No matter how abolitionists tried to transcend it, there remained a thin line between raw facts and sensationalism when trying to dismantle slavery in Antebellum America; it became very apparent that not even the publication and backing of a slave’s story by a white supporter was completely successful in proving the creditability of the experiences that black ex-slaves dared to share.

Similar to the ways in which white abolitionists served as the actual writers (complete with all authorial rights and responsibilities) of the Antebellum slave narratives that they were verbally told, so too have twentieth century authors had to make critical rhetorical choices when composing the contemporary partner of Antebellum slave testimony, the neo-slave narrative. For example, although these African American writers are composing with a different social
agenda than the white abolitionist patrons of early slave narratives, authors such as Margaret Walker, Shirley Anne Williams, and Toni Morrison each composed their neo-slave narrative novels, *Jubilee* (1966), *Dessa Rose* (1986), and *Beloved* (1987), respectively, from actual true stories in which they had to first determine which elements of the stories that they would re-tell, changed or unchanged, as well as which elements that they would leave out. Enriched with both actual historical records as well as the imaginative elements from each author, these texts have been assigned the literary category of fiction, although based on actual events. Then, there are other neo-slave narratives that rightfully belong to the category of fiction, being completely fictionalized by their authors. With these authors not serving as actual amanuenses who are retelling the stories told to them by actual slaves, or even basing their stories off of known real-life slave events and experiences, some readers and critics question the purpose and integrity of this form of neo-slave stories told by contemporary authors.

As Tim Ryan suggests in his book *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery Since Gone With the Wind* (2008), there are:

fundamental problems involved in representing and dramatizing the institution [slavery]. The first such problem that writers encounter is how one can reasonably fictionalize something as incomprehensibly horrific as slavery without sensationalizing, trivializing, or neutralizing its impact. The second challenge is the more general question of how to address and portray history in fiction.

For Ryan, contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives also have to be aware of that thin line that white abolitionist and amanuenses had to negotiate when they reconstructed the stories told to them, however, Ryan also seems to suggest that creating respectable portrayals of the “peculiar institution” is a unique task for authors of neo-slave narratives considering the fact that slavery exists as a historical event for contemporary writers, and not a present-day experience from which these authors can draw personal inspiration and knowledge from. On the other hand, critics such as Arlene Keizer have asserted that just as much, if not more cultural work has been performed by authors of completely fictional neo-slave narratives than by those who merely wrote down what they were told, or mixed fact with fiction when composing both traditional and neo-slave narratives. As Keizer observes in her book, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Novel of Slavery*, “The contemporary narrative of slavery began to take shape at precisely the moment that the last of those who had experienced New World slavery first-hand passed away” (Keizer 5), thus leaving contemporary authors who were interested in continuing the slave narrative genre with the challenge of how to play witness to a social and economic institution that they had no first-hand experience with. In addition, to write a semi-autobiographical, or semi-biographical work (both popular forms for neo-slave narratives), contemporary authors of such texts have also been assigned the task of finding the value and significance of someone else’s life and declaring these certain aspects worthy of reconstruction and consideration. The difference between these various approaches to composing neo-slave narratives represent the specific ways in which contemporary authors have attempted to negotiate those same “fundamental problems” that Ryan discusses above. As Timothy Spaulding writes in his critical text *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005):

As part of a larger tradition that sets out to recover the stories of our past obscured by time and by an official historical record that devalued the perspectives of the slaves themselves, many African
American writers, particularly in the last decades of the twentieth century, sought not only to recover these stories, but also to redefine the way we narrate the slave experience(2).

These narrative “redefinitions” are representative of the exploration of the slave narrative genre by contemporary African American literary scholars.

In his critical text Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy analyzes the historiography of slavery in African American literature by exploring the origin, and cultural and literary politics of the neo-slave narrative genre. If, as Rushdy suggests, traditional African American slave narratives were intended to disseminate abolitionist rhetoric in order to convince white readers that slavery needed to be abolished, then what work have African American neo-slave narratives accomplished since their emergence in the late 1960’s? Although these texts take the institution of American slavery as their subject matter, just as Antebellum slave narratives did, neo-slave narratives are yet texts created in response to the contemporary events and experiences of African Americans in the United States. Rushdy suggests that three events, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and the interest that the American publishing industry showed black writers during and after these two previous events, are the impetus behind the creation of neo-slave narratives in the 1960s. While Rushdy analyzes the emergence of the neo-slave genre due to the various ways in which these events transformed the social environment of America, I would like to further explore what actual elements of two of these events were, and continue to be, appropriated by neo-slave narrative authors and focus on the particular discursive elements of these social movements that get incorporated into the plot of neo-slave narrative texts. Through an analysis of James McBride’s Song Yet Sung (2008), I would first like to demonstrate McBride’s use of neo-slave text to enter into the conversations formed between intellectuals, activists, and historians during the late sixties concerning violence, and property in the historical past (and future) of black Americans. Using the same text, I would also like to underscore how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech influenced the use of dreams and “achieving the dream” as a trope in McBride’s neo-slave narrative, that represented the progression of identity for each generation of African American people. Also, I will provide a reading of Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (1966) that considers the conversations during the late sixties and early seventies concerning the Black Power Movement and contends that these conversations encouraged Walker to infuse her text with a different kind of rhetoric, one that not only values the speech of “the slave”, but also, the importance of acknowledging the perspectives of a variety of characters who experienced slavery from different sides of the color line and different levels of the social structure in the Antebellum South.

SECTION ONE: Meeting Tomorrow in a Dream: An Analysis of Violence, Property, and Identity in James McBride’s Song Yet Sung

Thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Power Movement, at no other time in American history has the past, present, and future of African Americans arrested the minds and consciences of those in the American academic, political, and cultural arenas with such fury than during the 1960’s. Recognizing a need to further examine slavery as not only a source of social, economic, and political power for white Americans, but also as a system in which slave individuals displayed agency, self-representation, and resistance in creative ways, despite their oppressed existence, academics in the 1960’s sought to explore the similarities between these actions of slaves and the struggle of African Americans to assert the same responses to
oppression during the Civil Rights Movement. The “new discourse” between historians, activists, and intellectuals that developed at this time was also centered on a consideration of three major issues: property, violence, and identity, and their importance and influence on the black subject since the establishment of chattel slavery in America. Rushdy concludes that, “these three topics assumed a prominent place in this new discourse on slavery because they so effectively demonstrated the connections between the political climate of the sixties and the long-term affects the institution of slavery had on American social life”(23). As the exploration of slavery and the issues of property, violence, and identity advanced during the sixties, many intellectuals began to create additional critical texts on these issues that not only furthered the academic discussions already in progress, but significantly influenced the black literary imagination on these topics at this time as well.

Although considered a bitter truth for many Americans, both white and black, the social violence of the 1960s provided a context for which scholars began to study America’s historical past. Decades of historical studies on violence in the United States resulted in the publication of two notable works in the late fifties: Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956) and Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Academic Life* (1959), which would commence the conversations on African Americans and violence that would progress well into the twenty-first century. While both men focused on the operation of violence within the institution of slavery, these two historians presented two very different arguments on this topic. Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution* was praised for its revision of historians such as Ulrich B. Phillips (who insisted on a paternalistic and harmonic structure of slavery), arguing instead for a recognition of the active forms of resistance that slaves perpetuated, while Elkins’s *Slavery* became a highly contested text, especially due to the controversial criticism that Elkins applied to abolitionists of the antislavery movement in America, and Elkins’s refusal of slave testimony as valuable to the study of violence on the slave’s behalf. With these ideas, Elkins initiated the first break against the consistent discourse on slavery that had prevailed until the publication of his book.

As a new decade began, studies on violence in the United States became more prevalent, and with these new texts came new critical perspectives concerning the “study of slavery and the role of violence in maintaining and destroying the system”(Rushdy 24). Out of this study came texts such as Thomas Rose’s *Violence in America: A Historical and Contemporary Reader*, Allen Grimshaw’s *Racial Violence in the United States*, and Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr’s *The History of Violence in America*; all three of these texts considered the manifestations of violence during the sixties. While events such as the Watts riots that occurred in Los Angeles, California in 1965 demonstrated how African Americans in the twentieth-century used violence to respond to racial discrimination and economic disadvantage, “At precisely the same time… Martin Luther King Jr. was theorizing, and the African American citizens of Montgomery were practicing a deliberate and strategic form of ‘nonviolence’”(Rushdy 24), to respond to the very same discrimination and disadvantages. These different responses, in conjunction with a consideration of the responses of slaves to oppression, proved essential to new studies on the uses and effects of violence against African Americans; in accordance with Rushdy, Cary suggests, “The economic and social system of slavery is… a prehistory (as well as a pre-text to all Afro-American texts), a past social condition that can explain contemporary phenomena”(126). As theorists compared examples of violence in traditional slave texts and events during the fifties and sixties, not only did they discover that previous assumptions about the reception and use of oppression and violence in black
communities was in need of a revision, but the relationship between property and identity in black communities called for redefinition as well.

The alarming levels of social violence that occurred throughout the American South during the sixties brought this issue into conversation with the civil rights of African Americans, “More important, however, property was an ascendant issue in the early civil rights movement because the struggle for civil rights in America has always been a struggle to define the limitations of property rights”(Rushdy 25). When freedom fighters walked into segregated restaurants and sat down at lunch counters, or climbed the steps of a public bus and took a seat up front; when they marched hand-in-hand down public sidewalks and streets with white Americans who were supporting their cause, or when they approached a fountain marked “whites only” and dared to take a long cool drink of water, they were using property, more specifically, other people’s property, in direct opposition to what the law declared was acceptable. Thus, along with ignoring the legal statues of the time and using other people’s property as tools to fight against segregation in the American South, African American civil rights activists were also shaping their identity, imagining themselves as black subjects in ways that were in direct opposition to what society said that they were, and were not, and what they could, and could not do in the United States. As this identity formation progressed, American intellectuals became interested in the history of the formation of racial categories in the United States, and began to reevaluate traditional slave narratives as texts that contained valuable examples of early African American identity formation.

With an increased demand for early black authored texts for scholarly study, many Antebellum slave narratives were “given new currency in reprint editions” (Andrews 265) during the sixties; texts such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) were produced in mass quantities and consumed by academics who sought to compare and contrast the various ways in which black slaves made meaning of themselves with the ways in which African Americans during the sixties defined who and what they were amidst oppressive social structures as well. Considering the foundational relationship that early black autobiography provided for texts of the neo-slave narrative genre, scholars also began to study these contemporary texts in large quantities, and to apply this study to the various hypotheses about the formation of the black subject in America; as many intellectuals have recognized, “Neo-slave narratives are exemplary texts for this purpose since each of them is not only a productive articulation about racial subjectivity but also a critical analysis of the intellectual mobilization of the concept of race”(Rushdy 20). With this critical perspective at hand, in conjunction with the demonstrations, and conversations that were influencing the reformation of black identity during the Civil Rights Movement, African American authors in the sixties began to write texts that would extend the production and study of the neo-slave narrative literary genre into the next century. One such text that was greatly influenced by these events during the sixties is James McBride’s *Song Yet Sung* (2008), a third-person neo-slave narrative that incorporates the issues of property, violence, and identity, and unique elements of the Civil Rights Movement in order for McBride to provide social commentary on how African Americans of the twenty-first century have sought to conduct themselves within American society.

In *Song Yet Sung*, McBride creates a discussion on the racial subjectivity of black humans as property through the actions of the character Patty Cannon, a white woman who has made a business of stealing the black slaves that belong to other people. Known as “the trader of souls”(McBride 19), by “a silent, complicit minority of landowners and a frightened majority of
whites who did not own slaves and had no say in the matter”(McBride 22), Patty has spent over fourteen years tracking, stealing, and selling runaway slaves and has grown so experienced in the business that she has even created innovative ways in which to manipulate the local laws on slave stealing. Patty has been able to allude the authorities and the prosecution for the theft of human property due to the specific location and positioning of her home base, which is strategically built on “the borderline of three different counties, two in the state of Maryland and one in Delaware.”(McBride 20). Therefore, (as McBride Continues), “when authorities came to arrest them [Patty and her crew], they simply stepped into another room and authorities were out of their jurisdiction”(McBride 20). Although civil rights were non-existent for slaves under chattel slavery, the slaves that Patty Cannon and her crew captured were still the legal property of others, and at least deserved to be returned to those who legally owned them. However, just as white property rights trumped the civil rights of African Americans throughout the years that segregation and Jim Crow laws were maintained in the American South, the land jurisdictions separating the counties that Patty Cannon’s property rests on made it impossible for law enforcement officials to “rescue” and return the slaves that Patty held captive; due to the enforcement of the property rights of the three closely located counties that Patty’s house is settled within, law enforcement officials from all three counties are not able to carry out their prosecution of theft of human property when Patty enters one of three rooms that each belonged to a different county in her home because it would mean that they were crossing the property lines and practicing law on land that rightfully belonged to another law enforcement agency. Validated by the positioning of her domestic property, Patty Cannon is free to abduct others’ human property throughout the novel with the help of a small company of men, whom she considers more as her own personal servants than the actual business partners that they are.

Through the employment of several rough men, Patty Cannon creates a powerful group of assistants that help her to hunt down slaves and quiet the dissention that rises against her occupation. Although her company is composed of both white and black men, Patty truly prefers to work with black men entirely; declaring that “The only way to catch a colored is through a colored”(McBride 68), Patty has a history of employing some of the black slaves that she stole to do her bidding as well. Describing Patty’s interest in black men as workers McBride writes:

> The ones whom she employed were selectively chosen, well built, finely sculpted, beautiful to look at, and able, loyal servants. They saw it as their duty to tend to her wants. She had no fear of touching them, even wrestled them from time to time, offering food, shelter, camaraderie, and occasional warm caress, and the sense of home. Her colored boys had never let her down. They were crude, distasteful at times, but they were honest, protective, and, when necessary, savage on her behalf”(24).

Besides acknowledging the sexual attraction that Patty seems to have for black men based on this description of her thoughts, McBride also seems to construct Patty as a pseudo slave-owner to the black men she employs. Considering them as “loyal servants” (in essence, her property) whose duty it is to “tend to her wants”, Patty provides food and shelter to her black male “employees” in exchange for a “crude”, “distasteful”, and “savage” performance of behavior towards the other black slaves that they are expected to track down. Constructing these black male characters as workers forced to do Patty’s will due to their title and duty as chattel property, McBride sustains the discussion concerning black people and property that intellectuals engaged in during the sixties. These intellectuals discoursed about the ways in which black people used property to demand civil rights, and the ways in which black people were denied ownership of
property and basic necessities of life by discriminatory practices in the fifties and sixties, while McBride, through characters such as Eb Willard and Little George (two of Patty’s stolen slave men) has reconstructed the subjectivity of black people as property themselves. Furthering this construction, McBride uses Little George and his actions to introduce the conversation of black slaves’ responses to violence into the novel.

“Patty Cannon’s Little George” (McBride 19) is a sadistic young man who commits several acts of violence against black slaves throughout the first chapter of Song Yet Sung. After hunting down the fugitive slave protagonist, Liz Spocot, Little George, “raised the barrel of his rifle high, then lowered it towards her face” causing “merciful blackness” to follow (McBride 5). When Liz awakes from the blow that Little George gave her, she is chained to an elderly slave woman who tells her of the physical danger that she is now in as a successful catch of Little George. The old woman explains:

Little George done shot you and gived you medicine and washed you. You corn on the cob to him, chocolate and pretty as you is. Death’d be a relief to you, once he’s done. He’s a thirsty camel fly when it come to women. Every woman in here knows it…(McBride 8).

With this revelation, Liz, and readers learn that not only is Little George a brutal catcher, but a rapist who has been “having his way” with enslaved women that he has captures for Patty Cannon. As if on cue, Little George soon enters the room and immediately approaches Liz with the plan of sexually assaulting her. However, Little George is met with a force of violence that takes him by surprise, and eventually, ends his life.

Hearing of Little George’s abusive actions against women, and the old slave woman’s warning that he may be after her next, Liz seeks to protect herself by some means even though her mobility is greatly limited by the chains that bound her arms and legs. Finding a small, metal pike in between the wooden floorboards beneath her, Liz prepares for Little George’s attack. As Little George made his advancement upon her, “…she [Liz] sat up and in one motion placed her chained arms around his neck. Holding the pike between her front teeth, she drove her head into his beautiful neck full force, drilling the pike deep in, striking the Adam’s apple from the side” (McBride 14-5). Reeling from the pain that Liz has just inflicted upon him, Little George begins to scream and thrash about as the other slaves in the room begin to warm to action as well. As Liz begins to frantically untangle herself from the severely injured Little George who has been caught up in her chains, she feels the weight of other bodies piling around her; describing the scene, McBride writes:

Liz tried to pull away from him now, panicked, but it was too late. She felt bodies slamming against her as the others, all of them, women, men, and children, descended into a desperate, pounding, biting, silent, resolute mass of animalistic fury. With grunts, squeaks, and heavy breath, they descended on the sole caretaker of Patty Cannon’s house, beautiful Little George, drove him to the floor, and squeezed the life out of him (15).

Realizing what they had done, the fourteen additional slaves in the attic seemed to be gripped by another surge of adrenaline and continued their relentless attack against their black captor:

The others swarmed him again with renewed vigor now, as if by beating his dead body as it made its way to the cooling board they could vanquish the killer within themselves, for they were murderers now and knew it; that knowledge seemed to drive them to even further rage, so that even as they collapsed into a tangle of kicking, punching arms and legs around the lifeless body
of Little George, they turned and fought each other, fighting out of shame, fighting out of humiliation, fighting for his keys, and, mostly, fighting to get clear of each other (McBride16).

Just as traditional slave narratives contained descriptions of events where black American slaves responded to violence perpetuated through the practice of slavery, scenes such as the one described above have been creatively included in neo-slave narratives, and are demonstrative of contemporary authors’ investment with preserving elements of the Antebellum slave narrative form, and their desire to contemplate the cause and effect of violence on the black human psyche. This scene makes McBride’s novel an example of what Deborah McDowell refers to in her essay, “Negotiating Between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom”, as “narratives… about slave women that shift the points of stress from sexual victimization to creative resistance”(146). For the slaves in Patty Cannon’s attic, Liz’s violent response to Little George’s attempt to rape her is enough to encourage them all to violently lash out in their own significant ways. As a collective force, they are able to successfully kill their captor, however, it is the very product of their collective force, (Little George’s death), which seems to frighten them of the force that they have created together, and incites the group of slaves to begin to turn and fight each other; their objective is no longer to simply get away from Little George, but, as McBride writes, to “get clear of each other” as well. With this scene, McBride is suggesting that oppression and violence perpetuated against black American communities will encourage a response of violence amongst those who are affected by it, who then, in turn, will misdirect the response and begin to hurt one another in the process of responding. Applicable to both slave and contemporary black communities in the United States, this specific scene in the novel demonstrates McBride’s conscious effort to use his text to engage in contemporary cultural conversations about the black subject and his response to cultural and social issues in America since slavery.

Along with including discussions on property and violence and of how black slaves were shaped by both of these issues during slavery, James McBride also uses his characters in Song Yet Sung to comment on the significance of identity for enslaved African American men, women, and children. For example, the woman that Liz is chained to in Patty Cannon’s attic is never given a name, a detail that McBride uses to express his acknowledgement of the cultural principles that a certain black activist and intellectual presented to African Americans during their fight for civil rights. When Liz asks her what her name is, the woman boldly replies, “I got no name… Whatever name was gived me was not mine. Whatever I knowed about is what I been told. All the truths I been told is lies, and the lies is truths”(McBride 18). Relating this textual element to conversations on black identity occurring specifically between the fifties and seventies, the “Woman with no name’s” refusal to accept the name that was given to her in captivity, is a direct reflection of the influence that Malcolm X and his teachings about black identity had on the black community; a influence which McBride, the author, was alive to witnesses. By giving the “Woman with no name” the same argument that Malcolm X and his followers claimed for the rejection of the legacy of the last name, a title that was given to many slaves according to the last name of their respective master, McBride suggests that black American slaves also sought to define themselves in culturally exclusive ways. After refusing her name, the old woman then proceeds to tell Liz about a secret code that the slaves in the surrounding counties use as a means to allude the white inhabitants and escape into freedom; this code, interestingly enough, also operates upon a premise of namelessness which is critical to the survival of those who dare to use it. As the woman instructs Liz on how to navigate the code with others that she may run into, she exclaims, “Tell ‘em the woman with no name sent
you” (McBride 18), which is exactly what Liz does as she continues her journey throughout the course of the novel. Liz also becomes stripped of her given name; as the story of her ability to see the future precedes her, she becomes known as simply, “the Dreamer” and is referred to by this moniker by the several individuals that she encounters along her escape.

When Liz tries to identify herself to a young boy who comes to help her along the road the assistant immediately becomes suspicious of Liz’s motives and sternly reminds her of the code’s “no name” policy. Describing the scene, McBride writes:

“I’m Liz.” She said.
He looked alarmed.
‘You trying to trick me?’ He asked.
‘No.’
‘No names then.”’ (McBride 82).

Once reprimanded, Liz remembers what the old woman told her and proceeds to tell her new companion the information that she is supposed to pass along: “I was trapped in Patty Cannon’s attic, she said. I dreamed of tomorrow and I met a lady there. Woman with No Name. That was her name” (McBride 83). Describing the male companion’s excited response to the information that Liz shares, McBride writes, “He turned to her, wide-eyed. ‘You the Dreamer, then?’” (83). Knowing the cryptic monikers, “the Woman with No Name” and “the Dreamer”, are more significant to the young man operating within the code than knowing the given slave names of Liz and the old woman that Liz meets in Patty Cannon’s attic. Considering the behavior of the characters operating with the code, refusing to listen to or to utter slave identities is demonstrative of how workers of the code in the novel are operating with an appreciation for the racial and social positioning that they share with those in which they actually help through their work; it’s not about who Liz is (what her name is, etc), but rather what she is (a black slave wanting to be free) that confirms her true identity with the “Woman with No Name”, and the young man on the road, and advances her to the next stage of her journey. As Rushdy proclaims:

The social logic of the Neo-slave narrative form is two-fold: first, the form evolved from a change in social and cultural conditions in the late sixties; second, later deployments of the form have engaged in dialogue with the social issues of its moment of origin(5).

Considering Song Yet Sung as such a text, the code that functions throughout the novel along the lines of a racial collectivity among black slaves is reminiscent of the ways in which African Americans banned together in the sixties to assert social, economic, and political freedom for themselves. In addition, as a cultural worker of the twenty-first century, McBride also includes within his novel an examination of the issues he feels plague black communities in the twenty-first century as well.

In Song Yet Sung, James McBride incorporates dreaming and “achieving the dream”, two very significant tropes in African American literature, in order to assert what he feels has gone terribly wrong with many African Americans since the late sixties. The protagonist, Liz Spocott, is a black female slave who suffers from severe headaches that are accompanied by troubling images of the future of the black race; on the very first page of the novel, McBride introduces readers to this “dreamer”, and begins to describe the visions that trouble her so much. The author writes:
She dreamed of Negroes driving horseless carriages on shiny rubber wheels with music booming throughout, and fat black children who smoked odd-smelling cigars and walked around with pistols in their pockets and murder in their eyes. She dreamed of Negro women appearing as flickering images in powerfully lighted boxes that could be seen in sitting rooms far distant, and colored men dressed in garish costumes like children, playing odd sporting games and bragging like drunkards—every bit of pride, decency, and morality squeezed clean out of them (McBride 1).

Liz’s dream presents contemporary issues in black communities from a slave’s perspective, someone who would not be familiar with these issues, therefore, several of the objects and situations in her dreams are described in odd ways, while others appear explicitly clear, even to a slave in 1850. For example, the “horseless carriages” that are being driven around “on shiny rubber wheels with music booming throughout,” is Liz’s way of describing flashy cars with the music volume up high, the “odd-smelling cigars” could be a description of marijuana joints being smoked, and the “Negro women appearing as flickering images in powerfully lighted boxes” is surely a description of the representation of black women on television; more specifically, the presentation of black women in music videos. On the other hand, the “colored men dressed in garish costumes like children, playing odd sporting games and bragging like drunkards” is not as easy to decipher. The issues that Liz seems to recognize more clearly, and therefore, are made more explicit, are “fat black children”- identifying obesity in black communities, and violence and black-on-black crime which Liz refers to with the phrase “pistols in their pockets and murder in their eyes”. With the last statement in the dream description, McBride seems to also suggest that all of these issues are the result of one major cultural problem: many African Americans in the twenty-first century have lost their “pride, decency, and morality”, and more concerning is McBride’s insistence that these attributes have been “squeezed clean out of them” by some force. Reading the behavior described in Liz’s dreams as external reactions to the internal pressures that social and economic disadvantages exert upon African Americans, one could see how McBride is using this novel to continue the conversation about the black subject’s reaction to oppression in the United States that began during the fifties.

As the novel continues, Liz’s dreams are described in length several more times; some repetitively recalling some of the images from Liz’s first dream account, while others begin to introduce new issues in future black communities that trouble our protagonist.

The next time Liz experiences a dream she is laying in Patty Cannon’s attic after her initial encounter with Little George; McBride explains:

For days she dissolved into and out of consciousness, moaning, her nightmares filled with garish images of the future of the colored race—long lines of girls dressed as boys in farmers’ clothing, young men standing before thousands delivering songs of rage that were neither sung nor played but rather preached over a metallic bang-bang that pounded out of tiny boxes (5).

In this dream, McBride addresses a new concern, “long lines of girls dressed as boys in farmer’s clothing,” which could serve as a reference to cross-gender dressing, or simply Liz’s unfamiliarity with the practice of women wearing pants, and McBride again discusses the issue of loud music, but becomes more specific about the type of music in black communities that concerns him. The “songs of rage that were neither sung nor played but rather preached” is Liz’s way of describing rap music, a genre predominantly created and listened to by members of the African American community in the late twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries. Stressing his concern with this genre of music even further, McBride even dedicates an entire one of Liz’s
dreams to discussing rap music and its affect on the black psyche, at length. Describing this
dream, McBride writes:

She dreamed of thousands of Negros gathered together at a camp meeting, and before them a
colored boy exhorted them with the thunderous voice of a preacher. Yet, he was not dressed like
a preacher, in a suit of calico or linens, but in the simple clothing of a farmer who worked the
earth, although his body was adorned with shiny jewelry—around his neck, his finger, even in his
mouth. A thousand drums seemed to play behind him, and as he spoke with the rat-tat-tat speed
of a telegraph machine, he preached murder, and larceny, cursing women savagely and
promising to kill, maim, and destroy. He shook his jewelry towards the sky and shouted, Who
am I? Who am I? He seemed not to know... (254).

As alarming as the rapper’s violent lyrics are, McBride (through Liz’s confusion) reads an even
greater concern in this performance; by the rapper yelling “Who am I? Who am I?”, Liz believes
that he is suffering from a loss of identity, and suggests that the crowd of listeners who have
gathered to hear his hypnotic beats have lost all sense of who they are as well. However, it
seems as if the distance in time that separates Liz from the people in her dreams has again
allowed Liz to misunderstand the contemporary events unfolding in her head. In actuality, the
use of the phrase “Who am I?” by contemporary rappers such as Petey Pablo, or simply “Who?”
(a phrase used by another rap artist by the name of Mike Jones) is not an expression of a lack of
self-identity, but rather an appropriation of the call-and-response technique in order to solidify
identity. Just like Pablo or Jones, the rapper in Liz’s dream already knows who he is, but takes
pleasure in presenting the question of his identity to his audience because through their response
(which is his name) his identity is confirmed; he is exalted through others’ acknowledgement of
who he is. Although Liz’s confusion does not allow her to grasp this understanding of the
rapper’s phrase, Liz’s conclusion that the rapper is confused about his identity is still significant
because it continues the discussion of constructed identity and naming that McBride begins with
the “Woman with No Name.” McBride is still continuing his discussion about African
American’s discard of given identity; Liz’s confusion only temporarily veils the issue at hand.
Unsure of what she is actually seeing, Liz also goes so far as to describe this dream rap concert
as a camp meeting and the rapper as a pseudo-preacher speaking to his congregation. However, it
is the dream that Liz has that features a real preacher that presents a direct demonstration of how
McBride is using his text to enter into the cultural debates about black America that arise
between historians, scholars, and intellectuals during and after the Civil Rights era.

In order to understand the full significance of Liz’s most important dream, which
incorporates elements of the Civil Rights Movement into an Antebellum slave story, it is
necessary to share this final vision in its entirety. The vision reads:

I dreamed of thousands of Negroes…and thousands of white people with them, folks stretching as
far as the eye could see. They were at a great camp meeting, and one after another, various
preachers spoke out. Finally the best of them rose up to speak. He was a colored preacher. He
was dressed in the oddest suit of clothing you can imagine; I reckon it’s the finest of his time. He
stood before these thousands of people and spoke to a magic thing that carried his voice for miles.
And Lord, he preached. As Jesus is at His resting place, that man preached. He opened up the
heavens. On and on he went, in the most proper voice, using the most proper words. He used
words so powerful, so righteous, I can’t describe them—words that seemed to lift him into the air
above the others, words that came from God Himself. And the people could tell! They wept at
his words and tore their hair and cried. White and colored, they held hands and hollered at him to

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go on, and when the colored preacher heard them yelling, that drove him to an even greater fury and he became even more excited, and as the crowd hollered at him, he grew so excited, he reached into the past and shouted a song from our own time! A song not yet sung. I heard it in Patty Cannon’s house. The Woman with No Name said it: It ain’t the song, it’s the singer, she said. It’s the song yet sung. (McBride 286-7).

When the “Woman with No Name” told Liz about the code, she also sung a song and told Liz to be on the lookout for the person who knew the last line to this song:

Way down yonder in the graveyard walk  
Me and my Jesus going to meet and talk  
On my knees when the light pass’d by  
Thought my soul would rise and fly…(McBride 287).

The “Woman with No Name” insisted that the person who knew all of the words to this “song yet [completely] sung” would be the answer to the code; that’s why when Liz heard the preacher in her dream not only sing the words above, but finish out the song, she knew that her ability to dream was essential to the survival of African Americans, and the future of the black race in America. Describing Liz’s reaction to the preacher’s song McBride writes:

That’s what the old lady sang, but she didn’t know all the words, Liz said. But I heard them in my dream. I heard the preacher say them. And when he did, them words changed the whole world somehow… He said, Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last…”(287).

In complete admiration of this preacher, Liz adds, “That man I dreamed of… he’s the true Dreamer. And he’s right there. Sitting in somebody’s tomorrow”(McBride 288). With this revelation of the last words to the “song yet sung” and Liz’s identification of the preacher in her dream as the “true Dreamer”, Liz has solidified McBride’s novel as a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his “I Have a Dream” speech that he delivered on August 28, 1963 at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, one of the most remembered events of the Civil Rights Movement. As a neo-slave narrative, McBride’s Song Yet Sung not only presents McBride’s unique interpretation on how black American slaves imagined the generations that would come after them, but also of how contemporary African Americans have answered to the expectations that their enslaved ancestors envisioned for them. For McBride, it seems as if many African Americans have failed to answer the call of greatness that their predecessors, the oppressed slaves of the American Antebellum period, and the civil rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., have presented to them. And McBride also seems to suggests that even if African Americans continue to struggle with their images of beauty, or create and listen to violent and sexually explicit music, misrepresent themselves in music videos, or fail to be more selective about the different foods that they put into their bodies, the least that they could do is dream, for as Liz declares in the novel, “That’s the one thing the white man can’t take, you know: your dreams” (McBride 159). Throughout the mid-sixties, the Civil Rights Movement was the dominant context in which debates about “racial, cultural, and academic politics”(Rushdy17) were formed, which significantly influenced the fictional works that African American authors created during the same time. However, as irritation rose with the largely significant, yet ultimately limited progress that the Civil Rights Movement made in the deep South, and as attitudes began to change on how best to advance the black race in America, a new group of intellectuals and activists emerged with a new set of goals and objectives that also greatly
influenced black authors and colored their literary discussions on the past, present, and future of the black subject in America.

SECTION TWO: Voice Power: Valuing the Intertextuality of Race through Collective Voice in Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*

Unsatisfied with some of the tactics used by proponents of the Civil Rights Movement, especially, the “nonviolent” protests and resistance, which many activists found to be a passive approach to a constant, impassive assault on black humanity, black activists began to re-imagine strategies that would encourage the rest of America to finally give black Americans the cultural recognition that they truly deserved. Out of these new conversations came the Black Power Movement, a social and cultural development that intellectuals struggled to define after its emergence. Initially read as a call for black separatism and a threat of black American rule over white Americans, this movement, and the slogan “Black Power”, from which it was named, were gradually recognized as a productive effort to advance ethnic unity among black individuals in the United States, and as a call for these black individuals to be active voices for their newly united cultural community. In essence, “…the Black Power movement created a new black social subject” (Rushdy 21); instead of practicing the peaceful and nonviolent tactics of Civil Rights workers, activists of the Black Power Movement actually relished the arguable threat of defensive violence that their approach presented to those in opposition and fear of this new movement. With black people daring to speak their minds openly and honestly, demanding respect, and equality, and even declaring what they would do if they did not receive these social treatments, came an opportunity for black authors in the sixties to apply this social attitude to a narrative form that traditionally did not allow for such a presence of unrestrained speech; frank conversations by slave characters in neoslave narratives are widely accepted by readers, whereas candid assertions by slaves before the abolition of slavery were regarded as highly questionable statements by audiences of the traditional slave narrative genre.

As discussed earlier in this essay, many white Americans were not receptive to the stories that black American slaves shared along the anti-slavery lecture circuit, first, because many of the white audience members held deeply rooted prejudices against the slave, insisting that black slaves were untrustworthy and only capable of telling lies, and second, because they suspected that the abolitionists that were recruiting slaves to speak on their circuits, and who were overseeing the recording and publication of slave stories, were surely capable of fabricating parts of, if not all of, the stories that were shared; as Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad explain in the introduction of their book *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*:

> From the start, the field was mired in arguments about the authenticity of these books and their depiction of bondage, about whether they were actually written by slaves and ex-slaves or mainly pernicious frauds by the enemies of an institution indispensable to Southern culture” (viii).

In accordance to such sentiments, “American aesthetic standards of the time made a black narrative that exposed the institutional facts of slavery preferable to one that expressed the subjective views of an individual slave” (Andrews 6). For example, narratives that discussed subjects such as how slaves planted and harvested specific crops according to the seasons were much more acceptable than ones that included how slaves felt about the work that they were forced to complete by cruel slave-owners and overseers. Literary critics and historians such as Andrews, McDowell, and Rampersad insist that “Many slave narrators were aware of the racist
and nationalistic biases that made the average northern reader suspect any black person who characterized Southern whites as barbarous and inhuman” (Andrews 26), which resulted in many of these narrators orating personal stories in which they consciously chose to exclude the most harrowing accounts of brutality committed against them by the hands of whites, and their most sincere feelings about such experiences. As Timothy Spaulding reiterates in his book *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, “…for all the information the original or traditional slave narratives provide us on the conditions of slavery, these texts often veiled the most disturbing aspects of slavery in order to appeal to a primarily white audience”(8). When African American authors began to compose neo-slave narratives in the sixties and seventies, they were faced with the task of not only observing and preserving some of these essential elements of Antebellum slave narratives, but also, adjusting some characteristics of the genre in order to speak to a different audience, at a different time in history, with different concerns. The rise and fall of both slavery and segregation resulted in changes to social conditions in the American South which significantly changed the reasons for writing slave narratives. In turn, since the reasons for writing slave narratives changed, the conventions employed to construct slave narratives changed as well. Instead of denouncing slavery to an audience of white Americans, which slave narratives before the Civil War were used to accomplish, slave narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were, and still are, employed to explore contemporary conversations about black Americans as they simultaneously provide a context from which readers can gain a larger understanding of slave culture, and the social constructions in the Antebellum American South.

Finding the appropriate ways in which to creatively represent the institution of chattel slavery without compromising the integrity of the traditional slave narrative genre has been a challenging task for many contemporary black writers. As Rushdy explains, as pseudo slave narrators, authors of neo-slave narratives have had to “… adopt the conventions, gestures, and voice of the Antebellum slave narrative in order to play with, partially dismantle, and partially demonstrate the implacability of the original identity- of slave”(22). The most significant characteristic listed above that authors have experimented with is the “voice of the Antebellum slave narrative,” which has manifested in at least two significant ways; first, through the changing of the first-person slave perspective into an often third-person, omniscient narrator, and secondly, through the addition of various perspectives from characters of different races, classes, and ages. In her novel *Jubilee*, (which is largely recognized as the first neo-slave narrative to appear in the sixties), Margaret Walker employs both a third-person perspective, and a collection of individual voices into the story of her great-grandmother’s life as a slave in order to construct a more complete picture of the institution of slavery, and the formation of identity in the Antebellum and Post-Bellum periods from different cultural perspectives.

*Jubilee* is an exceptional text because it serves as one of the very first neo-slave narratives to not only “reconstruct the image of the blacks who endured [slavery] and survived with their individual dignity intact” (McDowell and Rampersad xii), but also provides an actual portrayal of the other populations that existed during the centuries that slavery was maintained in the American South. In traditional slave narratives (or early black autobiography) only the voice of the slave is heard, which significantly limits a reader’s view of the institution of slavery; however, since neo-slave narratives belong to the novel genre, authors are able to employ the third-person perspective in their texts, and readers can now experience the social, economic, and political lives of other character types such as white slave owners, non-slave-owning whites, and free blacks through this literary genre. Some contemporary authors have even dared to
creatively imagine the life of free black slave-owners, like Edward P. Jones does in his neo-slave narrative *The Known World*. All four of these social groups, white slave-owners, non-slave-owning whites, free blacks, and free black slave-owners played significant roles in the formation of black slave identity in the Antebellum period, which authors like Walker and Jones have sought to represent in several contemporary narratives of slavery.

In addition to the traditional slave voice, Walker adds an honest and open representation of the thoughts, actions, and experiences of white slave-owners, and non-slave-owning whites in the novel *Jubilee*, as a means to demonstrate the negotiation of identity amongst individuals in these social groups. The majority of the story told in *Jubilee* is set on the land of John Morris Dutton, a 3,000+ acre plantation placed in the rural town of Terrell County, Georgia. Situated miles back in a dense forest of pine and oak trees, the Dutton plantation serves as home to Mr. Dutton, his wife Selina, their two children, John Jr. and Lillian, and hundreds of slaves, and sits between two neighboring plantations populated by the Barrow and Crenshaw families and their slaves. Among this community of slaves and slave-owners also lives a small group of white families who do not own slaves and in fact, have to struggle for survival upon the undesirable land leased by the wealthy Dutton, Barrow, and Crenshaw planters. Explaining the social and economic positioning of this group of “poor whites”, the omniscient narrator of *Jubilee* announces:

> Always, too, there were the poor whites, po buckra, who lived back in the pine barrens and on the rocky hills. They suffered more than the black slaves for there was no one to provide them with the rations of corn meal and salt pork which was the daily lot of the slaves, and therefore the black people were taught by their owners to have contempt for this ‘poor white trash’(60).

This description depicts the difficulties that members of the ‘poor white’ community had to endure; forced to settle on barren and rocky terrain, and lacking food, they were disliked by both the enslaved individuals, “These white people did not work well with slaves. Each group regarded the other contemptuously and felt that the other was his inferior”(Walker 61). Explaining this tumultuous relationship further, Walker writes:

> The slaves claimed that the poor whites were lazy and wanted the easy jobs, shifting the hard work on them, while the whites got wages and the slaves got none. Sometimes the poor white worker brought his family with him- women and children- but they only came for the midday meal of collards or peas and cornbread (62).

According to the slaves who lived and worked on the local plantations, the poor whites were known for doing half-a-day’s work and claiming the provisions that should have been solely consumed by the slaves themselves. In addition, the black slaves who belonged to the planter families often found themselves much better off than the poor whites because they were always provided with some form of food, clothing, and shelter by their owners. Nevertheless, the poor whites still always seemed to be taking something away from the slaves because they often came to beg and borrow tools, food, and supplies from their wealthy neighbors.

Discussing the relationship between the poor whites and John Dutton specifically, the narrator explains, “…many winters found them [the poor whites] coming to Marse John to beg bread and corn, and in the spring they came to borrow money and seed to get them started on a new crop”(Walker 61). As a good, Christian neighbor, John always provided for those who
came and asked for help, however, he also expressed disdain for those who came begging. While scolding the novel’s protagonist, Vyry, after she asks to be married to the free black man named Randall Ware, John elaborates on the condition of the poor whites in the community; he exclaims:

They are free, free and white; but what have they got? Not a pot to piss in. Every blessed thing they get they’re knocking on my door for it. Can’t feed their pot-bellied younguns; always dying of dysentery and pellagra; eating clay cause they’re always hungry; and never got a crop fit for anything; no cotton to sell, and can’t get started in the spring unless I help them (Walker 145).

In John’s opinion, being free and white really does nothing to enhance the lives of the poor whites in the community because they are still left hungry, sick, and dirt broke year after year. However, for some of the poor white, their race and liberty are the two things that they do have that speak towards their righteousness in the world. For example, Janey Grimes, the wife of Ed Grimes, the overseer on the Dutton plantation, is one who openly declares the self-respect that her skin color affords her; describing Janey, the narrator reveals:

… he [Ed Grimes] married a woman from ‘Cracker country,’ or the pine barrens of Georgia. She could neither read nor write and she had no dealings with black slaves in any fraternal fashion. She told her husband, ’I hate niggers worsener poisonous rattlesnake. We’uns is poor, but thank God, we’uns is white’(Walker 63).

As her statement shows, being poor and illiterate is inconsequential to Janey when she considers the fact that she and her family are of the white race. Aware of how others viewed them, many of the poor white individuals like Janey and her husband also often returned the aversion expressed towards them with their own contempt for the other social groups that lived and worked around them. Describing this disposition, the narrator illustrates “The poor whites hated both the slave and the slaves, for they reasoned that the cotton planter and the slave kept bread out of their mouths”(Walker 62). In addition, “….they [the poor whites] were always throwing taunts and filthy epithets at the black slaves who taunted them back again as ‘Ignunt, and worthless, and lowdown, thievish, sickly looking trash’”(Walker 62). The taunt of the black slaves directed towards the poor whites expressed here, and the words of Janey Grimes discussed above, are significant because they serve as instances in which the neo-slave narrator has included the honest thoughts and opinions of the slave, and the negative representation of white individuals, both which were not traditionally included in slave narratives of the Antebellum period. In addition, Walker’s construction of a deep-seated animosity between the poor whites and black slaves in the novel is important because it parallels the diversion that occurred between blacks and whites during the Black Power Movement.

When Stokely Carmichel coined the phrase “Black Power” in 1967, he was arguing for the social, economic, and political freedom of all people of African descent; Carmichael and his supporters were interested in black independence from the dominant white culture and a chance for blacks to work towards a self-definition. Unlike Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and supporters of the Civil Rights Movement who felt as though obtaining civil rights for African Americans was everyone’s problem, Black Power advocates insisted that the acquisition of social, political, and economic rights for blacks was solely a task for black individuals and black groups to take up. This idea of racial exclusivity was successful in uniting people of African Descent to give a critical response to the most serious issues plaguing their black communities, yet Black Power
ultimately encouraged a division between the races that subconsciously bred fear and animosity between individuals who identified with different racial groups. As a genre, early black autobiography (slave narratives) more closely resemble the type of racial individualism that Black Power supporters rallied for; the majority of traditional slave narrative texts were solely written in the first-person, slave or ex-slave voice, who, although were often translated by white patrons, presented their readers with the perspective of the black slave only. In contrast, the majority of Neo-slave narrative texts experiment with a mixture of first-, second-, and third-person viewpoints, as well as characters of different races and social classes that ultimately challenges the Black Power Movement’s idea of racial exclusivity that arrested America in the late sixties and seventies; as Rushdy writes, “Neo-slave narratives contest this premise of individualism and challenge the singular voice in which it is articulated”(232). *Jubilee* is one of the first novels of the neo-slave genre that was published during the same time that the Black Power Movement was taking shape, and arguably, this novel’s presentation of a division between the poor white and black slave characters is Walker’s effort to bring the historical events of slavery into conversation with the social events of the sixties and seventies. Although acknowledging the racial divisions that have affected the communication between black and white individuals in the history of America by creating the animosity between the poor white and black slave figures in her novel, Walker also seems to lean away from the diversion of the races as a solution to our nation’s social issues and suggests instead, that only through a consideration of a collective voice will America come to a healing place. As a privilege of the contemporary author, Walker’s narrator in *Jubilee* continues to collectively explore the thoughts, actions, and words of both black and white characters throughout the novel.

Along with his wife Janey, Ed Grimes is another character in *Jubilee* that represents the perspective of the poor white community through speech and action. Although Grimes serves as the overseer on the plantation that belongs to Mr. John Dutton, the narrator informs readers that he, in fact, “lived in circumstances not much better than the slaves. His house was slightly better than the Negro Quarter houses on the plantation” (Walker 60). Existing somewhere between the social and material conditions of the slaves and the extremely poor whites in the community, Grimes appreciates his job for the necessities that it provides for him and his family, but always wishes that there was more to life than what he has accomplished so far. As the narrator explains, “Although Grimes had been poor white trash in Georgia, and grown up in the environs of Marse John’s plantation, he longed to improve his lot and rise above his beginnings”(Walker 63). However, with years of hard work and only a limited acquirement of social and economic mobility, Grimes cannot help but to be both spiteful and jealous of the wealthy planters in the community (like his employer John Dutton) who have benefited from the legacy of their ancestors and the work of the black slaves that they own. The narrator describes Grimes’s frustration with his working conditions and employer in the following passage:

> Of course, he [Grimes] never did have a good horse. John Morris Dutton kept all the fine thoroughbreds for hunting and carriage pulling and riding, while he gave Grimes all the nags and mules for work horses. Grimes did not think this was exactly right, but then what can you expect from a nigger-loving man like Dutton when it comes to treating poor white people right? (Walker 26).

Identifying himself as “poor white”, Grimes finds it ridiculous that the rich John Dutton would fail to provide him with a decent horse to work his property with. Using the one “deficiency” that John has, (his sexual fraternization with slave women), Grimes labels him a “nigger-loving
man”, and attributes John’s failures as an employer to the fact that he is a slave-owner who enjoys sleeping with his slave women. Although he finds his male employer negligent, Grimes finds solace in knowing that he works for a woman who shares his contempt for the slaves that he is responsible for watching on the Dutton Plantation. Sharing Grimes’s thoughts on Dutton’s wife Selina, the narrator reports Grimes as thinking:

Now his wife’s different…Missy Selina Dutton is, a fine, good lady…She knows how to handle niggers and keep a big establishment…She’s a real Christian woman, a Bible-reading, honest-dealing, high-quality lady who knows and acts the difference between niggers and white people. She ain’t no nigger-loving namby-pamby like that s.o.b. pretty boy she’s married to. She knows how to lay the law down on niggers and keep her business to herself”(Walker 26).

As made apparent in this passage, Grimes thinks highly of Selina because of the way that she “handles” the slaves on her plantation. Unlike her husband who maintains sexual relations with his female slaves, and even allows the children that he produces outside of his marriage to take residence in the plantation mansion, Selina makes a clear distinction between the races and chooses not to fraternize with her human property on any level; her support for racial autonomy and exclusivity predates the same type of efforts made by Black Power advocates in the 1960s and 70s. However, Selina’s idea of racial division is based off of racist and discriminatory beliefs whereas the racial division that was supported by Black Power advocates was based upon the foundational principles of black freedom and self-definition. In addition to serving as a proponent of racial exclusivity, Selina is also used throughout the novel to serve as a representative of the cruel nature of the slave-owning population.

By describing the actions and words of Selina Dutton (who is referred to as “Big Missy” by the slaves on her plantation) Walker’s omniscient narrator of Jubilee is also able to include instances of violence committed against the novel’s protagonist Elvira “Vyry” Dutton by her white slave-mistress and present Vyry’s empowered response to this violence. As one of the favored children that John Dutton has fathered with a slave woman on his plantation, Vyry is instructed to move into the Big House when she turns eight-years-old, and serves as the handmaid to the Dutton’s young daughter, Lillian. Infuriated with her husband’s decision to move one of his “bastard” children into her home, Selina takes out her frustrations by physically abusing Vyry throughout her childhood. Explaining the abuse that Selina commits against Vyry, the narrator reports,

Twice Big Missy slapped her in the mouth with the back of her hand, and once Vyry barely escaped the foot of her mistress kicking her. Once she yelled to the startled child, ‘You stupid bastard, if you break airy one of my china dishes, I’ll break your face’(Walker 30).

By slapping, kicking, and yelling at Vyry, Selina is able to instill a fear in the child which affects the progress that she makes in her new home and at her new job; as Vyry tries to adjust to the unfamiliar surroundings of the Big House and her new task as maid, she often makes mistakes and sometime even forgets to complete her required tasks. After Vyry fails to empty Lillian’s slop jar one evening, Selina behaves badly towards the child:

Instead of whipping her, she threw the acrid contents of the pot in Vyry’s face and said, ‘There, you lazy nigger, that’ll teach you to keep your mind on what you’re doing. Don’t you let me have to tell you another time about this pot or I’ll half-kill you, do you hear me?’(Walker 31).
Defiling her with human waste, Selina severely scolds Vyry about forgetting her work, and even threatens to “half-kill” the child if she forgets to empty Lillian’s pot again. On another occasion, Vyry accidentally breaks one of Selina’s China dishes and is punished severely for this mistake. Illustrating Selina’s violence on this occasion, the narrator reveals:

She [Selina] hooked the strap to a nail, then, snatching up Vyry, she crossed her hands and caught them securely with the strap. Vyry’s toes barely touched the floor of the closet. Suddenly, Big Missy slammed the door behind her and left Vyry hanging there in the darkness” (Walker 32).

Rushing to Vyry’s aid, John Dutton exclaims, “What are you trying to do, Selina, kill her?” (Walker 37), to which Selina boldly replies, “Yes. I reckon that’s what I oughta do. Kill her and all other yellow bastards like her.”(Walker 37). Professing her murderous intentions, Selina serves as a representative of the evil, or brutal white Southerner who was often excluded from traditional slave accounts by slave narrators due to the unacceptability of this character archetype by supporters of slavery who insisted that slavery was a benevolent institution. Although it was undeniable that such brutal actions were committed, and such words were spoken by those who maintained the institution of slavery in the Antebellum period, the actual display of such behavior by white slave-owners was contradictory to the argument that slavery was a nurturing, paternalistic institution that served to improve the life of black slaves by providing them with food, clothing, shelter, and skill, and was immediately dismissed by proponents of slavery if ever encountered in slave stories. It is because of the form and function of neo-slave texts, that Walker is able to include a character such as Selina who directly exposes the harsh realities of the institution of slavery; as Elizabeth Beaulieu explains in her book *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*, with this genre, “The bias of autobiography is removed, the abolitionist intention is no longer relevant, and the genre is shaken free from the rigid constraints of form…” (15). Since neo-slave narratives are created to speak to a large and diverse body of listeners, and are no longer needed as propaganda for abolitionist aims, contemporary authors such as Walker are free to imagine and present character examples of the various individuals who influenced (and were influenced by) slavery through different social, economic, and political realms. By creating a character such as Selina, Walker gives voice to the un-benevolent slave-owner and has revised the slave narrative genre by insisting on its potential to serve as a testimony to both black and white individuals who were involved in and affected by slavery in America.

In her critical text, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*, Angelyn Mitchell defines neo-slave narratives as “liberatory narratives”, and suggests that as a genre, “The liberatory narrative operates as a site of memory by allowing its readers to go beyond the events of slavery into the feelings and thoughts of the people who imaginatively had the experience”(17). Valuing the personal “feelings and thoughts” of the slave-owning population who also “imaginatively had the experience” of slavery in the Antebellum period, Walker uses Selina to feature the gendered experience of slave-mistress just as much as she uses her to disavow the paternalistic insinuations made about slavery. Although Selina’s position as the wife of a wealthy slave-owner accords her with power over the slaves in her control, this gendered position also establishes her as a victim of certain practices carried out within the context of slavery as well. In the same scene where Selina is confronted about her violent treatment of Vyry and confesses her murderous intentions, she also expresses her embarrassment with the fact that her husband
John has produced children outside of their marriage with slave women, and has allowed one of these children, Vyry, to occupy their home. Selina exclaims:

How much do you expect me to put up with? Here in this very house with my own dear little children. And my friends mortifying me with shame! Telling me she looks like Lillian’s twin...So far as killing her, I ain’t even hurt her. I oughta kill her, but I ain’t got the strength to kill a tough nigra bastard like her”(Walker 37).

This statement is significant because it achieves two distinct purposes. First, the statement is successful in presenting how frustrating it must have been for Selina to have to accept the indiscreet actions of her husband John; Selina’s voice here encourages readers to consider the realities of those outside of the slave category, who also did not have the ultimate control during slavery and were basically rendered powerless in a social, economic, and political structure that largely affected their lives as well. Secondly, these words by Selina are a testament to the constitution of Vyry, whom the story is ultimately about. Selina’s acknowledgement of the slave-child Vyry as being immune to her attacks because she is virtually stronger and tougher than her white mistress reinforces the powerlessness of Selina, and in turn, issues power to the young slave Vyry, who would traditionally not be expected to possess any form of it; this type of re-invention of the slave subject is an essential component of the neo-slave narrative genre. Selina’s declaration of Vyry as unbreakable, and the fact that after all that Selina has done to her, Vyry is still able to boldly declare “…I don’t see how come that make Big Missy hate me so bad. I ain’t done nothing”(Walker 44), are at least two examples of how Vyry’s self-worth is not diminished by her subjectivity as slave, or as child. Discussing common functions of traditional slave narratives in her essay “Telling Forgotten Stories of Slavery in the Postmodern South,” Susan Donaldson insists that “One slave narrative after another traced the corrupting effects of absolute sovereignty on owners of human chattel and on the individual psyches of slaves exposed to the abuses of that power”(271). For traditional slave narrative texts, the effects of violence and abuse upon black slaves is often expressed as being traumatic and spirit-breaking (such as the helplessness that Harriet Jacobs discusses in the chapter entitled: “The Trials of Girlhood” in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl), however, Walker’s construction of Vyry as an assertive young girl despite the physical and emotional attacks from her mistress is a construction that is encouraged by the neo-slave genre in which Walker is writing. Commenting on the creation of empowered slave characters in neo-slave narratives, Keizer argues that, “For writers living with slavery as a postmemory, assuming agency on the part of the enslaved appears to be a psychological and textual imperative”(16). Textually, empowered slave characters provide examples in which contemporary readers can better appreciate the varied responses that slaves had to the violence committed against them, while they simultaneously encourage a psychological contemplation of freedom within readers as well. Not only is Vyry a unique slave character based upon the way that she responds to Selina’s violence in the context of a specific age, gender, and race, but she inspires readers to consider their own assumptions about effective responses to violence and discrimination expressed by individuals of various ages, genders, and races in a contemporary American society. Also , with the presentation of Selina’s argument and reasoning behind the violent acts that she commits against Vyry, Walker contends for the acknowledgement and the necessity of multiracial interaction.

In addition to the variety of voices created in Jubilee being useful in constructing a more complete representation of slavery, and reconstructing the identities of slaves, poor whites, and slave-owners, the interactions that the protagonist, Vyry, has with the Dutton family are also
significant because they help to complete an understanding of Vyry’s own familial history. Since John Dutton is the biological father of Vyry, and many chapters in the novel *Jubilee* are created specifically to address the experiences of the individual members of the Dutton family, I argue that Walker seeks to acknowledge the “familial” relationships that her great-grandmother (Vyry) held with John Dutton, his wife, Selina, and their children, Lillian and Johnny. Not only is *Jubilee* a family memoir because Walker is retelling her great-grandmother’s story, but because it also includes the stories of the father, half-sister, and half-brother of this great-grandmother; in several places of the novel, Walker provides a look at the relationship that Vyry has with John, Lillian, and Johnny (whom she shares some biological identity with) which demonstrate how thin the line between Vyry’s identity as slave, and as “family”, truly is when considering her relationship with the Duttons.

Throughout the course of the novel, Vyry does not foster much of a relationship with Selina Dutton and her half-brother, Johnny; as discussed earlier, Selina Dutton always held contempt for Vyry because of her paternity, and years later, after Johnny Dutton’s death, Vyry had little more to say about him than, “I ain’t never like him and I know he ain’t never liked me, but I feels sorry for him now” (Walker 238). Instead, it is the relationships that Vyry has with her biological father and her half-sister that truly explore an important contemporary convention of the neo-slave narrative genre.

When he was alive, John Morris Dutton strived to be a descent master to his slave-daughter Vyry. As discussed earlier in this essay, John Dutton upheld (at least subconsciously) the fact that he was the biological father of Vyry by requesting that she come live in the Dutton mansion and interact closely with his legitimate daughter, Lillian. He even chastises his own wife, Selina, when she physically and emotionally abuses Vyry out of anger. However, there are instances such as when Vyry asks to marry the free black man, Randall Ware, and when Vyry attempts to run away, that John also maintains the rights of being her owner; John harshly denies Vyry the right to marry because he simply does not wish her to be married to a free black man, and he does not prevent or protest the mandatory whipping that Vyry received as an attempted runaway slave. In addition, as a young, vibrant master, John grants Vyry freedom upon his death, but by the time that John is actually on his deathbed, he has deteriorated into a senile old man, who teases Vyry about this promise of early emancipation. As Vyry tends to her house chores, John calls her into the study where he had taken residence after he had fallen sick and yells to her, “Think I forgot what I told you? I promised to set you free when I die, didn’t I? Got it in my will, right here!... But I ain’t dead yet!...You ain’t free till I die, and I ain’t dead yet!” (Walker 192). Now, genuinely concerned about her freedom after John is dead and gone, Vyry anxiously awaits his death, only to learn that she will not be set free due to another one of Selina’s spiteful attacks. With John gone, Vyry reflects on the impact that her master-father played in her life; at length, the narrator certifies:

The death of Marse John set up a chain of mixed emotions and reactions in Vyry. On his very last day of life he had taunted her with the promise of her freedom, something he knew she wanted more than anything else in the world...According to Aunt Sally and all the stories she had heard around the plantation from Mammy Sukey and other slaves, Marse John was her natural father. She was as much his child as Miss Lillian and she looked as much like him. But she was also his slave as her mother and been before her, and now her children were slaves. When she saw Miss Lillian weeping in grief over the death of her father, Vyry felt no sympathetic emotion. He had never once acknowledged her as his child and she had no tears to shed for him. True enough, he had never been as cruel to her as Big Missy, but neither had he ever showed her
any parental love… He did not prevent the guards from whipping her, he would not give her permission to marry, and now in stone-cold death she knew he had taunted her with the promise of freedom”(Walker 196-7).

At this moment, the “decent” behavior that John showed towards Vyry throughout her life loses its significance with her and instead, she remembers all of the times that her father did not come through for her; she ushers him into death without a sign of grief or sadness. With his death, it would seem as if John would become someone who Vyry welcomingly forgets, however, years later when Vyry meets a poor white couple who mistake her for a white woman, Vyry proudly declares her identity as a black woman without avoiding the acknowledgement that her father was a white slave-owner. Explaining the circumstances of her conception, Vyry announces:

He was my white marster, that’s who he was. He was my mother’s marster and my marster too, and I was a slave on his plantation till Surrender and the soldiers come and declared us free. Of course now, he never did own me for his child and I wasn’t nothing but his piece of property to work and slave for him, but I sho didn’t cost him nothing, that is as a price on the slave market, cause he never had to buy me- I was always his (Walker 431).

In this passage, Vyry asserts that John Dutton did not have to buy her because she was born on his plantation, but more importantly, Vyry seems to acknowledge that she was “always his” because she was born of his own flesh and blood. Spaulding argues that:

Writers of postmodern slave narratives view the history of slavery as in need of re-formation. In sociopolitical terms, these writers set out to reform our conception of American slavery by depicting a more complex, nuanced view of black identity in the context of American slavery”(4).

Considering the explanation of her paternity that Vyry provides above, Vyry recognizes the complexity of her identity as black slave “in the context of American slavery”, and fully understands what Bassard describes as, the “slippage between kin and property that underwrites the legal system of slavery”(409); this “slippage” occurs in slave identity when, as Bassard writes, “In designating that the child follows the condition (slave or free) of the mother, paternity is effectively written out of slave identity. It doesn’t matter who fathered you, only who owns you”(Bassard 409). As a woman who grew into adulthood under this social structure and comes to terms with her biracial identity, Vyry has already assumed a level of authority and self-definition that many African Americans were just beginning to wrestle with as freedmen in the post-bellum era. Along with proclaiming the issue of how her paternity complicates her existence in a social structure that does not acknowledge her as the interracial subject that she truly is, Vyry even embodies her interracial subjectivity when interacting with another member of the Dutton’s immediate family.

The life-long relationship that Vyry has with Lillian Dutton is the most significant interaction that she has with any of her extended “family” members. As Lillian’s maid, Vyry grew up in close proximity with her half-sister and played with her on many occasions. Describing John Dutton’s encouragement of Lillian and Vyry’s early interactions, the narrator explains:

Marse John was always kind to her when he was around. He would tell the little Missy to share when he brought bananas and oranges and other goodies. ‘Give Vyry some, too,’ he would tell
her and Miss Lillian would do as her father said. The two little girls often played together making mud pies, or running over the hillside playing hide-and-go-seek and playhouse under the big live oaks and shouting and laughing in fun (Walker 20).

As young children, neither Lillian or Vyry had a true understanding of their paternity, however, they were encouraged to play together by John Dutton, who seemed to be consciously fostering a bond between these two children that he had fathered by different women. Thanks to their father’s desire to have Lillian and Vyry interact throughout their childhood, Lillian develops a love for her slave-sister, which she enjoyed publically expressing. The narrator explains Lillian’s affectionate relationship with Vyry by sharing:

But Vyry had a staunch champion in Miss Lillian. In those early years the little Missy did not mind saying to anyone, ‘Yes, Vyry’s my sister, and I love her dearly, and she loves me, too, now don’t you, Vyry?’ And Vyry would mumble, ‘Yes, Missy, I reckon I does.’ But that was child’s talk and had nothing to do with their elders, Big Missy and Marse John (Walker 21-2).

Even though Lillian can afford to be disillusioned when it came to her and Vyry’s actual social relationship, as a slave, Vyry has to always remember her identity as slave, and simply indulges Lillian with a “Yes, Missy, I reckon I does”, when asked about her love for her mistress-playmate, who also was her actual half-sister. Years later, when both little girls have grown up, married, and had children, Lillian and Vyry maintain their relationship with one another and arguably function as actual family members by the end of the novel.

After Selina, John, Johnny, and Kevin (Lillian’s husband) have all passed away in the course of the novel, Lillian is the only remaining adult left to maintain the Dutton Plantation. Grieving the major loss of her immediate family members, and stressed about raising her two children and seeing after the plantation on her own, Lillian turns to Vyry for comfort and assistance. Lillian cries, “Oh, Vyry, please don’t leave me. I’m all alone now. Please don’t leave me.” And suddenly she clung to a confused but sympathetic Vyry”(Walker 267). When Lillian reaches out to be comforted by her slave-sister, Vyry is caught by surprise and not sure of how to receive her, however, after a few days pass with the two women together, Vyry seems to assume the role as big sister and begins to help Lillian recover from her grief and care for the Dutton estate. The relationship intensifies between the two half-sisters, Lillian and Vyry, when Lillian is physically injured by the Yankee soldiers who pass through a few months later to deliver the Declaration of Independence to the slaves on the Dutton Plantation. As caretaker of the farm, Lillian, Susan and Bobby (Lillian’s children), in addition to her new beau, Innis Brown, and her own two children, Minna and Jim, Vyry operates as a matriarch of this extended “family” and ensures that everyone is fed, clothed, and comforted for several chapters of the novel. When Innis suggests that him, Vyry and the children pack up and set off to begin a new life after Emancipation, Vyry is appalled and scolds Innis; she exclaims, “I can’t leave Miss Lillian here by herself. You knows I can’t go off and leave her helpless like and sick in her mind!”(Walker 302). Vyry’s reaction to Innis, coupled with the intensity in which she cares for Lillian and the Dutton plantation after Emancipation is one element of the text that has encouraged the accusation of Walker as being caught up in the “Gone with the Wind” phenomenon, a sensation that “forever enshrined on page and screen a wistful and highly nostalgic image of the Southern plantation as a gracious abode of white gentility and black subservience”(Donaldson 269). Equating Vyry with Mammy from Margaret Mitchell’s text, critics “often proclaimed [Jubilee] the black Gone with the Wind”(Donaldson 269).
who draw similarities between Walker’s and Mitchell’s texts, Vyry serves as little more than a representation of the loyal and obedient slave who stays on the plantation well after his/her duty is done. However, I find this reading of Vyry problematic because it suggests that Walker is presenting (and perhaps, critiquing) her own great-grandmother as a bowing, shuffling, overly loyal slave, an image which I do not believe that Walker is trying to accomplish with this character in her novel. I suggest instead, that it is more reasonable to think about Jubilee as a text created during the context of the sixties and seventies, and therefore, as Walker’s response to the dominant debates on race and identity surrounding the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements; reading Jubilee in this context, Walker is contesting the argument for racial exclusivity that Black Power supporters encouraged, and insisting on the use of multiracial cooperation as a means for people of African descent to gain authority over their own social, economic, and political lives. As Rushdy declares:

Neo-slave narratives take up the issues raised by the anthropological idea of race as a performed and regulative social category, question the politics proscribing cultural crossing, and develop statements on the liberating effects that come with acknowledging the pliability of racial identity (22).

The relationship that Walker creates between Lillian and Vyry presents a discussion on the “pliability of racial identity” when it concerns equating race with a certain social positioning as was maintained throughout the historical period that these fictive characters lived in. At different points in their lives, both Lillian and Vyry do not define each other according to the social and racial subjectivity that has been proscribed upon them by society and the institution of slavery. For example, when Lillian and Vyry were children, Lillian ignored the social and racial positioning of Vyry as a black slave, and liked to declare that they were sisters and loved each other. When the two women grew into adulthood, however, it is now Vyry who seems to ignore the social and racial positioning of Lillian as white slave-owner in order to care affectionately for her. In turn, Vyry’s own social and political positioning changes because it is she who runs the deserted Dutton Plantation and she whom the Doctor must inquire information from when he suggests that someone come retrieve Lillian and her children. In addition, Vyry’s economic status improves from her non-acceptance of the social and racial categorization of the early Antebellum era because it is this attitude that informs her decision to stay on the plantation and care for Lillian and her family, which in turn, leads to the fact that she eventually leaves the Dutton Plantation with a wagonload of household items for her family to begin their new lives as freedmen. Due to this generous donation of Lillian’s Aunt Lucy, Vyry is able to provide a comfortable home life for her family for years to come. Describing the items that Vyry chose for her family, Walker writes:

Vyry had an abundance of other things she considered necessary to give them a comfortable start in life. She had iron pots and kettles, a wash pot, skillets, smoothing irons, candle molds and tallow candles, tin plates and cups and dippers of gourd and tin, a china wash bowl and pitcher and a slop jar. She had quilts and croker sacks of cotton and feathers for beds and pillows, a precious spinning wheel, lots of potash soap, and most important of all she had sacks of cracked corn, water ground corn meal, and sacks of seed. She filled the chest with her most valuable keepsakes from the plantation and Big House and tied it on the wagon (316).
Not only will these “keepsakes from the plantation” help to sustain Vyry’s newly freed family for some time, Vyry’s new possessions also serve as invaluable family heirlooms that will remain in the family for years to come. Years later when Vyry pays a visit to Lillian and the Porters, she is still warmly received as close family might be; Aunt Lucy tells Vyry that her and Uncle Porter were “just talking about you [Vyry] the other night and wondering where you [Vyry] were”(Walker 410). Aunt Lucy’s welcoming greeting and admission that the Porters were “just talking” about her recently and wondering how and where she was is significant because it shows the unique closeness that this ex-slave has with the extended family of her former owners.xviii The fact they are thinking about her and worried about her welfare even after Emancipation and parting is demonstrative of the fact that Vyry is truly connected to this family on a deeper level. The most telling sign of Vyry’s identity as family, however, occurs when she says “goodbye” to Aunt Lucy and Lillian for the last time in the novel. Illustrating the scene, Walker writes, “When Vyry left she hugged and kissed Miss Lucy goodbye and then Miss Lillian…”(Walker 412). Such an undeniable display of love and affection between Vyry, Aunt Lucy, and Lillian that the kiss presents solidifies the fact that this is not just a parting between ex-slave and owners, but rather, an emotional farewell between beloved members of a family; with this scene, Walker has created another significant convention of the neo-slave narrative genre. As Rushdy asserts:

> Whether it is by emphasizing that all racial roles are performed or by revealing the economic and social practices subtending the historical formation of all racial subjectivities, the authors of the Neo-slave narratives firmly reject the essentialism and ahistoricism of Black Power and neoconservative intellectuals, and work to reveal the structural mechanisms that historically created and daily re-create ‘race’ in America”(231).

The intimate relationship that Walker creates between Vyry, Lillian, and the Porters by the end of her novel *Jubilee* demonstrates the performativity of race in the Antebellum South, because it features members of the white slave-owning class acting outside of their prescribed racial performance by embracing members of the black slave class, and in addition, shows the pliability of race by allowing Vyry, as a bi-racial subject, to assume a position in both of the social arenas that were associated with each race of which she existed. As another example of Walker’s argument for multiracial cooperation and collectivity, after leaving the plantation, Vyry and Innis are offered help to build their new home by white families in their new community. In addition, in exchange for her skills as a midwife, or “granny”, Vyry and her family are promised security and protection from the violence of the Ku Klux Klan who have been active in their new county;xix One of the Brown’s new neighbors declares:

> …we has the word of the people that if you will stay we guarantee yall won’t have nothing to fear, ain’t nobody will bother you, do, we’ll protect you instead. We’ll put you up a house in a day’s time we’ll have you under your roof just like you want it”(Walker 434).

Not only are Vyry’s new neighbors offering to help a family build a home, but to display a level of interracial care and concern that was rare in the Antebellum Southern context in which Walker’s novel is set. It is through the presentation of voices such as this one, and the various voices discussed earlier in this chapter that are representative of the true healing properties of the neo-slave narrative genre; As James Weaver writes in his essay, “Rehabilitative Storytelling: The Narrator-Narratee Relationship in J. California Cooper’s Family:”
The neo-slave narrative not only represents rehabilitative storytelling but enacts it, situating readers in a position to confront the United State’s slave past and to use that past as a source for social regeneration in the present”(Weaver 129).

With this idea, through the use of a variety of voices in their texts, neo-slave narrative authors such as Walker are asserting that it is not Black Power nor White Power, but rather a multiracial Voice Power that will ultimately bring the discussions on race, class, and gender in America’s past, present, and future to a productive, healing place.

CONCLUSION

Beginning in 1760, more than six thousand individuals shared their experiences as former slaves with white patrons, who wrote these African American stories until we were respected enough to write our own. First articulated from black memory, filtered through white ear, imagination, and hand, then presented to be consumed by both black and white eye, these accounts have come to serve as the literary inspiration from which those who will never have to endure slavery’s hardships seek to further explore this institution within the dialogue of contemporary social events such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Foundationally conceived out of the stories told within the Antebellum slave narrative genre, “Contemporary writers’ views of slavery are certainly informed by slave narratives and their speaking silences, yet many writers move so far beyond the traditional narratives that their works are not bound by that frame of reference”(Keizer 3). Authors of neo-slave narratives employ the narrative freedom that they have been afforded to create intriguing representations of slavery; representations that include characters, events, actions, and words that highlight and enter into the contemporary conversations that intellectuals and activists have been having about the existence and progression of black individuals in American society. As a result, readers are enamored by texts such as Song Yet Sung, and Jubilee who, as Beaulieu suggests, are pieces of literature that are “…personally driven and socially charged, literature that simultaneously honors tradition and creates it”(25). James McBride tackles the issues of property, violence, and identity which have plagued America’s history through the adventurous tale of a fugitive slave with the power to see the future, and envisions the most recognized leader of the Civil Rights Movement as the one person in the world who can help America complete its song, while Margaret Walker’s multiracial voices and interactions in Jubilee critique the essentialism and exclusivity of the Black Power Movement and insist on the productivity of interracial communication and cooperation. Not only have McBride and Walker tackled the issues of race, identity, and politics in the Antebellum era through the slave stories told in their texts, but dared to subvert, and mix these issues with their imagination to address a contemporary audience’s concern with these same contentions in present-day America. As neo-slave authors, McBride, Walker, and all of the other contemporary authors who have also appropriated the slave genre to do such important work serve as cultural and social activists who should be honored for their literary efforts in re-forming the imaginative testimony of black America’s history.
This text actually boasts an extended title, which was very characteristic of slave narrative texts composed during the first century of the literary tradition; the complete title of Hammon’s work is: A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings, and Surprizing Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man,---Servant to General Winslow, of Marshfield, in New-England; Who Returned to Boston, after Having Been Absent almost Thirteen Years. Containing an Account of the Many Hardships He Underwent from the Time He Left His Master’s House, in the Year 1747, to the Time of His Return to Boston.---How He was Cast Away in the Capes of Florida;---The Horrid Cruelty and Inhuman Barbarity of the Indians in Murdering the Whole Ship’s Crew;---The Manner of His Being Carry’d by Them Into Captivity. Also, an Account of His Being Confined Four Years and Seven Months in a Closed Dungeon,---and the Remarkable Manner in which He Met with His Good Old Master in London; Who Returned to New-England, a Passenger in the Same Ship (1760). Serving as a short biography itself, this title, like many others of the time, reveals many details about the slave storyteller, including his name, race, occupation, owner, select life experiences, and his personal commentary on some of those experiences.

This text is another extended title piece. The full title, Declaration and Confession of Jeffrey, a Negro. Who Was Executed at Worchester, Oct. 17, 1745, for the Murder of Mrs. Tabitha Sanford, at Mendon, the 12th of September Preceding (1745), seems to characterize Jeffrey as a confessed killer, depending on how one may read the title; sadly enough, no existing copy of this text has been successfully located for scholars to conduct a complete examination of its contents, and thus, support or refute this assumption.

Although both Hammon and Jeffrey share stories about their enslavement in Europe, both of these texts were published in Boston, Massachusetts, characterizing them as New World or American texts, and although the full titles of these texts may appear quite overzealous to the common contemporary reader due to their revelation of details that one might rather chance upon through the actual reading of the text, the true significance of these extended titles lies in the fact that they alone signify the performative qualities that early African American slave narratives operated upon for over one hundred years.

Both of these objectives were seemingly impossible to achieve during the Antebellum era due to slavery’s foundational principle that the black subject was not even of human substance and therefore, not capable of the levels of thought and feeling as white human beings. However, as more white Americans began to voice their concerns with slavery, the impenetrability of this foundational principle began to fail, thus weakening the institution of slavery itself and allowing the slave narrative to begin to operate with additional purposes.

Sherryl Vint supports my argument on the effectiveness of slave testimony coupled with the presentation of physical scars when she writes in her essay, ““Only by Experience”: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives,” that “The suffering body authorized and authenticated autobiographical accounts of slavery’s horrors (242).”

Except for the very few cases in which African American slaves were granted manumission before the Civil War, many of the slaves who were recruited by abolitionist were indeed those who had been successful in running away from their masters. This presented a major problem for some anti-slavery lecture audience members who found it difficult to believe anything that a cunning, untrustworthy run-away slave could possibly have to say. Indeed, any slave who decided to run-away had to adopt a few dishonest practices in order to evade their captors such as dawning disguises, lying, and hiding, however, this only seemed to support the well established sentiment among the slaveholder population and many Southern whites that the slave was by nature a deviant, and thus, could not be trusted on any level.

Although, one could argue that many of the events within these texts were surely experienced by someone, during some time, and at some place in history.

This function of the author becomes even more significant when the central protagonist of a neo-slave texts advances from the foundation of a real-life figure such as Vyry Brown, the maternal great-grandmother of Margaret
Walker, the author of *Jubilee*, to a completely fictional characters such as Clora from J. California Cooper’s *Family*, who is solely a creation from the literary imagination of Cooper, the author.

ix Perhaps this phrase is making reference to black men spending a large majority of their time playing sporting games, (such as a rowdy basketball game played on a community court), like young children.

x Many contemporary rap artists are not known by their given names, but rather by stage names that are constructed and performed. Using Petey Pablo for an example, “Petey Pablo” is in fact a moniker, an identity that has been created and performed by Moses Barrett III. Just like the “Woman with No Name” (although perhaps not for the same reasons) Barrett has chosen to discard his given name, which is arguably, what the rapper in Liz’s dream has done as well. Therefore, Liz’s worry about her dream rapper having “lost” his identity is still significant alongside her confusion about what he is actually achieving through the use of the question “Who am I?”

xi Walker also creates the character Randall Ware who presents the perspective of a free black man; however, I will not discuss this character type at length in this essay.

xii This is my reading of the relationship between Vyry and Selina based on the text as a response to conversations concerning the Black Power Movement; however, In their critical texts, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*, and *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*, authors Angelyn Mitchell and Elizabeth Beaulieu respectively, also acknowledge the influence that the Feminist Movement had on the creation of neo-slave narrative texts.

xiii Selina destroys John’s last will and testament and erases all record of his promise to Vyry.

xiv Instead of just informing the inhabitants of the plantation that all slaves were declared free, the Yankee soldiers took to looting and destroying the Dutton property, and even physically attacked Lillian by hitting her over the head with a gun. Lillian is seriously injured and never regains the full function of her mind.

xv Innis ask Vyry to leave Lillian because he has made the assumption that because slavery has ended and Vyry is no longer a slave that she would be ready and willing to leave the plantation where she has served as a slave all of her life. However, as history has taught us, many slaves refused to leave their home plantations after Emancipation for various reasons, for example, some, out of fear of how to care for themselves and their families as freedmen, some out of a sense of duty and honor towards the slave-owning family on the plantation; and some out of a concern for the welfare of the plantation that lived on, worked, and built all of their lives.

xvi That is, until Alice Randall published *The Wind Done Gone*, a 2001 parody of Mitchell’s text.

xvii When Lillian’s Aunt Lucy Porter and her husband come to take Lillian, Susan, and Bobby to their home, Vyry experiences the acquisition of valuable property that once belonged to the members of the Dutton family. Upon planning to leave, Aunt Lucy tells Vyry to select some items to take along with her and her family; she says, “Well, Vyry, we just ain’t able to carry all this stuff away. And you oughta pick out something for yourself after Lillian’s stuff gets packed up. I just think it’s no more than right for you to have some of this stuff. Better than strangers coming in and destroying everything”(Walker 309). Although Aunt Lucy does not venture to tell Vyry of why she believes that it is “no more than right” to give her such valuable property from the Dutton household, one could suggest that she does so not only because Vyry was the only slave who remained to care for Lillian, the children, and the Big House, but because Vyry is actually at least a half member of the Dutton family due to John Morris Dutton being her natural father. In Aunt Lucy’s mind, it is at least decent to allow Vyry, a former slave who has Dutton blood running through her veins, to be able to claim some items, versus letting the things be looted by actual white men who will venture upon the house and land once it is no longer occupied.

xviii If Vyry was just another black slave from the Dutton plantation, Lillian and the Porters would more than likely not be concerning themselves about where she was and what she was doing after Emancipation.
Vyry and Innis have already been victims of the KKK by this point in the novel; the Klan burned down their second home, which destroyed many of the keepsakes that Vyry carried away from the Dutton Plantation.


