African American Literary Counter-narratives in the Post-Civil Rights Era

DISSERTATION

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By

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Abstract

African American Literary Counter-Narratives in the Post-Civil Rights era is situated at the intersection of 20th and 21st century African American literature and Critical Race Theory while also being attentive to the continuity of the historic engagement between African American literature and the law through the exploration of the law as a trope in the works of African American authors of the post-Civil Rights era. In exploring these critical connections, I argue that African American authors construct counter-narratives that challenge color-blind narratives of racial progress using the familiar language of the law and posit various modes of legal and extra-legal storytelling as a way of aggregating the varied and often alienating experiences of race in America.

Since the election of the first African American president in 2008, there has been a boom of self-congratulatory proclamations that his election marked the destruction of the final racial barrier in the United States. I argue that these post-racial proclamations are nothing new and are, in fact, rooted in a longstanding trend of American nationalist discourse so often deployed as a distraction from the continued subjugation of marginalized groups. My project examines how African American authors of the post-Civil Rights era challenge color-blind rhetoric by writing narratives about African Americans who live in the shadows of the lofty narratives of racial progress. The counter-narratives I examine paint a nuanced picture of African American characters struggling to comprehend, cope with, catalyze and counter the most recent manifestation of white supremacy. However, far from simply representing a community in pain or positing “solutions” to the sufferings of African Americans, these authors instead portray an array of possibilities and pitfalls that shape the black experience in America.
Dedication

For my grandmother, Lou Ivy Barron, who has seen all sides of the coin and has the stories to prove it.

In memory of Jacqueline (Jacquie) Scott, my friend and a transcended woman warrior. Jacqui, there are no do-overs and no take-backs. I hope you will accept the completion of this project as my amends.
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Vita

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On November 4, 2008, I sat in my living room surrounded by friends and colleagues (all African American). I have had many raucous gatherings with this same group; this Tuesday night, however, we all sat gaping at the television in complete silence as a cloud of awe, wonder, fear, and doubt flooded the air. Awe and wonder because, as African Americans and students of African and African American history, literature and politics, we were too familiar with the continued tumultuousness of U.S. race relations to believe that we would live to see the day that an African American might win the U.S. presidency. We were filled with fear and doubt for the same reasons. As the MSNBC political pundits called state after state in favor of then presidential candidate Barack Obama, we all began to hope in spite of the realities that we all live, read and teach, that yes, we would have our first African American president. At approximately 10:53pm, Chris Matthews, host of MSNBC’s *Hardball*, was so moved by the power of the possibility of an African American president that he excitedly launched into a monologue about contemporary U.S. race relations that summed up the rhetoric of the post-election news:

Times are identified by the presidency. We may be entering now the era of an Obama presidency, which gives the character to the times. And it’s
so extraordinary for someone who grew up as I did to imagine the fact that our first family will be African American . . . It’s going to be a spectacularly different environment for every kid who reaches consciousness in our society. From now on it will be different than it was before. It’s totally different. If this happens in the next few minutes and we announce it, every reality we grew up with in terms of ethnicity will be different, and the world will look at us—Thank God!—with wonder again. My God, how they do it! How do these Americans do it? . . . Once again, America, with all its frailties and all its sins of the past has been able to do something truly wondrous . . . I love it when they say “I don’t know how they do it?” because we’ve invented something new—a truly diverse presidency for once. (Matthews, Chris 2008)

At the core of Matthews’s comments is an understanding of Barack Obama as a messiah figure—a leader who has come to move us out of racialized darkness into the promise land of the colorblind era—as evident in Matthews’s belief that “every reality we grew up with in terms of ethnicity will be different” after Obama is elected president. The promise of an Obama presidency is not only to usher us into the post-racial era, but also to restore the sense of wonder with which the world once viewed the United States—“My God, how do they do it!”

About five minutes after Matthews’s speech, Sen. Barack Obama became President-elect. Ten minutes later, I received a text message from a friend (an African American woman) who had been working at the polls all day. It read:
“Are we progressing or regressing when a white man says to me ‘Even though he’s a nigger, I’m gonna vote for Obama. We need change?’ I have no doubt that even this white man my friend wrote of would emphatically argue that clearly race is no longer a factor in American society if he can bring himself to vote for a “nigger,” a point supported by his candor and willingness to voice the details of his voting logic to an African American woman. The following morning, millions of Americans across the nation flocked to their local newsstands to purchase newspapers archiving the event that some thought would mark the end of racism in the United States. On its front page, The New York Times proclaimed “Obama: Racial Barrier Falls in Decisive Victory.” One letter to the editor read: “That day has dawned, the day dreamed of by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when a man is judged by the content of his character rather than by the color of his skin. And America stands tall before all the world” (Maguire, Connell J. 2008).

What struck me about Matthews and countless others characterizing the election of Obama as the dawning of a new post-racial era was how at odds such proclamations were with the tenor of Obama’s campaign. The son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, when he began his bid for the U.S. presidency in February 2007, Obama’s narrative was repeated often with slight variations. Any time his critics and opponents threatened to pigeonhole him as the “black candidate,” the narrative would shift, emphasizing his father’s absence (Obama’s parents divorced when he was two years old and his father
returned to Kenya. Obama saw his father only once more before he was killed in a car accident), venerating his mother’s role as a working single mother and praising his grandparents for their hard work and patriotism. As the campaign mulled on through the primaries and the general election, Obama’s narrative became a mantra repeated as often as necessary in order to reassure white voters that his race was not a threat to American idealism.

Then on March 18, 2008, standing before a deep blue background, surrounded by eight American flags—four to his right and four to his left—President Barack Obama, who was then battling Hillary Clinton in the Democratic primary for the Democratic National Convention’s nomination, called a press conference to address what many conservative news media pundits characterized as “anti-American rhetoric” in the sermons of Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Obama’s then pastor for more than twenty years. Interestingly, the clips of Rev. Wright which circulated with the most frequency on MSNBC, CNN, Fox News and other television outlets were from a 2003 sermon titled “Confusing God and Government.” In the sermon, Wright ultimately accuses the government of lying to the American people and critiques the American government for its mistreatment of female and non-white citizens, particularly citizens of African descent. When parts of Wright’s sermon were leaked to the press during the Obama campaign, they were widely characterized as being “racist,” “anti-American,” and “unpatriotic.” The extensive relationship Obama had with Wright made Obama, in the eyes of many Americans, guilty by
association of criticizing the state’s treatment of people of color and illuminating the disconnect between the rhetoric and actions of the U.S. government. After all, Wright had brought Obama into the Christian faith, officiated Obama’s wedding, and baptized Obama’s two daughters. Thus, Wright’s critiques of the U.S. government’s treatment of citizens of color became Obama’s critiques, and during his March 18th speech, “A More Perfect Union,” President Obama felt compelled to address the nation to lay to rest an issue that threatened to sink his historic campaign. Obama’s goals in this speech were clear; he sought to distance himself from Wright’s comments without alienating people of color, particularly African Americans and to emerge from the Rev. Wright firestorm as “raceless” and American as he entered it. Indeed, Obama jumped through many flaming rhetorical hoops to avoid throwing Wright under the bus and disowning him outright, but it was quite apparent, even from the speech’s title, that Obama’s primary goal was to paint himself as a true American patriot with faith in the possibilities of America.

Until the Wright clips surfaced, Obama had been widely touted as the “post-racial” candidate who “transcended” race. As Texas Monthly editor Paul Burka wrote during the campaign: “Americans gave him a free pass on race. They saw him as transcending the race issue. . . . Everybody gave Obama the benefit of the doubt. He had become a phenomenon by ignoring the race issue — the phase of the campaign in which, as Obama himself said in the speech, he was criticized by blacks for not being black enough. By ignoring the race issue,
he was able to transcend it” (Burka). Burka is not using “transcendence” here to refer to Obama as a racially progressive candidate. Rather, Burka directly equates transcendence with silence, and by asserting that Obama was able to transcend race by ignoring it, Burka concedes that he believes there is a race “issue” that is best dealt with by being swept under the rug. According to Burka’s logic, Obama earns the title of the “post-racial” candidate not for his racially progressive speech in which he details the racial tensions that plague various groups, but by pretending racial tensions do not exist at all. Thus, by avoiding any reference to race, Obama transcends it all together. When Burka claims that, “Americans gave [Obama] a free pass on race,” one must pause and decode these two terms that have for so long been antithetical in the rhetoric of race and nation. It is important to note that many African American voters also gave Obama a “free pass on race,” but for very different reasons. Paradoxically, after vetting Obama to ensure that he was “black enough,” most black voters did not demand that Obama speak for, or even directly to, the needs of “the race” (this was not true for everyone, there were African American protestors at some Obama rallies demanding to know just what he intended to do for black people). Arguably, this was because black voters who are familiar with the backdoor politics of race relations in America understood that in order for Obama to win, he had to appeal to the “universal” logic of American idealism, which most certainly does not include any extensive meditation on future initiatives aimed specifically at bettering the circumstances of African Americans.
My understanding of “race” and U.S. race relations is heavily rooted in post-structuralism and influenced by Critical Race Studies and Critical White Studies scholars. These scholars understand race to be a social construction, meaning that “race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado and Stefanic, 7). While this definition suggests that racial categories are both arbitrary and fluid, I do not mean to downplay the real-world, material effects of racial categories on human subjects. On the contrary, racial categorization is the phenomenon by which society is largely structured and power distributed. The fluidity of racial categories acts in maintenance of the status quo. Though the term “race” is a signifier for a set of phenotypical characteristics, popular usage of the term suggests that “race” is a term that generally refers to “raced” individuals, i.e. non-whites. By contrast, whiteness is thought of as the “raceless” norm. As scholar John Hartigan Jr., wrote early in the movement to critically interrogate whiteness as a social, cultural and political construct:

... one central importance of whiteness as an analytical concept is that it identifies how the unmarked and normative position of whites is maintained by positing “race” as a category of difference. “Racial" and “race" are typically used to characterize difference and deviance from social norms that have been seamlessly equated with what white people,
generally speaking, do and think. Phrases such as race relations and racial problems have effectively focused on only one side of the equation, on the conditions of peoples of color and not upon the position of dominance that whites maintain. (496-497)

Moreover, “race” and “white” have come to signify “anti-American” and “American” respectively, stemming from the use of racial categories to mark Black people as slaves and property while whites were free and propertied.¹ Thus when Burka says “Americans gave [Obama] a free pass on race,” he is referring specifically to white Americans; in other words, using a race rhetoric decoder ring, Burka says Whites gave Obama a free pass on his blackness, willingly forgave him for it and bestowed upon him a veil of honorary whiteness, a decision which they questioned at the height of the Rev. Wright scandal. For white Americans, Obama quickly morphed from the faithful servant to a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Burka’s comments reveal a sense of betrayal felt by many white Americans and also imply the inherent contradiction of the phrase “African American.” Considering the definition of race given above, it should be clear that when Obama was labeled as the candidate who “transcended race,” he was really being labeled as the candidate who “transcended” blackness and became (at least rhetorically) white.

¹ Both Cheryl I. Harris in “Whiteness as Property” (1993) and George Lipsitz in Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics explicate the history of how American citizenship became coded as “white.”
Although the racially rhetorical twists and turns in Obama’s campaign did dampen my enthusiasm as I noted the compromises that a “viable” African American candidate must make in order to win the U.S. Presidency, it also led me to questions that pushed my interrogation of literary critiques of racism in the post-Civil Rights era. Can one effectively argue that we are living in a post-racial era if blackness is still a liability? What is the investment of the white racial establishment in premature claims to the end of racism and in narratives of racial progress? What are the effects on African American individuals and communities who continue to face obstacles deriving from structural racism? If African American authors have a history of challenging dominant racial narratives—scientific, cultural, national, etc.—in such an environment, how does one create an alternative narrative that validates the experience of the raced “other” and critiques the “end of racism” myth? What do these narratives look like?

Post-racialism is by no means a new phenomenon; it evolved from the Neo-conservative colorblind argument (to be discussed in detail later on), which itself evolved out of the overt legal obstacles to full citizenship African Americans worked tirelessly to overcome during and long before the Civil Rights Movement. African Americans through political action as well as through cultural movements have endeavored to spotlight the surreptitious chasm between the American promise Obama embraced during his campaign and the material realities of black people. Post-racialism and colorblind rhetoric are the
most recent evolution of racial discourse to attempt to mask this chasm. The purpose of Her Fleece Was White as Snow is to examine the African American literary engagement with the over-determination of black subjectivity as represented by authors in the post-Civil rights, “colorblind” era. I examine texts from the post-Civil Rights era (1968-Present) in order to argue that many contemporary African American texts critique the manner in which American society has come to venerate “colorblindness” as the current state of U.S. race relations despite the continued subjugation of people of color. As it was for their literary predecessors, one of the primary projects of African American authors writing in this new milieu has been to critique, complicate and challenge a dominant discourse that seeks to simultaneously hyper-define and undermine black subjectivity. In particular, I examine how the law, which is considered to be race-neutral in the context of the color-blind argument, continues to haunt the literary texts of contemporary African American authors.

Indeed, African American literature has always engaged the legal status of African Americans both directly, engaging legal issues head on, and indirectly, with narratives that make visible and clear the often abstract and invisible limitations that the law has placed on people of color. Early slave-narratives challenged the status of African Americans as chattel, and authors such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs used intricate rhetorical strategies to construct counter-narratives that engaged the nationalist, moral, and gendered narratives of nineteenth-century America. The questionable status of African
Americans following the Civil War led to counter-narratives that illuminated the liminal space African Americans occupied as pseudo-citizens—no longer in bondage, yet not free. Similarly, the literature of the New Negro during the Harlem Renaissance continued to challenge racial tensions pervading the social conditions of America by integrating aesthetics with racially salient themes. Literature of the 1940s and 50s leading up to the Civil Rights Movement (texts such as Native Son, The Street, Invisible Man, If He Hollers Let Him Go) offered biting critiques of a social structure designed to confine African Americans to a permanent underclass status.

Though the literature of these movements has not been articulated as “counter-narratives,” placing them in their historical context readily illuminates the racialized psychic, social, and political ramifications of the issues black authors have “countered”—slavery, black codes, disenfranchisement, lynching, mob rule, Jim Crow, segregation, and the residual effects of the sexual exploitation of black women and the emasculation of black men. Authors of the post-Civil Rights era, however, face unprecedented challenges in their efforts to construct counter-narratives that represent and critique the continued subjugation of African Americans in the absence of the overt legal obstacles facing authors of previous literary movements. Therefore, this project is concerned with the appearance of “the law” not only as a formal concept, but also as trope, metaphor and symbol in contemporary African American literature. The texts I examine offer a spectrum of readings and representations
of the law, demonstrating the continuity of literary engagement between pre-
and post-Civil Rights authors, yet also speaking to the new challenges stemming
from shifts in racial discourse in the late 1960s.

Although the African American literary tradition deals extensively with
the role of the law in the lived experiences of Black people in America, very little
critical attention has been given to this subject in African American literary
criticism. As Jonathan Suggs notes in Whispered Consolations: Law and Narrative in
African American Life (1999), one of few scholarly monographs dealing with
African American literature and the law, “African American literature’s ongoing
critique of American law was not only an untold story, it had been largely
invisible to even the most implicated observers” (2). Suggs asserts that
historically, African American literature has engaged the law in a way that white
American literature has not had to. He writes, “The law’s ability to shape—its
historical force as the sole yet ever elusive determinant of African American
social identity—presets the narrative base for all African American fiction”
(Suggs, 9). From this broader premise, Suggs analyzes the “signifying
relationship” between African American literature and American law; reading
the law as a separate yet parallel body of knowledge to Black literature, he
explores the ways particular legal cases influence authors’ constructions of
literary texts beginning with what he defines as the “romantic” period and
extending forward to the publication of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man in 1952.
Lovalerie King in *Race, Theft, and Ethics: Property Matters in African American Literature* also understands the law to be an important determinant in the lives and literature of African Americans. King’s innovative analysis of property and ethics in African American literature ranging from the publication of *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, An American Slave* published in 1845 to the “neo-freedom narrative,” *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison published in 1987 illuminates the ways in which “Blacks challenged the definers and their definitions by creating their own codes of honor and ethics, which served their peculiar needs while demonstrating their individual and collective will toward the fullest possible expressions of freedom” (39). Though Suggs, King and I all agree that the law has had an insidiously pervasive influence on Black America and that Black literature has always directly and indirectly engaged the law, my project does differ from theirs by time period, thematic approach, and critical framework. As noted previously, Suggs’s analysis ends with the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952), sixteen years before my project begins. Similarly, King’s thematic approach to property and ethics extends over 140 years. This difference in the time periods we are analyzing is quite significant to my project because I focus on the ways in which contemporary African American authors challenge colorblind racism, a discourse which emerged during the post-Civil Rights era. Thus, the texts analyzed in *Her Fleece Was White as Snow* range from the publication of John Edgar Wideman’s *The Lynchers* in 1970 to Tayari Jones’s *Leaving Atlanta* published in 2003. I focus on a more narrow range of texts than
Suggs and King because I am tracing the emergence of a specific form of racism and examining counter-narratives produced to challenge it.

While Suggs does briefly discuss Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) use of narrative in the “postclassical” period in the epilogue to *Whispered Consolations*, specifically analyzing the work of Patricia Williams and Derrick Bell, CRT is a much more integral part of my and King’s analytical frameworks. King uses CRT to demonstrate the construction of the “black thief,” asserting that “A critical race approach helped me to understand that the stereotype of the black thief is an inevitable byproduct of the American legal system; it provides a means for tracking the relationship between the law and the developing stereotype” (5). In King’s work, CRT is a useful tool in historicizing and contextualizing the stereotype of the black thief. For my analysis, however, CRT is temporally imperative to my understanding of contemporary African American literature as challenging colorblind racism. CRT has been of great use in identifying the shift from the more explicit and overt forms of racism in the pre-Civil rights era versus the racial issues of the contemporary colorblind moment. As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanic explain, CRT evolved in the mid-1970s “as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized, more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back” (3-4). As legal discourse moved from overt racism to “race neutral” on the surface, these lawyers, activists, and legal scholars began to search for new
methods to oppose the structural racism underpinning the continued subjugated status of people of color despite “the heady advances of the civil rights era,” and “race neutral” and “colorblind” discourse. These theorists critique the belief that removing all allusions to race will solve the “race problem,” and argue that this strategy only accommodates and perpetuates structural racism that continues to go unchecked. The emergence of CRT was largely a reaction to the early rustling of colorblind, race neutral rhetoric; therefore, CRT is the most appropriate framework for analyzing literary challenges to this burgeoning discourse.

The legislative gains made during the Civil Rights Movement were substantial. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the National Urban League (NUL), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) fought diligently via grassroots campaigns, non-violent protests, and the lobbying of Congressional members in order to achieve formal equality under the law for African Americans. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in Brown v. Board of Education that “in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” thereby overturning Plessy v. Ferguson which established the “separate but equal” doctrine in 1896.² Between 1957 and 1965, Congress passed five civil rights

² In “African-American Rights After Brown,” Gerald N. Rosenberg argues that the Supreme Court’s decision in the case did not have a significant impact on the eradication
Passed during the Eisenhower administration, the Civil rights Act of 1957 did the following: created a United States Commission on Civil rights “for the purpose of studying racial discrimination in the United States and recommending remedial legislation to Congress” (Loevy, 26), created a Civil rights Division, invested in the U.S. attorney general the power “to secure court injunctions in civil rights cases and that such cases be removed from state courts to United States courts” (26), and gave the United States Justice Department the authority to prosecute cases of voter discrimination in the Federal Courts (27). These powers were expanded in the Civil Rights Act of 1960, which extended the term of the Commission on Civil Rights and allowed the Justice Department to review voter records of state and local elections (32).

When it passed, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was widely considered to be “the most significant piece of legislation to be passed by the U.S. Congress in the twentieth century” (Loevy, Preface). Its impact was far reaching as it catalyzed of racism as is suggested by the celebratory narrative Crenshaw critiques. According to Rosenberg’s analysis, “for nearly ninety-nine of every 100 African-American children in the South a decade after Brown, the finding of a constitutional right changed nothing. A unanimous landmark Supreme Court decision had no effect on their lives” (204). This was largely due to a lack of political pressure on state and local government officials to enforce the Brown decision. The need for the anti-segregation thrust of the Civil Rights Movement supports Rosenberg’s argument. It was not until the Civil rights Act of 1964 allowed for the withdrawal of federal dollars from elementary and secondary education programs with segregationist tactics that Southern states began the process of desegregation (Reosenburg, 209). Thus, the Brown case did not have the effect implied by its mythical legacy.
“the almost immediate elimination of racial discrimination in places of public accommodation throughout the United States.” Moreover, this civil rights statute allowed for the withdrawal of federal funds from those institutions with discriminatory practices. Passing on the heels of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 specifically targeted Southern states where local officials sought to disenfranchise black voters. In those areas of the south where fewer than 50% of the eligible black voting population were actually casting their vote, “U.S. Government ‘examiners’ appointed by the executive branch would come into the state and take over the registration process from local officials” (Loevy, 337). The Voting Rights Act did much in the way of increasing voter turnout amongst eligible voters in states such as Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia (337).

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is often characterized as the pinnacle of the Civil Rights Movement. This is likely because much of the Civil Rights Movement was centered in the heart of the South, and having achieved legislative victories in the two main arenas facing Southern Blacks—segregation and disenfranchisement—the movement became diffuse and struggled to find a centrality of purpose around which to organize. Also, with rise of the Black Power Movement, an increase in civil unrest in the black urban ghettos as demonstrated by the Watts Riot in 1965, the vocalization by of anti-war sentiment by prominent African American leaders (including King), the Civil Rights Movement suffered a radical decline in white support. Despite the
movement’s rapid decline, however, Congress did pass one last civil rights statute in 1968. Although The Civil rights Act of 1968 (also known as the Open (Fair) Housing Act) went before Congress in 1966, it was not until King’s assassination in April of 1968 that Congress speedily passed the statute that prohibited racially discriminatory renting and selling practices.

Civil rights legislation, while doing much to eradicate racism in the formal letter of the law, did not result in the material gains for African Americans that civil rights leaders and the black masses had hoped for. By 1968 the movement struggled to address the longstanding, complex problems of the urban ghettos. As Leon Friedman writes:

Thus, the fight in the South was primarily a fight by the politically and legally enslaved; the fight in the North was (and is) by the poor. . . . In the South the goals were specific, quantitative and personalized. It was possible to start a campaign to register a definite number of voters in one particular county within a limited time period, or to remove a notoriously bad sheriff or police chief. But—aside from problems of union discrimination—where or how or against whom does one begin a campaign to increase Negro employment? How does one measure whether a Negro child in Harlem has received the quality of education that is due him? Who is the enemy when a Negro family is evicted from its home in a city to make way for new luxury apartments? The problems are too diffuse to be encompassed in single campaigns and the evil is too
institutionalized to be susceptible to swift and definite defeat. The problems in the North are built into the very structure of society and cannot be dealt with by single blows. (xiii)

The frustration embedded in Friedman’s words is representative of that which characterizes the state of civil rights progress in the years immediately before and after King’s assassination.

Perhaps the difficulty in addressing the problems of the North lay in their mischaracterization, with many believing Northern issues stemmed primarily from class tension, not race. Even Martin Luther King echoed this sentiment when reflecting on the Watts riots in 1975: “The nonviolent movement of the South meant little to them since we had been fighting for rights which theoretically were already theirs . . . I would minimize the racial significance and point to the fact that these were the rumblings of discontent from the ‘have nots’ within the midst of an affluent society” (Carson, 292). King’s and Friedman’s assessments suggest that racism and classism are not interrelated phenomena, that the struggles of the north were radically different from those of the South, but this is hardly the case and Friedman’s use of “Negro” as a descriptor preceding employment, education, and family certainly suggest otherwise. In fact, Jeanne F. Theoharis argues in Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South 1940-1980 that racism may have looked different in the North, but it

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3 Freedom North is a volume of essays by scholars seeking to challenge the traditional narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. In the introduction, Theoharis argues that the
was very much a problem against which black communities of the North fought for years before the Southern civil rights leaders like King turned their attentions in that direction following a season of urban uprisings. According to Theoharis, paradigms that situate the Civil Rights Movement primarily in the South make it difficult to account for the decisive spread of the Ku Klux Klan and other racial violence out of the South into the rest of the country in the 1920s. They miss the systems of racial caste and power — pervasive and entrenched across the North — that denied people of color equitable education, safe policing, real job opportunities, a responsive city government, regular sanitation services, quality health care, and due process under the law. Northern segregation operated somewhat differently than Southern. Public spaces — bathrooms, trains, movie theaters, and lunch counters — were not legally separated for blacks and whites in the North. But schools, housing, and jobs operated on a strict racial hierarchy with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. And many public spaces, while not explicitly marked “for whites only,” practiced that just the same. By shielding Northern segregation and the dominant narrative minimizes the resistance of black organizations in the North, beginning before the Civil Rights Movement and continuing long after the 1960s. She argues that, “In history textbooks, college classrooms, films, and popular celebration, African American protest movements in the North appear as ancillary and subsequent to the ‘real’ movement in the South. Because racism is southernized in popular versions of American history and political discourse, the main battle is believed to be in the South. Following this logic, the movement fittingly and exclusively emerges there” (2).
economic and social disfranchisement of people of color from full
examination, these formulations naturalize the Northern racial order as
not a racial system like the South’s but one operating on class and culture
with racial discrimination as a byproduct. (2)

My point here is that racism was a problem facing African Americans in all
regions of the country, not just the South. But, as Friedman notes, those issues
facing African Americans of the South, such as the laws legalizing Jim Crow,
seemed more tangible, and, therefore, more conquerable and more fightable.
The more diffuse, slippery problems facing African Americans outside the South
that showed that white supremacy was more pervasive than the issue of formal
law proved far more difficult to confront.

Weary of the tactics and gradual pace of the movement and frustrated by
the lack of material gains following the legislative thrust, organizations such as
CORE and SNCC⁴ began to shift ideologically towards black nationalism,
moving away from the nonviolent, Christian rhetoric that characterized the tone
of the early years of the movement and continued to characterize the ideologies
of the SCLC and NAACP. Ultimately, “the growing disunity was rooted in the
frustration of radically heightened expectations and in the extraordinary
problems involved in achieving genuine equality for the black poor. In the face
of these circumstances, the various segments of the movement became

⁴ For an in depth chronicle of the history of this ideological shift in SNCC, see Clayborne
Carson’s In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s (Cambridge: Harvard U
P), 1981.
increasingly divided on how to tackle the situation” (14). Thus, when Stokely Carmichael, then chairman of SNCC, first shouted the slogan “black power” in 1966 at the James Meredith “March Against Fear,” the feelings of frustration and powerlessness that the slogan embodied had been festering for some time. The concept of Black Power emerged from the New Nationalist militancy of the fifties and sixties, most notably symbolized by Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. New Nationalism was characterized by “sharp criticisms of liberal integration, calls for black self-determination and anticolonial politics” (Johnson, xxi). Unlike the New Nationalists, however, “Black Power radicals would take firm stances against interracialism and make more assertive demands for black political autonomy” (xxi).

Steven F. Lawson notes in his chronicle of the Civil Rights Movement, “The black power doctrine was forged out of personal experience, the model of the African liberation struggle, and the idea of cultural pluralism” (149). Ultimately, Lawson notes, black power advocates “were letting government officials know that all the legal rights they had long possessed still had not brought them economic and political power” (150). To many whites, both conservative and liberal, the connotations associated with black power were literally the antithesis of the established order as it called for a radical redistribution of power. Civil rights legislation did not affect the racism that

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5 Although Carmichael is often credited for coining the phrase “Black Power,” its roots can be traced back to the publication of Richard Wright’s _Black Power_ published in 1954 (Johnson, 231).
plagued the economic and political power structure. Faced with challenges to this power structure, “many white liberals believed that the federal government’s obligation ceased once the legal obstacles of racial discrimination had been destroyed. With these impediments removed, it remained for blacks to take advantage of the opportunities that awaited them and strive for success according to their individual abilities” (Lawson 152). President Lyndon Johnson, who had worked with civil rights leaders during his administration to pass civil rights legislation, was prepared to take the next step with implementing affirmative action legislation in order to ensure true black equality by leveling the playing field. President Johnson, in his address at Howard University in 1965, “declared that affirmative steps must be taken to close the economic gap between blacks and whites in order to achieve ‘equality’ as fact” (153). After the address, Johnson issued an executive order “requiring federal contractors to actively recruit and hire qualified minority job seekers” (153). In the face of affirmative action legislation put in place by the Johnson administration and upheld by a then liberal Supreme Court, many white conservatives began preaching the value of meritocracy, arguing that affirmative action was a form of “reverse discrimination” that undermined the vision of a colorblind society by singling out African Americans for special treatment.

The conservative argument against affirmative action in favor of “color-blindness” was not new. In fact, the phrase “color-blind” was first used by
Supreme Court Justice Harlan in his dissenting opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In 1896 Harlan writes:

The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. In view of the constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizen. There is no caste here. Our constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates class among citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful. The law regards man as man, and takes no account of his surroundings or his color when his civil rights are guaranteed by the supreme law of the land.

According to Leslie Carr, here Harlan is counseling whites to avoid turning to the state for explicit assistance in maintaining power. “On the contrary,” Carr asserts, “the law must be pure as the driven snow” (116, emphasis mine). While the Court clearly did not take Harlan’s advice in *Plessy* when the majority acknowledged race by upholding segregation as constitutional, it is hardly surprising that Harlan’s words went unheeded in 1896. After all, it had been only thirty-one years since emancipation and less than twenty years since the end of Reconstruction. In all regions of the Union there persisted a fear of race
mixing and “Negro domination.” Overtly racist laws were a way of re-subjugating African Americans. Thus, insofar as racist discourses go, Supreme Court Justice Harlan was a man ahead of his time. Following the legislative gains of the Civil Rights Movement, in the face of further legislation in the form of affirmative action and the radicalism of the Black Power movement, color-blind racism was the necessary incarnation of racial discourse acting in maintenance of white supremacist ideology.⁶ Joseph E. Lowndes, author of From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of New Conservatism (2008), argues that “color-blind logic” was an ideal way to merge conservative ideals with anti-civil rights sentiment. He writes that the law’s “durable “color-blind” logic, stating that all citizens should have the right to associate or not, could appear to oppose the institutions of Jim Crow while ignoring the structural conditions of racial stratification in the South and, more important, in the rest of the country. . . . its basic premises were well-suited to the time and would become the hallmark of anti–affirmative action rhetoric used by conservatives thirty years later . . . (75). As the “latest manifestation” of racism in the

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⁶ Here, both Carr and Bonilla-Silva characterize color-blindness as an ideology, but I believe that a distinction should be made between ideology and discourse. I define ideology as “not an optional extra, deliberately adopted by self-conscious individuals, but the very condition of our experience of the world, unquestioned precisely in that it is taken for granted” (Belsey, 5). In other words, ideology is not a belief system that can be put on and taken off at will, but rather it is one in which individuals are unconsciously indoctrinated and must consciously resist. Colorblind racism, however, is a discourse or “a domain of language-use, a particular way of talking (and writing and thinking)” about race (Belsy, 5). While racial discourse has changed over time, say from scientific to cultural racism, the goal has been to sustain white supremacist ideology.
“American system,” colorblindness acts as a fleece of pure, democratic egalitarianism hiding the state’s continued investment in the racial subjugation of people of color. According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva:

Compared to Jim Crow racism, the ideology of color blindness seems like “racism lite.” . . . Yet this new ideology has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order. Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defining a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era. And the beauty of this new ideology is that it aids in the maintenance of white privilege without fanfare, without naming those who it subjects and those who it rewards (4).

“Color-blind” remains the adjective used by conservatives and liberals alike to describe the law and their own personal convictions regarding U.S. race relations (when one claims to be “color-blind,” one is arguing the he or she does not allow racial hierarchy to factor into everyday human interactions). And it is an ideal way to shroud white privilege in a veil of innocence while simultaneously suggesting that minorities are lazy opportunists, unwilling to elevate themselves through participation in the free market and preying on white guilt via color-conscious policies. “When racism is placed in a historic perspective, it becomes clear that it is not some flaw that impedes the perfection of the American
system,” writes Carr; “Racism was a basic part of the system from the beginning. ‘Color-blindness’ is simply the latest manifestation of it” (xi).

James Baldwin notes in “Stranger in the Village” that Americans are nostalgic for a type of European innocence, and the nostalgia for this state of innocence has “often forced Americans into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological” (172). Ultimately, Baldwin argues, white Americans are attempting “to find a way of living with the Negro in order to be able to live with himself,” “himself” here being a dominant, empowered white subject. In the past, this power differential has been maintained through direct and indirect state sanctioned violence—“lynch law and law, segregation and legal acceptance, terrorization and concession” (173). It is now, however, maintained through colorblind discourse which seeks to protect and render white supremacist ideology invisible. Similarly, Catherine Belsey notes, “The work of ideology is to present the position of the subject as fixed and unchangeable, an element in a given system of differences which is human nature and the world of human experience, and to show possible action as an endless repetition of ‘normal,’ familiar action” (90). If the power of the dominant ideology is that it limits the ways in which we see the world, leading us to believe that the way things are is the only way things can and should be, then the work of a counter-ideology is to demystify the status quo and challenge existing ideological attempts to justify and reinscribe the current distribution of power. CRT has served this function since its emergence in the 1970s and continues to do
so with an expanded purview. It is my argument that reading CRT and African-American literature as fields with a reciprocal relationship offers a more complex picture of the ways in which African Americans view their struggle. CRT has been absolutely imperative to understanding the role racism has played as a founding principle in creation of the American polity, and it has also given form to the nebulosity of colorblind racism in the Civil Rights Movement.

CRT also asserts that narrative plays an important role in the reproduction of ideology. As Richard Delgado notes, the dominant ideology uses storytelling as a means of making the current racial hierarchy appear normal. In Delgado’s description of the process of storytelling (or the construction of dominant narratives) and the need for counter-storytelling (the reciprocal construction of counter-narratives), he argues that “stories, parables, chronicles, and narratives” are the ways we see and make sense of the world; we each carry a “bundle of received wisdoms, stock stories, and suppositions that allocate suspicion, place the burden of proof on one party or the other” (64). For the dominant “ingroup” (read whites), storytelling serves the function of self-definition by rationalizing and naturalizing its own position of superiority over the marginalized “outgroup.” The dominant “preconceptions and myths” privilege an understanding of the world that naturalizes white supremacy and the subordination of people of color.

It is the naturalized stories of the ingroup that African American authors seek to challenge with the construction of counter-narratives. Perhaps helpful to
seeing the significance of counter-narratives is James Phelan’s understanding of narrative as a rhetorical act. He argues, “the phrase ‘narrative as rhetoric’ means something more than that narrative uses rhetoric or has a rhetorical dimension. It means instead that narrative is not just story but also action, the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose (8) (original emphasis). For Phelan, narrative as rhetoric refers to the “relationship between author, text, and reader,” as well as what he terms the “multilayered process of writing and reading, processes that call upon our cognition, emotions, desires, hopes, values, and beliefs (Phelan 19). In this project, I define African American counter-storytelling as an active and fluid engagement between the myths and the margins, thus while emerging from work of CRT scholars I aim to move beyond an understanding of counter-narratives as only oppositional. The definition of post-Civil Rights counter-narratives offered below is meant to be a more expansive understanding of “counter-narratives” as a complex engagement with the various workings of racialized power in this era, thereby freeing counter-narratives from the prescriptions of being solely the terrain of oppositional thinking. I argue that African American literary counter-narratives of the post-Civil Rights era, 1) critique and historicize the contemporary racial milieu by using “the law” as trope that both illumines the connectivity between past and present manifestations of white supremacy, 2) theorize about the ways in which the black individual and the black community come to negotiate their own identities and intra-communal relations in a racial milieu designed to keep them
isolated and alienated from one another, and 3) represent storytelling as a way of aggregating and sharing the contemporary racial experiences of African Americans.

Each chapter in this project is a case study of a text or set of texts that I have identified as counter-narratives to colorblind discourse. As I have already discussed, African American authors have historically engaged the law proper and its defining power within the lives of black people; however, for this study, I chose novels for this study that were complex examples of racism in the twentieth and twenty-first century as a pervasive and elusive, invisible and material phenomena while demonstrating the continuity of past and present through multilayered allusions to and representations of “the law.” Specifically, each of these novels eschews celebratory narratives of racial progress in favor of more nuanced representations of the continued presence of race in America.

In the second chapter of this project, I discuss Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), engaging it at both the level of genre and content. I characterize *Kindred* as what Charles Mills describes as an “epistemological novel” or one that represents an on-going struggle between dominant and non-dominant ways of reading the world. More specifically, I am concerned with the struggle between colorblind readings via racialized power and privilege and color-conscious readings that demystify the workings of contemporary racial subordination and the hidden presumptions that make up the subtext of colorblind discourse. This is made possible because *Kindred* lies at the nexus of two genres with
diametrically opposed approaches to race-content. Science Fiction has long been a genre that has generally avoided discussions of race or displaced them using an “alien/other” paradigm, while neo-slave narratives re-present the history of slavery in ways that remind readers of the lingering presence of the racial past. What Butler does brilliantly at the level of genre, she continues in the text itself by using time travel, a common device used in Science Fiction narratives, to transport Dana and Kevin, an interracial couple, back and forth through space and time, thus juxtaposing “present day” 1976 race relations with those of the antebellum south. In doing so, the novel complicates the often simplistic rhetoric of racial progress by demonstrating how those laws and institutions that hyper-defined black/white relations in the antebellum south continue to operate on lower frequencies.

In chapter three, I examine John Edgar Wideman’s *The Lynchers* (1973) and *Reuben* (1987) in order to explore the effects of colorblind racism on the dynamic between the black individual and the black community. Both novels have characters who become increasingly frustrated with a phantom form of racism they feel is attacking them and their inability to locate a target against which to retaliate. In the absence of such a target, these characters seek to create one, and this obsession leaves them powerless and unable to effect any meaningful action on the part of their community. *The Lynchers*, published during the apex of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, engages the revolutionary spirit of the time, as well as the anger and frustration that found outlets in urban race riots.
Looking to claim power in their community, crippled black nationalist, Little Man and a group of young black men plan to start an urban riot by lynching a white police officer. In appropriating the lynching act and the narrative of power it implies and in targeting a white police officer, the group seeks to appropriate white power. Little Man, the planner of the group, rationalizes, “When I talk about lynching, I’m talking about power. . . . One lynched nigger more or less doesn’t change anything. The symbol matters, the ritual” (62). In order to claim white power, the group must sacrifice their community (if the plan comes to fruition, many will, inevitably, die) for what they believe to be the greater good.

Wally, a primary character in *Reuben*, written fourteen years after the publication of *The Lynchers*, is plagued by the same frustration and helplessness that cripple Lil’ Man. And, though Wally yearns to be a positive contributor to the Homewood community, his rage toward this more diffuse form of racism and his obsession with finding an outlet for his racial tension leave him feeling impotent and isolated. Read together, these two novels mark a progression from retaliatory violence to community action as embodied in the mythical title character, Reuben, who is a makeshift lawyer who spends his days giving free legal advice to the poor Homewood residents. In this progression, Reuben becomes the ideal symbol of community engagement and action in a racist environment that seeks to curtail both.

Focusing on the city of Atlanta, in the final chapter, I examine Tayari Jones’s *Leaving Atlanta* (2002) within the context of Atlanta’s racially moderate
image. Specifically, I am interested in the construction of the myth of the “city too busy to hate” how that myth silenced the suffering of low-income African Americans and repressed stories of racial violence in the south. In Leaving Atlanta, the trauma of the abduction and murder of as many as thirty black children shapes dredges a history of brutalized black bodies in the south and ultimately leads the novel’s young protagonists to become aware of their own vulnerabilities as young black children.

Each of these chapters speak to the fact that claims to racial progress in the United States do not emerge from shifts in power or the leveling of historically distorted playing fields but are rooted in a politics of disavowal of the experiences of many African American others. The myth of the great egalitarian America feeds on the glory of these racially coded mountaintop narratives—we have struggled; we are victorious; we are America and we are great. Contemporary African American authors are subversive storytellers casting light on the valleys of great the American mountaintop.
Chapter Two: A Struggle Between the Margins and the Middle: Race and Epistemology in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

In his 2000 essay titled “Black to the Future,” Walter Mosley, lamenting the scarcity of African American authors writing under the umbrella of Science Fiction (SF) writes:

Science fiction and its relatives (fantasy, horror, speculative fiction, and so on) have been a main artery for recasting our imagination. We make up, then make real. The genre speaks most clearly to those who are not satisfied with the way things are: adolescents, postadolescents, escapists, dreamers, and those who have been made to feel powerless. And this may explain the appeal that science fiction holds for a great many African Americans. Black people have been cut off from their African American heritage by being excluded from history. For us, science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm. . . . In science fiction we have a literary genre made to rail against the status quo. (202-203)

Mosley cites Octavia E. Butler as being one of “a handful of mainstream black science fiction writers” (203). Her fourth novel *Kindred* was first published in 1979 and then re-published nine years later in 1988 to much critical acclaim and attention due in large part, no doubt, to its unique style and its contribution to the by then-popular neo-slave narrative genre. The protagonist of the novel is
Edana (Dana) Franklin, an African American woman living in an interracial marriage with her white husband, Kevin Franklin. On her 26th birthday and just as she and Kevin are moving into their new home, Dana is pulled from her life in 1976 Los Angeles back in time to the antebellum south to save the life of Rufus Weylin, her white ancestor who, over the course of the novel, grows from a young child to a cruel slave owner. In order to ensure her own survival in the future, Dana must protect Rufus long enough for him to father Hagar, Dana’s ancestor who has kept a discursive record of the family’s lineage beginning with Rufus in a bible that has been passed down through the generations of Dana’s family. Over the course of the novel, Dana and Kevin journey through time and space, alternating between newlywed couple in 1976 to slave and slave master in antebellum Maryland.

In this chapter, I read Butler’s Kindred as a counter-narrative that challenges the dismissive implications that underlie visions of a colorblind utopia through careful representation of the overt obstacles and subversive undercurrents that make such an achievement impossible to attain without coming to terms with the ways in which white racial privilege once codified through the legalization of chattel slavery continues to shape race relations in the “colorblind” era at an epistemic level. This is made possible because of the novel’s participation in two genres that are seemingly at odds. The neo-slave narrative is a genre rich with imaginative potential even as it adheres to some prescriptions that link it to its literary predecessor, the 19th-century slave
narrative. In *Kindred*, this potential is compounded by the novel’s participation in the genre of science fiction (SF). The organic boundaries of science fiction are “vague, elastic, and constantly in motion” (Stabelford, 5). I assert that Butler introduces the content of the neo-slave narrative into the racially conservative terrain of SF and creates an epistemological rupture culminating in a text where dominant and non-dominant ways of reading are always already dialogically linked. Ultimately, this proves true not only at the level of genre but through evolving dynamics of Dana’s and Kevin’s interracial relationship as they travel back and forth from their new home in Los Angeles to the antebellum South. I include Butler’s fiction in this study of African American literature because of its conflation of genres as well as because it demonstrates how so often claims to African American progress rest on and, in fact, feed upon both the active and unconscious negation of black suffering. What I find most useful about *Kindred* is how Butler demonstrates that this negation can so often appear to be benign and non-racial but is in fact in keeping with a longer history of white supremacist thinking. By writing as parallel spaces the historical moment of the legalized enslavement of African Americans and the contemporary moment of the bicentennial year 1976, Butler illumines how the two are “kin,” and how the legacy of slavery manifests in subtle ways that require critical awareness on the part of all.

Helpful to understanding the importance of the literary contribution of neo-slave narratives is Charles Mills’s discussion of memory and counter-
memory. According to Mills, in any hierarchal society there is both “official” memory belonging to the dominant, which suppresses any “unhappy or embarrassing memories” and “counter-memory” belonging to non-dominant groups; memory and counter-memory have “conflicting judgments about what is important in the past and what is unimportant, what happened and does matter, what happened and does not matter, and what did not happen at all” (29). For white Americans, white amnesia often takes the form of “whitewashing” history, downplaying white psychological and physical violence against marginalized groups and misrepresenting historical figures and events. This is, of course, exacerbated by the exclusion of the stories or “testimonies” of individuals from marginalized groups. So, if people of color are, through a white, ethnocentric conceptual framework, perceived to already be inferior and thereby excluded from the dominant historical record or recovered in such ways as only to justify their domination, then it stands to reason that the voices of these groups, which may threaten to alter the historical record as well as the ways in which they are perceived (and thus challenge the conceptual frameworks) must be discredited. Mills asserts, “if one group, or a specific group, of potential witnesses is discredited in advance as being epistemically suspect, then testimony from the group will tend to be dismissed or never solicited to begin with” (31).

According to Ashraf Rushdy in his ground-breaking work on the origins of the neo-slave narrative genre, historians observing the tension between
marginalized voices and dominant historical narratives began to view history differently, realizing that “‘history’ was made not solely by the imperial powers of a nation, but also by those without any discernible institutional power” (Rushdy, 4). In seeing African Americans, an oppressed people, take to the streets, first in nonviolent protest and later via urban rebellion, historians began to undertake research projects that were attentive to the histories, cultures, and concerns of marginalized peoples and revisit the experiences of enslaved African Americans with a new critical lens that incorporated previously excluded materials and topics such as “slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance” (4).

Black Power-nurtured intellectuals challenged “whitewashed” interpretations of history that recuperated black voices and experiences only in an effort to control and contain them. These scholars “contested representations of slavery they found demeaning and uninformed by the new revisionist energies” (89). For example, Rushdy argues that the publication of William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) in the midst of this radical new environment struck a negative chord with Black Power intellectuals who critiqued Styron’s (mis)appropriation of the slave voice and experience, thus leading to the publication of *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Critics Respond* (1968). The dialogue between Black Power intellectuals challenging the historical record with studies that advocated the recuperation of slave testimony and new representations of slave agency and resistance and historians seeking to
propagate heavily mediated, whitewashed representations of slave history is
demonstrative of the emergence of a counter-narrative which challenged the
hegemonic one. And it is out of this controversial milieu that the neo-slave
narrative genre emerged. As Rushdy asserts,

                   Neo-slave narratives immediately raise questions about the connection
between slavery and postmodern black identity, between the moment
when the first slave narratives were produced and the moment the Neo-
slave narratives appeared. In other words, they make that connection not
only in their content but also in their form, since they adopt the
conventions, gestures, and voice of the antebellum slave narrative in order
to play with, partially dismantle, and partially demonstrate the
implacability of that original identity—of slave. (22)

Butler’s Kindred is a rich example of a text that examines the connectedness of
contemporary African American identity and slave experience. Dana’s time
travels from 1976 Los Angeles to the antebellum south allow Butler to embody
the enslaved experience in unique and troubling ways. Those slaves that Dana
encounters in the past are represented as three-dimensional humans who
explode the one-dimensional connotations of the slave identity. Conversely,
Dana’s repeated trips to the past instigate a painful growth spurt as she comes to
understand how the slave past informs her present.

The scholarship surrounding the genre is, of course, as varied as the
novels themselves. Despite the differences in thematic and scholarly approach,
there appears to be a consensus around two primary functions of the neo-slave narrative (Rushdy, 102). First, scholars read neo-slave narratives as revisioning the historical record on slavery, and, in doing so, the genre makes a commentary “about contemporary African American subjectivity” evolving out of the Civil Rights era (102). In his work, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* published in 1999, Rushdy claims that “neo-slave narratives wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject” in the Black Power era. Rushdy is interested in the critical intervention that neo-slave narratives make in the discursive history about slavery, which, up until the Civil Rights era, was largely made up of absences and misrepresentations.

Similarly, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu in *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative* argues that Black women writers participating in the genre posit new readings of the black female slave. This began with the publication of Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* in 1966, which Beaulieu reads as an extension of the gendered concerns taken up in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and continues with other contemporary and more experimental novels “that are responsible for repositioning the black woman in slavery, according her new status as a whole woman with a gender identity completely her own” (25). In *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (2002), a gendered analysis of works in the genre, Angelyn
Mitchell eschews the language of slavery and the neo-slave narrative in favor of what she describes as “liberatory narratives,” or Black feminist narratives that are “concerned with more than a state of being; their primary function indeed is in describing how to achieve freedom” (4). Mitchell explores the connections between Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, and other contemporary liberatory narratives by Black women writers demonstrating the connections to themes of Black female subjectivity and “the self” as represented in the Harriet A Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* or what Mitchell describes as the Ur-narrative of Black womanhood. For Rushdy, Beaulieu and Mitchell, the neo-slave narrative is they a new engagement and a re-reading of the slave past as both assert that the genre illuminates the agency of the slave and the slave community, as well as represents various forms of slave resistance. Doing so becomes a tool for the rupturing of old racist paradigms that used simplistic stereotypes, like the Sambo, Jezebel, and Mammy figures, but, more importantly, demonstrates to a generation forging an identity through the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, that they are a part of a legacy of resistance.

The second function of the neo-slave narrative is what Rushdy calls “recovery,” here referring to the recovery of the memory of slavery as well as recovery as a form of healing. Rushdy’s later work, *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), is a testament to both definitions. It focuses on a more narrow set of neo-slave narratives, what he calls “palimpsest” narratives, of the 1970s. He examines how “these writers all
represent the processes of transmitting and resolving family secrets as a way of showing the enduring effects of slavery on contemporary subjects” (33). According to Rushdy, the protagonists of these narratives are willing to face and understand the past and see this as a necessary step for understanding previous family generations, and they challenge the “passive and spectatorial attitude toward history” by their willingness to address the direct effects of slavery on contemporary African American subjectivity. In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler honors both of these functions. *Kindred* demonstrates that the slave past is not past at all but heavily influences both black and white subjectivity in the present. She also argues that racial progress is a laborious process of excavation and confrontation.

Interestingly, the neo-slave narrative embraces a complex meditation on African American subjectivity while SF offers only marginal representations of race or only addresses it through metaphorical encounters with extraterrestrial “others” or through an absence/presence dichotomy. In a 2003 interview, Nalo Hopkinson’s characterized the SF community as one in which “the received wisdom . . . is that ‘race doesn’t matter’. . . So in science fiction, you have a group of generally pretty forward-thinking people trying to be color-blind in all that they do so that no one gets excluded. . . . So one risks feeling quite churlish in the science fiction community if one points out that while color-blindness is a step in the right direction, it doesn't erase racism” (150-151). Does not erase racism, and, in fact, makes race an even more divisive issue by creating distance between those who seek to unravel the mysteries of racial hierarchy through the
imaginative possibilities of SF and those who avoid addressing racial hierarchy all together. Hopkinson recalls one antidote involving African American SF author Samuel “Chip” Delany, “It was [Samuel Delany] who I heard say to someone at that same con[ference] the year previous, in response to her comment that she ‘just didn't see race,’ that if she couldn't see something that threatened his life almost daily, then she couldn't be a very good ally for him” (151). For Delany’s white counterpart, progressive race politics is synonymous with black invisibility; for Delany this is an act of dual marginalization that has extended to representations of race in SF.

In SF, the concerns of African Americans and other people of color are often similarly invisible. As Elisabeth Anne Leonard asserts in her overview of race and SF, most SF addresses race by acting as though it is an issue which does not exist at all. According Leonard, SF authors tend to not mention the race of a character at all, or, if they do, it is “irrelevant to the events of the story” (254). Another device SF writers use when “addressing” race is to imagine a world in which, after a period of interracial mixing, all characters are of mixed race. “These kinds of writing,” asserts Leonard, “can be seen as an attempt to deal with racial issues by imagining a world where they are non-issues, where colour-blindness is the norm” (254). She continues, “This may be a conscious model for a future society, or a gesture to ‘political correctness’ by an author whose interests in the story lie elsewhere, but either motive avoids wrestling with the difficult questions of how a non-racist society comes into being and how
members of minority cultures or ethnic groups preserve their culture” (254).

Ironically, while the “political correctness” of SF authors appears well-meaning, these same authors risk reinscribing the status quo by creating a racial norm, eschewing racial difference and skirting any dialogue about race at all. By depicting a future free of racial differences, these authors implicitly represent the struggle for racial equality as an issue of the past. The absent presence of race in SF implies that authors see themselves as having perceptions of the future that are unclouded by the racial ideologies of the past and present. However, this reasoning is suspect when one notes that other issues such as class and gender often find their way into SF works. As Gregory E. Rutledge asserts, “The tacit rationale for de-emphasizing race because it would be irrelevant in a more advanced society, as has been argued, is specious at best. . . . since, futurist fiction writers reinscribe into their futures quotidian vices such as greed, classism, and theft, then surely racism would be present, too” (239).

When Sheree R. Thomas first conceived of her groundbreaking edited collection *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora* (2000), she thought “dark matter” a fitting metaphor to explain how and why there are so few African American authors of speculative fiction represented in mainstream literature when so many are writing in the area of speculative fiction. Thomas explains that in scientific terms, dark matter is “a nonluminous form of matter which has not been directly observed but whose existence has been deduced by its gravitational effects” (x). The concept, when applied to the
contributions of black authors in speculative fiction, reads much like Toni Morrison’s “Africanist presence” or “Africanism” in American letters. For Morrison, these terms refer to “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (6-7). The American Africanism became a backdrop against which America perfected its mythical image. Morrison asserts, “Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers people their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americaness” (6). For Morrison, whiteness is schizophrenically constructed against a “colored” other, with whose absence and presence it is obsessed. Similarly, Thomas’s “dark matter” accounts for the far-reaching influence of black authors as well as “blackness” in speculative fiction (i.e. their gravitational pull), even as their absence in the literary mainstream (i.e. nonlumination) and the absence of black representation in mainstream science fiction makes them invisible to many.

When Octavia Butler emerged as a voice in the SF genre, her work was showered with critical attention because, until that point Samuel R. Delany, publishing since 1962, was the lone African American voice in mainstream SF. Beginning with her first novel, Butler began introducing strong, black female protagonists into the genre, challenging it to make good on its subversive
potential. As Ruth Salvaggio noted early in Butler’s career, “A traditional complaint about science fiction is that it is a male genre, dominated by male authors who create male heroes who control distinctly masculine worlds” (78). But Butler’s work goes beyond gender to engage the intersectionality of black female identity, an engagement which, until Octavia Butler’s contributions to SF, was lacking in the genre.

But the power of Butler’s work also lies beyond her introduction of black heroines into the genre, in her use of SF as a lens to demystify the daily struggles of African Americans and those behaviors and habits of mind which have been normalized into invisibility yet continue to have the power to marginalize. As Hortense Spillers comments,

Among black women writers in the genre of science fiction, Octavia E. Butler has created entire alternative worlds that uncannily reflect reality and deflect and undermine it at the same time by generating objects who improve on the available human models; in that regard, science fiction puts into play something we know, that is rather familiar, while it so rearranges the signposts that the outcomes are strange and defamiliarized. The melding of the familiar and the strange is not only the essence of the marvelous, but the very ground of the uncanny, which returns us to what we know in a way that we had not known and experienced before. (4)

Spillers credits Butler for recovering slavery out of the realm of the unimaginable and unrepresentable for contemporary readers by “joining so terrible a historical
contingency to the canons of the magical” and, in this way, “Forced from our slumber of feigned innocence, we awaken here to full consciousness and its blast of discomfort” (5). Butler’s use of SF and the neo-slave narrative as modes of storytelling allows her to reconstitute the historical and contemporary struggles of African Americans in order to make a move necessary for epistemological change in the post-Civil Rights era racial milieu when proponents of the dominant racial ideology seek a complete erasure of racial injury by way of the rhetoric of racial progress. Similarly, Robert Crossley, author of the critical essay in the reader’s guide of the Beacon Press edition of Kindred, writes that Butler “has redrawn science fiction’s cultural boundaries and attracted new black readers—and potential writers—to this most distinctive of twentieth-century genres. . . . she has deployed the genre’s conventions to tell stories with a political and sociological edge to them, stories that speak to issues, feelings and historical truth arising out of African American experience” (274).

Through time travel, the chief element of “the magical” in the novel, Butler takes the institution of chattel slavery and firmly plants it in Dana’s “racially progressive” milieu, the new home that she and Kevin have purchased together and are just moving into in the first section of the novel. This home represents a new beginning for the couple who have both left behind their families and their respective Los Angeles apartments to be together in this new space. The creation of this new space, however, is a struggle for the couple that requires considerable compromise even before Dana’s time travels begin.
Dana begins the first section of the novel with, “The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember” (13), suggesting that the racialized and gendered struggles she takes on the past are already present in the present. Dana, however, is not aware of this trouble until her first trip “home,” suggesting that her time travels only amplify the existing “trouble” in the present. Both writers, Dana desires to always be on equal footing with Kevin, despite his attempts to care for her financially and his at times patronizing attitude regarding the sharing of space. For example, Dana and Kevin were both living in small apartments in Los Angeles when they met and began dating and did not live together prior to getting married. Dana recalls, “We both had books shelved and stacked and boxed and crowding out the furniture. Together, we would never have fitted into either of our apartments. Kevin did suggest once that I get rid of some of my books so that I’d fit into his place” (108). Dana and Kevin’s relationship prior to their marriage is littered with small struggles such as this, with Kevin attempting to exert what seems to him to be a naturalized power. It is common sense to Kevin that Dana should move into his space and sacrifice her books (not a small sacrifice considering that she is a writer). Dana, however, resists, insisting, “Let’s go to your place and I’ll help you decide which of your books you don’t read. I’ll even help you throw them out” (108). In a similar power struggle, Kevin asks Dana to type parts of his manuscript. She recalls that while she agreed to do his typing the first time, subsequent requests she refused:
I’d done it the first time, grudgingly, not telling him how much I hated typing, how I did all but the final drafts of my stories in longhand. That was why I was with a blue-collar agency instead of a white-collar agency. The second time he asked, though, I told him, and I refused. He was annoyed. The third time when I refused again, he was angry. He said if I couldn’t do him a little favor when he asked, I could leave. So I went home. (109)

When Dana returns to Kevin’s apartment the following day, Kevin is surprised and assumes she is now ready to “type those pages,” but, again, Dana refuses. This conversation takes place in the doorway of Kevin’s apartment, suggesting a kind of threshold space where Kevin must agree to relinquish the power (at least in part) bestowed upon him by society as a male in order for him and Dana to begin to build an equitable relationship. “I stood waiting for him to either shut the door or let me in,” writes Dana. “He let me in” (109).

For the time being, these struggles alleviate the gendered tension in Kevin and Dana’s relationship, allowing them to leave those tensions outside of their new space, they must also find a way to protect this space from the mounting racial tensions of the 1970s as embodied in both Dana and Kevin’s “kin.” Interestingly, given that Dana and Kevin are living in the racially charged 1970s, prior to his proposal, they do not discuss how their families might cope with an interracial relationship; “I hadn’t been aware of us avoiding the subject,” Dana recalls, “but somehow, we’d never gotten around to it” (109). Kevin is
unpleasantly surprised when his sister is against the marriage; he blames her
response, however, on the influence of her “reactionary” husband. The response
of Dana’s aunt and uncle is a glimpse into the complex relations of African
Americans to whiteness. Dana’s aunt is not enthusiastic about the union, but she
“forgives” Dana for her relationship with Kevin because they will produce
children with a lighter complexion than Dana, whom she describes as “highly
visible” (111). In response to the news that Dana will be marrying a white man,
Dana’s uncle threatens to take her out of his will so that his property does not
“fall into white hands” (112).

Their family members’ respective reactions represent a spectrum of
perspectives of black-white intermarriage. Kevin’s sister’s response is overtly
anti-black. Not only will she not associate with Dana, but she refuses any further
association with her brother if he marries Dana, suggesting that the marriage will
somehow contaminate Kevin. Dana’s uncle’s response stresses the importance of
black property ownership; thus taking Dana out of his will and leaving her
unpropertied is “the worst thing he could think of to do to [Dana]” (112). Dana’s
aunt is what many African Americans would label “color-struck.” She “does not
particularly like white people,” but is nonetheless invested in white supremacist
ideology, believing that there is something inherently good about white blood
that in some way betters African Americans who have it. Dana’s aunt “always
said [she] was a little too ‘highly visible,’” suggesting that lighter skin results in
an easier passage.
In response to their families’ reactions, Dana and Kevin decide to “go to Vegas and pretend we haven’t got relatives” (Butler 112). As orphans (their parents are dead and they have alienated themselves from their living kin), Dana and Kevin are alienated and “operating as only minimally social individuals,” a fact exacerbated by their both having chosen a vocation (writers) that often leaves practitioners isolated observers (Kubitschek 28). As Missy Dehn Kubitschek notes, Dana and Kevin’s “alliance might seem to represent the triumphant unity of strong individuals who are wiser than their person circles or surrounding society. *Kindred* implies, however, that no individually negotiated contract can cancel or transcend the social context” (28). In other words, Butler is arguing that issues of racial hierarchy are not only the domain of those with more extreme perspectives as embodied by Dana’s and Kevin’s families. As Dana and Kevin attempt to forge their new relationship, they cannot do so outside of their socio-political milieu.

Significantly, Butler sets the novel in the 1976 bicentennial year. In doing so, she invites an imagining of the affect evoked by celebratory rhetoric and symbols of American progress and idealism. This imagining becomes more textured as Dana’s and Kevin’s experiences in the past force them to confront the histories of race, gender, and power that inevitably inform their interracial marriage. In order for Dana and Kevin to move forward into a more honest space, Butler asserts that both characters must confront the legacy of their racial past instead of ignoring it. As Kubitschek points out, both characters have
brought baggage to the new union as symbolized by the unpacked boxes in their new home. For Kubitschek, these boxes “represent Dana’s and Kevin’s personal pasts and integrity;” and are made up of those things Dana and Kevin would not sacrifice in order to “fit” into each other’s small LA apartments. “This sequence suggests that . . . [Dana and Kevin] must confront larger issues, the heritages of both races and both genders” (28). Butler suggests, however, that this act of historical confrontation and unpacking is a process that Dana is more willing to undergo than Kevin. Dana recalls:

    We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order. Now he was closeted there either loafing or thinking because I didn’t hear his typewriter. Finally, he came out to the living room where I was sorting books into one of the big bookcases. . . . He picked up a book, opened it, and turned a few pages. I picked up another book and tapped him on the shoulder with it. When he looked up, surprised, I put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him. He stared at it unhappily. (Butler 12)

Interestingly, Dana is unpacking books at the time of her inaugural trip to the past, an act implicitly loaded with issues of representation, discursive power, knowledge, and most important, symbolizing the epistemic struggle that occurs after Dana’s first trip to the past.

    When Dana is teleported to save Rufus who is drowning in a river, she returns home only a few feet away from where she first disappeared before
Kevin’s eyes and just out of his reach. She is visibly shaken (having just had Tom Weylin’s gun pointed at her head), soaked with water from the river, and covered with mud. She explains the events of her experience to Kevin who, despite having seen her disappear, does not believe her and, what is worse, believes her time travel and Rufus’s rescues are illusions. When the two compare “facts,” juxtaposing what Kevin sees with Dana’s experience, Dana tells Kevin that “I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They’re no crazier than yours” (16). Indeed, Kevin’s having seen his wife disappear before his eyes seems just as fantastical as Dana’s “facts,” yet Kevin attempts to pathologize Dana, arguing that the events were either a dream or hallucination. Kevin’s reaction to Dana’s “facts” implies that he privileges his own knowledge as normal and, therefore, rationalizes his own experience by pathologizing Dana, labeling her experience as abnormal or other; for Kevin, there is no room for Dana’s experience outside of individual pathology. Kevin encourages Dana to distance herself from the experience, telling her to “Let [herself] pull away from it... whether it was real or not. Let go of it” (17). Because Kevin cannot make sense of the events he attempts to disregard them. Upon Dana’s second return to 1976 from the antebellum slave south after having been beaten bloody by a patroller, Kevin asserts once more that Dana is simply hallucinating despite having once again seen her disappear before his eyes. Dana asserts that the individuals she is visiting in her past are her ancestors and the fear and pain she is experiencing are very real. But Kevin asserts the opposite; he states “...
fact is, you had already seen the Bible. You knew about those people — knew their names [and] knew they were Marylanders . . .” (46). Within the expectations of the genre, Kevin’s elaborate explanation of the events is bordering on the absurd. Here Kevin is re-visioning the “facts” in order to construct an experience easily identified as rational and “let go” of evidence to the contrary — particularly the “fact” that he has witnessed Dana disappear. That both Dana and Kevin refer to their knowledge as “facts” suggests a larger epistemological struggle. In the context of reading the text as science fiction, it is Dana’s construction of the facts that is clearly favored in the text. The genre of the novel makes possible the reallocation of power from the dominant epistemology that reads Dana’s experience as pathology and encourages her to forget it completely to one that values her experience as the truth.

According to Adam McKible in “‘These are the Facts of the Darky’s History’: Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts,” the re-visioning of facts and constructions of the truth is far from unusual. He asserts that the “truth” that is given credence is the one that is constructed by those in power, thus defining “truth” as a “fictionalized assemblage and erasure of events” — truth becomes a narrative construction (224). McKible’s analysis carried to its furthest conclusion suggests that “truth” is ephemeral; it is this transience that makes “truth” a site of potential resistance for marginalized others. For Dana, the events she experiences during time travels are far from crazy or fantastic — they are real; this is true for the reader as
well—as readers of both science fiction and neo-slave narratives, we travel back to the antebellum south with Dana, we are with her as she rescues young Rufus, we are with her as Rufus’s father, Tom Weylin, points a rifle at Dana’s head instigating the fear that transports her back to 1976, and we are with her later as the patroller attempts to rape her—these events are not an illusion. “I’d like,” Dana tells Kevin, “to give you some of this pain that I must still be hallucinating” (46). For Dana, the pain, fear and suffering become proof of her experience. While Dana’s rebuff is sarcastic, she goes on to assert that there is great danger in disbelief; Kevin’s unwillingness to make room for Dana’s experience will not stop her time travels, just as dominant narratives that exclude marginalized groups cannot stop the creation of counter-narratives that privilege these groups, but rather make these counter-narratives that much more imperative just as Dana’s belief in time travel is imperative to her own survival in 1976. It is not until Kevin is transported back in time with Dana that he believes her story. In section three, “The Fall,” as Dana is overwhelmed by the dizziness that signals her time travel, Kevin rushes to help her. Because he is touching Dana when she is transported, he is transported with her. When they arrive in 1819, Kevin exclaims, “It happened . . . It’s real!” (58) The implications of this are two-fold. First, Kevin is appropriating the time travel experience. When he says, “It’s real,” it is only because he is validating what he believes is his experience even though it was Dana’s teleportation that takes him to the past. Second, and perhaps most dangerous, is that Kevin seems unwilling to believe in the
experience of someone other than himself unless he “walks in his or her shoes.” With this attitude, Kevin risks his ability to empathize with Dana. In actuality, no amount of evidence—the scars Dana eventually gets on her back and breasts from the lash, the bruises on her face from the patroller’s fist, her lost arm—would have been enough to convince Kevin that Dana was going where she said she was going.

This struggle over “facts” is symbolic of the larger epistemological struggle that surfaces when Dana and Kevin are transported to the past together because Kevin is touching Dana when Rufus calls her. Dana and Kevin quickly understand that their 1976 marriage is “illegal” in the antebellum South. When Kevin tells Rufus that Dana is his wife, Rufus replies “Niggers can’t marry white people!” (60); he later tells Dana that whites and blacks marrying is “against the law” (61). Dana, therefore, tells Kevin that “we’d better demote me” (60). In this way, Dana becomes Kevin’s slave so that they might fit in during their time in the past. Although Kevin and Dana consider themselves to be role playing in a sense, this shift in their relationship signals drastically different perspectives of life on the Weylin plantation. Kevin’s experience of the past is filtered through a privileged ethnocentric perspective, so that even as he sees the horrors of slavery first hand, he is blind to them. For Kevin, this trip to the past is somewhat of a game, a perspective afforded to him because as a white man he is not in the same immediate danger as Dana. For example, when Tom Weylin introduces Kevin to his wife, Margaret Weylin, Dana recalls, “to my surprise, [Kevin] bowed slightly
to the woman,” mimicking his notion of Southern manners. Similarly, when Kevin is discussing with Dana the arrangements he made with Weylin for their stay on the plantation, he intentionally attempts to fabricate the most “disgusting” story he can imagine (80). He tells Weylin that he has promised Dana her freedom but really intends to sell her in Louisiana where he can make a better profit; Kevin also implies what Weylin already knows—that Kevin and Dana have a sexual relationship. Interestingly, while Weylin encourages Kevin to sell Dana because she is too educated, he is uncomfortable with Kevin’s having promised her her freedom (as we discover later in the novel, Weylin believes that one should always keep their word, even when dealing with slaves). While Kevin’s story is completely contrived (except for the sexual relationship), in this moment Kevin, at least rhetorically, becomes even more vile and “disgusting” than Weylin.

In yet another instance, after Kevin and Dana are in Maryland for some time (for they are unable to leave until Dana feels her life is threatened), Kevin and Dana discuss the possibility of leaving the plantation. Kevin suggests that they go to Baltimore where he can find work. Dana, in turn, suggests Philadelphia, a free state. Kevin is slightly surprised that he does not think of this himself. On yet another occasion Kevin comments that despite the few sparse whippings, he is “surprised there is so little to see” on the Weylin plantation. He says, “this place isn’t what I would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage” (100). On each of these occasions
(and many others), Dana’s reality—the reality of black life in the nineteenth century—is not a factor for Kevin. Despite being surrounded by oppression, his status as a white male largely shields him from the reality of plantation life in the antebellum south. While plotting their escape he must be reminded that life for Dana would be better in the free state of Pennsylvania than in Maryland. When he proceeds to romanticize the “Old West mythology,” Dana must remind him that “That’s where they’re doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks” (97).

When he suggests that life on the slave plantation is not as bad as he expected, Dana must remind him that she and the other slaves have poor housing, little food, no rights, and live under threat of being sold for “any reason—or no reason” (100).

Kevin is blind to the plight of Dana and the slaves on the Weylin plantation. This blindness is a result of years of unacknowledged and unconscious privilege. Kevin assures Dana that he is “not minimizing the wrong that’s being done here,” but Dana argues that he is. She says, “You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer . . . I can understand that because most of the time, I’m still an observer. It’s protection. It’s nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for me. But now and then . . . I’m drawn all the way into eighteen nineteen, and I don’t know what to do” (101). Dana is more easily “drawn in” to 1819 than Kevin because her experience in going from free to slave is more drastic and far more visceral than Kevin’s shift from social to legalized white privilege and because racism
intricately connects the two time periods. And, ultimately, Dana and Kevin are seeing two drastically different versions of the same time period, and an integral part of Kevin’s experience in 1819 is being blind to Dana’s. As Mills explains in the *Racial Contract* (1997), to be white in America is to blind to the pervasiveness of white supremacy. He writes:

Part of what it means to be constructed as “white” … part of what it requires to achieve Whiteness, successfully become a white person … is a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities. … One could say then, as a general rule, that white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. (19, emphasis Mills’s)

This “mental phenomena” or epistemology is what Mills identifies as white ignorance which, of course, includes overt, malicious forms of white supremacy (e.g. racial extremists like the Ku Klux Klan), but more importantly is concerned with white ignorance that is not based on “bad faith.” In these instances, Kevin is not willfully malicious (his are cognitive, not willful, responses), but he does demonstrate that he has been conditioned to exclude the oppression of others from his reading of the world. When he vocalizes his interest in the seeing the mythical West or even moving to another state with Dana, who others believe to
be a slave, these are not conscious, exclusionary acts, but that they are not conscious does not mean that they are benign.

For example, when Kevin and Dana determine that Dana is transported back to 1976 when she fears for her life, Kevin proposes to “test the theory” (84). Kevin assures Dana, “I don’t have to hurt you. I can arrange something that will scare you before you have time to think about it. I can handle it” (84). Dana asks Kevin to give her six weeks before he implements his plan so that she can have time to nurture a relationship with Rufus and Kevin agrees. One day Dana is teaching Nigel to read in the cookhouse, a place she has chosen specifically because none of the whites on the plantation ever enters there; however, this time Tom Weylin enters the cookhouse and catches Dana with a book which leads to her first whipping. Butler repeats multiple times that the white people on the plantation never enter the cookhouse. The implication, then, is that Kevin somehow encouraged Weylin to enter the cookhouse in order to frighten Dana home.

His plan succeeds. This being Dana’s first experience with the lash, when Weylin whips her, Dana believes she is going to die. When she is transported home, Kevin is just beyond her reach and is left in the past. That Kevin’s plan was so short-sighted further emphasizes his inability to empathize with the experience of the slaves on the plantation, and how this inability functions to the detriment of Dana and the slave community there. Up until this point the cookhouse was something of a safe and sacred space where the slaves came to
relax and share information. Dana even comments that listening to the slaves talk in the cookhouse was educational for her. The invasion of the cookhouse by Weylin and indirectly by Kevin suggests a great loss for the slave community on the Weylin plantation. Kevin’s behavior also puts Nigel at risk along with any other slave on the Weylin plantation that wishes to learn to read. This event is the culmination of Kevin’s attitude about the antebellum South until this point in the novel—for Kevin his white privilege (particularly the privilege not to see oppression) keeps the atrocities of slavery at bay psychologically.

Dana’s concerns for Kevin parallel her concerns about the effects this environment will have on Rufus. For example, Dana asks Kevin to allow her to tutor Rufus so that she can spend some time influencing him in a positive way; she wants to “see what we can do to keep him from growing up into a red-haired version of his father” (81). Her efforts to change Rufus, of course prove to be futile, as she notes after Rufus rapes Alice for the first time. She thinks, “But I should have been used to the impossible by now—just as I should have been used to white men preying on black women. I had Weylin as my example, after all. But somehow, I had hoped for better from Rufus” (119). Inevitably, Dana comes to understand that she cannot counter the effects of Rufus’s environment. In fact, the more she attempts to counter the environment by resisting her own enslavement at the hands of Rufus, the more ruthless Rufus becomes, inevitably
proving to be even crueler than his father. Although Dana is hesitant to do so, Butler extends Dana’s logic about the effects of the Rufus’s environment to Kevin. I would hardly describe Kevin as a cruel slave-owning monster, but what Butler is saying is that, ultimately the hierarchies operating in one’s environment do affect one’s behavior. It would take an acknowledgement of this privilege as well as persistent opposition to one’s environment to shed these influences. The novel characterizes Rufus and, to a much lesser degree, Kevin as at times lacking the motivation to resist.

And on several other occasions, Kevin and Rufus echo each other in both speech and behavior. When Kevin and Dana are transported back to 1976 together, Kevin falls on Dana who is still sore from a recent whipping; as he helps her to her feet, he asks, “Can you get up? I think I’d hurt you more by lifting you than you’d hurt yourself by walking” (188). These same words are echoed by Rufus after he has Dana sent to the field for not being able to save Tom Weylin’s life when he suffers a heart attack. The similarity is not lost on Dana who recalls, “The words echoed strangely in my head, Kevin had said something like that to me once. I opened my eyes again to be sure it was Rufus” (213-214). And finally, towards the end of the novel, Kevin begins to get both

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7 Examples include when Dana writes a letter to Kevin who has moved north after having been left in the past; Rufus does not send the letter even though for months he leads Dana to believe that he has. When Dana attempts to escape north to find Kevin after discovering Rufus has lied, she is captured by Rufus and Tom Weylin and badly beaten. Also, when Dana is unable to save Tom Weylin when he has a heart attack, Rufus blames Dana and has her sent to the fields where she is beaten by Edwards, the overseer, who goes as far as to strike her across her breasts with the lash.
suspicious and jealous of Dana’s relationship with Rufus; before the 1976 couple are transported back to 1976 Rufus demands that Dana is “not going to leave me,” a demand that sounds to Kevin like something he, not Rufus, would say to Dana. Kevin tells her, “It sounded more like what I might say to you if you were leaving” (245). Kevin informs Dana that he knows what “those people” in the antebellum South were like, so he “understands” if Dana was raped by Rufus. The suggestion here to the reader and to Dana is that somehow her rape reads to Kevin as a dishonor or transgression for which he can forgive her. Dana responds, “You mean you could forgive me for having been raped?” (245).

Butler further establishes this “pattern of cultural dominance” by creating parallels between Kevin and Tom Weylin. For instance, when Tom Weylin considers purchasing Dana, “His eyes went over me like a man sizing up a woman for sex, but I go no message of lust from him. His eyes, I noticed, not for the first time, were almost as pale as Kevin’s” (90). Similarly, when Dana and Kevin return to 1976 after Kevin has been trapped in the past for five years, Kevin is cold and angry towards Dana; “He had a slight accent,” Dana realizes, “Nothing really noticeable, but he did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin. Just a little.” When Kevin is frustrated by his inability to quickly re-acclimate to 1976, Dana attempts to comfort him, but, she recalls, Kevin “glared at me as though I was some stranger who had dared to lay hands on him” (194). In this

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8 Although Dana does not read lust in Weylin’s face, he is more than likely “sizing her up” for breeding. In fact, just a moment later Weylin asks Dana how many children she has had, and when she replies, “none,” he assumes she must be “barren” (90).
moment, Dana describes Kevin’s eyes as “truly cold . . . The expression on his face was like something I’d seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly” (194).

When the two are transported back in time together, Dana is concerned about Kevin even though she knows that he can also protect her. Although Dana does not articulate her concerns to Kevin, she does believe that if he is in the South for too long, he will be in very real “danger. . . . If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. . . . The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow” (78). Dana has every reason to be concerned. The behavior Kevin has exhibited in 1976 (asking Dana to type his manuscripts, asking her to leave when she does not, suggesting that Dana throw out her things to fit into his space, etc.) suggests that Kevin is part of a legacy of white male power. Butler goes as far as to argue through the convergence of these three characters that, in fact, Kevin, Rufus and Tom Weylin are “kin.” As Richard Crossley observes, “The convergence of [Kevin and Rufus] in Dana’s life not only dramatizes the ease with which even a ‘progressive’ white man falls into the cultural pattern of dominance, but it suggests as well an uncanny synonymy of the words ‘husband’ and ‘master’” (276).

While I do assert that the novel illuminates the legacy of white male privilege codified into law in the antebellum south and that Kevin is a
descendent of that legacy and its contemporary carnation of which white epistemological ignorance is a large part, I am not arguing that Kevin is a cruel racist in a similar vein as Rufus and Tom Weylin. The text suggests that this is not the case. When Dana returns to the past after having left Kevin there, Sarah tells her that Kevin got “in trouble every now and then ‘cause he couldn’t tell the difference ‘tween black and white” (150), and Kevin tells Dana of how he aided runaway slaves—hiding them, feeding them, and pointing them to another stop where they would receive help (193).  However, to let Kevin “off the hook” for the more subtle and mild forms racial and gendered privilege that he exhibits misses the goals of the novel, which is, I argue, to demonstrate how the in the post-civil right era, some are all too willing to embrace the rhetoric of “credit where credit is due” and “racial progress” because they are unwilling to do the work of unpacking our racial history. What Mills previously described as white historical amnesia allows for those symbols of this country’s sordid racial past to be ahistoricized. Butler creates Kevin to critique this amnesia. By examining Kevin and Dana’s interactions in 1976 after they travel to the South, the novel encourages readers to be suspect of claims to racial progress in ways that Dana and Kevin are not. As a man of 1976 returning to the past, ideally Kevin’s time there should make him hyper-aware of the history of his privilege in the present,

9 Although Sara describes Kevin as not being able to “tell the difference ‘tween black and white,” I question whether Kevin even spent much time interacting with Sarah and the other slaves when he is left behind. In fact, later in the novel, after Kevin has returned to the present, he tells Dana that he used to wonder if Carrie, a slave who is born without the ability to speak, was “a little retarded” to which Dana responds, “If you had gotten to know her, you wouldn’t even suspect” (242).
but in order to become hyper-aware, Kevin must begin the process acknowledging and confronting the legacy of power and privilege of which he is an unconscious inheritor. This process moves beyond feeding black fugitives; Kevin has to reflect on his (unconscious) complicity in a system that defines his freedom as inherent and another’s as stolen.

Kevin, however, is not the only one who must confront the legacy of the slave past. Dana must also go through an epistemological shift, although her journey is quite different than Kevin’s. Much of what Dana understands of slavery comes from history books and encyclopedias; her knowledge is “second hand”—a version of the slave past that is neatly packaged and non-threatening and, other than basic information, in no way prepares her for what she will experience in the antebellum South. For example, after her first trip to the past, Dana recalls seeing her family tree in Hagar’s bible, but she remains disconnected with her history on a number of levels. When Dana is attempting to piece together an explanation of her time travel, she considers the names listed in Hagar’s Bible:

Alice Greenwood. How would she marry [Rufus]? Or would it be a marriage? And why hadn’t someone in my family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white? If they knew. Probably, they didn’t. . . . Hagar Weylin Blake had died in 1880, long before the time of any member of my family that I had know. No doubt most information about her life had died with her. At least it had died before it filtered down to me. There was only the
Interestingly, Dana’s first question/assumption is how Alice will marry Rufus in order for him to father Hagar. While the question that follows—“Or would it be a marriage?”—hints at other possibilities for Rufus’s and Alice’s relationship, neither of Dana’s questions accurately foreshadows the horrors of the sexual abuse that Alice is forced to endure at the hands of Rufus nor do they foreshadow Dana’s complicity in Alice’s suffering when Dana haltingly agrees to help convince Alice to go to Rufus “willingly” and continues to save Rufus’s life knowing that he rapes Alice. The first suggestion (that Rufus and Alice will somehow marry) implies that Dana has been distanced from the trauma of the reality of slave life for black women. Similarly, Dana feels disconnected from her ancestors, the “relatives that [she] had never known, would never know” (28). Dana seems to lament the lack of a connection to her past and realizes that her time travel is bridging the distance between herself and her ancestors.

The process of “knowing” her ancestors requires that Dana confront the legacy of black female subjugation at the hands of white men while also acknowledging her own privilege. Time and again Dana must confront the legally unbridled power white men had over black female bodies. For example, in the second section of the novel, “The Fire,” Dana is sexually assaulted by a

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10 Not only does Rufus repeatedly rape Alice, he also forces her and her husband to run North. Eventually, the couple are caught, Alice’s husband is tortured and sold to the deep South, and Alice who was free, must become Rufus’s slave and concubine.
patroller who mistakes her for Alice’s mother. After saving Rufus from burning down his father’s home, Dana goes to seek “refuge” at the home of Alice and her family. As Dana approaches their small home, she sees a group of “patrollers”\(^\text{11}\) kicking the door in and hustling Alice, her naked father, and her semi-nude mother out of the house. Alice’s father, one of Tom Weylin’s slaves, is tied to a tree and beaten for sneaking off without a pass while Dana, hidden in the bushes, and his family watch. After the patrollers take the man, one returns to rape Alice’s mother and finds Dana instead. Dana struggles with the patroller, eventually knocking him unconscious with a stick. Fearing that he will rape and kill her when he wakes, however, she is transported back to her living room in 1976. When she regains her consciousness, she confuses Kevin with the patroller; she “saw a blurred face above me—the face of a man—and I panicked. I scrambled away, kicking him, clawing the hands that reached out for me, trying to bite, lunging up toward his eyes. . . Kevin! . . . Kevin lay half on top of me, holding me, smearing himself with my blood and his own. I could see where I had scratched his face—so near the eye” (43-44).

When the patroller strips Alice’s mother of the blanket, he shouts at her, “Who do you think you are anyway?” while another says, “What do you think

\(^{11}\) Dana describes the “patrols” as “Groups of young whites who ostensibly maintained order among the slaves. Patrons. Forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan” (37). She later tells Kevin that “A patroller is . . . was a white man, usually young, often poor, sometimes drunk. He was a member of a group of such men organized to keep the blacks in line. . . . Patrollers made sure the slaves were where they were supposed to be at night, and they punished those who weren’t. They chased down runaways—for a fee. And sometimes they just raised hell, had a little fun terrorizing people who weren’t allowed to fight back” (45-46).
you’ve got that we haven’t seen before?” “Seen more and better,” shouts another (36). In covering herself, Alice’s mother implies that she has a right to control and possess her body, her nakedness. In stripping the blanket from her and questioning her, the patroller implies that that right belongs to a person, a “who” and Alice’s mother is, in his eyes and in the eyes of the law, only a “what” — the sum of her body parts that are only to be used for the pleasure of white men. Dana literally takes on this objectification as she becomes the object of the patroller’s lust. For the patroller, Dana and Alice’s mother are interchangeable. Both are objects to be used to gratify white male desire and, ultimately, one is as good as the other. The merging of the patroller with Kevin in Dana’s mind implies that she has to confront not only the objectification of black women, but also the fact that her chosen mate is inheritor to a system that has historically granted him such power over black female bodies.

Dana has to confront her own investments in privilege and power as well. In the instance of the patroller and others, Dana is able to do what the other black female slaves in the text are unable to do — resist the sexual advances of white men by appropriating symbols of gendered and racialized power as signified by her masculine attire and her speech and manners. As her twin “dressed up like a boy,” Dana has the power to respond to the patroller in a way that both of Alice’s parents cannot. When Dana goes outside to collect the blanket, she is grabbed by the patroller who demands to know who she is and why she is at the house. In return, Dana asserts “‘I live here,’ I lied. ‘What are you doing here?’” (41). In
claiming the residence (“I live here”) and implying that the patroller has no right to be there, Dana uses the tools associated with white male privilege to claim ownership (even if only rhetorically) of the residence.

According to Rushdy, Butler argues “that whiteness, like family, is a social construction that depends more on a politics of intent than a politics of descent, more on affiliations based on who one can become socially than those based on who one is genetically” (120). In this way “white power” is not rooted in a set of genetic characteristics, but rather it is embodied in a set of behaviors and things traditionally associated with whiteness, i.e. resistance, education, and self-ownership. “Whiteness, then, becomes the source of power, even when the power is exercised by people who are not white,” argues Rushdy, “because the society of antebellum Maryland is structured in such a way that white people are presumed to and do hold that kind of dominating power over black people” (121). What Rushdy does not note, however, is how this power is gendered in the novel, specifically in regards to dominion over the black female body. That slaves and whites comment on Dana’s being “dressed like a man”\(^\text{12}\) suggests that it is more than “whiteness” that she is appropriating; she is appropriating white masculinity. In resisting the patroller, Dana reclaims Alice’s mother’s

\(^{12}\) In “The Fire,” Rufus recalls seeing Dana before she “arrives” to put the fire out; he says, “You were wearing pants like a man—the way you are now. I though you were a man” (22). This is not long before she is attacked by the patroller. In “The Fall,” when Dana and Kevin are transported back in time after Rufus falls from a tree and breaks his leg, Nigel asks Dana, “How come you’re dressed like a man?” (60). In the same section, Carrie “plucked at [Dana’s blouse, at [her] pants” indicating that she is oddly dressed. Dana tells Carrie that’s all Kevin has given her to wear—“Let it be Kevin’s fault that I was ‘dressed like a man’” (71).
body by demanding personhood through self-defense—I am a person; I have the right to protect my personhood; I have a right not to be raped. Once Dana establishes this in the encounter with the patroller, it becomes the marker of her own humanity as a black woman.

Dana believes that she is better off from the other slave women largely because she is not sexually assaulted. For example, when Dana is healing after the whipping she receives for running away, Tess who has been systematically raped by Tom Weylin who then passes her on to Edwards, the overseer, sits with Dana complaining, “‘You do everything they tell you . . . and they still treat you like a old dog. Go here, open your legs; go there, bust your back. What they care! I ain’t s’pose to have no feelin’st!’” (182). “She had sat with me crying,” remembers Dana, “while I lay on my stomach sweating and hurting and knowing I wasn’t as bad off as I thought I was” (182). Dana also feels herself to be in a better position than Alice. When Rufus forces Dana to be complicit in his rape of Alice, Dana goes to Alice who is sitting in Carrie’s cabin sewing a dress for Dana. She tells Dana, “I’m sick of seeing you in them pants” (165). After Dana gives Alice Rufus’s ultimatum (either she comes to him voluntarily, or he will have her whipped), Alice threatens to throw the dress in the fire. To this threat, Dana responds, “I don’t give a damn what you do with that dress” (166). Alice, softened by Dana’s anger, asks Dana for advice; their dialogue is worth quoting at length:

Alice: What am I going to do?
Dana: I can’t advise you. It’s your body.”

Alice: Not mine. . . . Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn’t he?

Dana: Paid who? You?

Alice: You know he didn’t pay me! Oh, what’s the difference? Whether it’s right or wrong, the law says he owns me now. . . . Go tell on me, Dana. Show him you the kind of woman he needs, not me. . . . One white man, two white men, what difference do it make? (167)

The differences between the two women, even the fact that Alice cannot understand Dana’s desire for Kevin, are symbolized in Alice’s sewing Dana a dress. For Alice and others, Dana’s attire is unusual, unfeminine and separates her from the other women. For Dana, the choice to keep her 1976 attire over the attire of the time period is an act of resistance that signifies the greater act of refusing to allow herself to be physically violated by Rufus or any other man. Despite the fact that Rufus does indeed own Alice’s body according to the laws of the time, Dana encourages her to think of herself as her own. Dana’s refusal to allow her body to be “taken” is what ultimately separates her from Alice. Alice suggests that Dana should go to Rufus in her stead because of Dana’s relationship with Kevin. Dana and Kevin’s relationship, of course, differs from Alice and Rufus’s in love and consent. That being said, the 1976 couple do struggle with the way their relationship must necessarily shift when they are in antebellum Maryland.
Kevin, as Dana’s husband, of course wants to protect her from whatever atrocities he can, so when he “finally”\(^{13}\) (83) sees Dana’s living accommodations in the slave quarters, he says to Dana, “I can’t do anything for the others . . . but I want you out of that attic. I want you with me” (83). For the rest of their time there, Dana stays with Kevin at night, pretending to be his concubine. Although she knows the true nature of their relationship, the reaction of other slaves, as well as Tom and Margaret Weylin sullies her time with Kevin. Once, when leaving Kevin’s room in the morning, she encounters Tom Weylin:

Tom Weylin was up early one morning and he caught me stumbling, still half-asleep, out of Kevin’s room. I froze, then made myself relax.

“Morning, Mr. Weylin.”

He almost smiled—came as near to smiling as I’d ever seen. And he winked.

That was all. I knew then that if Margaret got me kicked out, it wouldn’t be for doing a thing as normal as sleeping with my master. And somehow, that disturbed me. I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed. (96-97)

Weylin’s near smile is a product both of the complete license white men have over the bodies of black women combined with the stereotype of the hyper-

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\(^{13}\) The implication is that four days have gone by since Dana and Kevin arrive on the plantation before Kevin goes to see the slave quarters where Dana is sleeping.
sexualized black female, both of which he misreads onto Dana and Kevin’s relationship. Because Dana and Kevin have not revealed to anyone but Rufus, whom they asked to keep it a secret, that they are married their relationship appears as consensual as it is. To Tom and Margaret Weylin, Dana fits the stereotype of the sexualized black woman desiring her “supposed master,” and although Dana knows this is not the basis of her relationship with Kevin, she understands the broader dynamic of racial power which underlies the nature of such relationships in the South and feels dirtied by Weylin’s reaction. It is imperative, however, for Dana to understand her relationship with Kevin as a consensual choice outside the dynamics of the antebellum south. When they return to 1976 together after having been separate for some time, Dana asks Kevin to come to bed with her despite her injuries. “He did,” recalls Dana, “He was so careful, so fearful of hurting me. He did hurt me, of course. I had known he would, but it didn’t matter. He was home. I’d brought him back. That was enough” (190). As Angelyn Mitchel writes, “In this instance, sexual intercourse is an act of liberation, a way of confirming one’s reality and grounding one’s self in that reality. . . . Dana assumes complete control over her sexuality in her twentieth-century milieu. She enjoys sexual intercourse, unlike her foremother, Alice, whose sexuality produces trauma” (47). In re-consummating her relationship with Kevin in their new home after such a long separation in which they are both more indoctrinated into slave/master hierarchy of the south, Dana both acknowledges the struggles of Alice and Tess while simultaneously
reclaiming her own agency and power which, no doubt Dana feels is slipping as she slowly comes to understand the extent of Rufus’s power over her.

Interestingly, Dana’s ultimate act of resistance comes shortly after Alice commits suicide and reveals a conflicted Dana who is now confronted with the decision to kill Rufus or be raped by him, a decision that mirrors Alice’s years earlier. In Alice’s absence, Rufus turns to Dana for the sexual relationship that imprisoned Alice until she reclaimed her body by hanging herself. Much like for the patroller, Dana and Alice are interchangeable. While Alice was alive, Rufus thought the two “are really only one woman” (228); after Alice’s death, he tells Dana that she is so much like Alice whom he lusted after since childhood, that he can “barely stand it” (257). As Rufus lays down with Dana, holding her still and preparing to rape her, Dana ponders the ease with which she could allow herself to be raped by Rufus by “just being still” versus how difficult it would be to “raise the knife, drive it into the flesh that I had saved so many times” (260). She thinks:

He was not hurting me, would not hurt me if I remained as I was. He was not his father, old and ugly, brutal and disgusting. He smelled of soap, as though he had bathed recently—for me? The red hair was neatly combed and a little damp. I would never be to him what Tess had been to his father—a thing passed around like the whiskey jug at a husking. He wouldn’t do that to me or sell me . . .

No . . . (260)
Here we see Dana go through the same decision-making process that her ancestor, Alice, goes through when confronted with Rufus’s ultimatum. Alice chooses to go to Rufus “voluntarily” in order to avoid being whipped; and, although she contemplates killing Rufus, she cannot go through with it. Dana recalls of Alice’s decision, “She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn’t kill, but she seemed to die a little” (169). Dana attempts to convince herself that the sexual violation will be different for her. She will not be used, passed around and sold as Tess is. She rationalizes that to be raped by Rufus is better than to be raped by Tom Weylin—Rufus is young, handsome and smells of soap. This line of reasoning, however, only leads to the slow spirit-death that Alice suffers. She tells herself that Rufus “would not hurt her if [she] remained as [she] was,” meaning that Rufus would not hurt her if she submits to being a female slave, submitting to him completely. All of his previous acts of cruelty were an effort to have this total control over Dana. All Dana’s previous acts of kindness toward Rufus were an effort to make him a better man than he was. Dana and Rufus both fail. Dana realizes that she will be no better off than Tess, “No,” she thinks, “A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her” (260). She also understands that while Rufus’s cruelty may come in a nicer package, he is still “erratic, alternately generous and vicious” and, in actuality, crueler than his father (260). Ultimately, Dana decides that she can “accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover” (260). This decision is costly for both Dana and Rufus; Dana stabs Rufus,
killing him as he attempts to rape her. But he dies holding Dana’s arm, which she then loses when she is transported back to the present.

Dana and Kevin are both physically scarred by their time travels. When the couple reunites on the Weylin plantation after Kevin has been stranded for five years, Dana describes his face as bearded, “lined and grim where it wasn’t hidden by the beard. He looked more than ten years older than when I had last seen him. There was a jagged scar across his forehead—the remnant of what must have been a bad wound” (184). The location of Kevin’s scar and the implied severity of the wound suggest that the scars the past has left on Kevin have troubled his way of knowing and understanding the world, but that this is an internal struggle that Kevin is either unwilling or not ready to fully confront. He develops a peculiar habit of rubbing the scar on his forehead signifying his private struggle; when he and Dana return to the present together, Kevin wants to be left alone and pushes Dana away; and when he tries to harness the experience, take control of it through his writing, he is unable to put anything on paper.

Dana herself has scars from the lash across her back and breasts, a scar on her face where Tom Weylin kicked her and an empty sleeve from when she lost her arm to Rufus’s grasp in the past. In an interview with author Randall Kenan, Octavia Butler said of Dana’s lost arm, “I couldn't really let her come all the way back. I couldn't let her return to what she was, I couldn't let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum
slavery didn't leave people quite whole” (Kenan 498). This explanation can be extended to Kevin as well, as slavery affects all people, not just black people; given Butler’s reasoning, he too does not come back whole. But, I do not ascribe completely to Butler’s explanation which seems to have been readily taken up by scholars analyzing the text. Indeed, Dana does undergo a gross physical transformation, but I do not agree that this signifies that she is less whole than she was prior to time travels. Quite the contrary, when we meet Dana and Kevin in the beginning of the novel, both have been orphaned by the deaths of their parents and their marriage leads to both being alienated by their remaining biological family. In the past, Dana connects with both halves of her biological kin through Rufus and Alice and is integrated into a slave community of which she becomes an integral part. In this way, she returns more whole than when she left, and her missing arm, instead of symbolizing a lack, I argue, reminds her of her charge as a writer; she has been tasked with telling the story of the slave community she left behind.

In the epilogue of the novel, Dana and Kevin visit Maryland to learn the fate of the Weylin plantation and the slaves there that Dana has grown to know and love — the news is not good. Almost all of the slaves are sold after Rufus’s death with no regard to familial ties. In seeing what has become of the slaves on Weylin’s plantation, Dana, as she touches a scar on her head and feels her empty sleeve, wonders aloud, “Why did I even want to come here. You’d think I would have had enough of the past.” Kevin responds saying, “You probably needed to
come for the same reason I did. . . To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane” (264). While this reasoning is not surprising given what we’ve seen of Kevin’s character until this point, it is once again indicative of his inability to think beyond himself. He knows the slaves were sold and their plight; his concern, however, is for the validation of his own experience. For Dana, this question is rhetorical; her desire to know the fate of Weylin’s slaves is not driven by mere historical curiosity or the need to escape the stigma of pathology, but by the kinship and communal bonds that she formed with the slaves during her trips to the past; her missing arm, the scars on her back, and the fear and trauma she has experienced are evidence of her sanity. Dana responds, however, that “If we told anyone about this, anyone at all, they wouldn’t think we were so sane” (264), but the first person conventions of the (neo) slave narrative genre and the elastic boundaries of SF indicate that this is not true. Dana has found a way to tell her story and those of her ancestors whose narratives were lost and who were reduced to names in a Bible, inspiring hearsay and conjecture about a long ago past. *Kindred* is a reclamation of that history that ruptures any illusions about the past and any delusions of a romanticized racial present.

It has not been my intention in this chapter to bash white racial progressives; rather my goal has been to read Butler’s work as an interrogation of a system of invisible seemingly benign privilege that too often shapes, represses or outright excludes the experiences of marginalized people. It is also not my
intention to let Dana off the hook, so to speak. Time travel is a vehicle for both characters to explore the continued impact of the institution of slavery in the post-Civil Rights era and the way race relations of this contemporary moment are not an outgrowth of the superficial optimism of colorblind reasoning but part of a legacy of racial oppression in the United States. Dana and Kevin’s marriage and its evolution throughout the novel are meant to signify the problems inherent with superficial interracial bridge building without an awareness of or attentiveness to the colored complexities of history. The novel itself reads as a parable, warning against the implicit quick fixes of pronouncements cloaked in what Patricia Williams, a veteran of the Critical Race Studies movement, describes as a “kind of utopianism whose naivety will assure its elusiveness” (2). Williams cautions against the quick fixes such declarations of colorblind vision intimate. While a colorblind future is a “legitimate hope,” she writes, “In the material world ranging from playgrounds to politics, our ideals perhaps need more thoughtful, albeit more complicated, guardianship. By this I mean something more than the ‘I think therefore it is’ school of idealism. ‘I don’t think about colour, therefore your problems don’t exist.’ If only it were so easy” (2).

Butler suggests that what is necessary, for both blacks and whites, is for the development of a “cognitive resistance” or “one’s own concepts, insights, modes of explanation, overarching theories,” and one must attempt to inoculate oneself from systems of knowledge that suppress critical engagements with the world. The novel implies that this is a far easier task for the marginalized than
the dominant—the slaves in the novel (including Dana) must be hyper-aware of
the power relations on the plantation; their lives depend on it. For Kevin (Tom
and Rufus Weylin), this is a far more arduous task because it requires a level of
altruism difficult to muster when one has been conditioned not to see forms of
suffering that may lead one to question one’s privilege. *Kindred* does not offer a
utopian conclusion in which Kevin has experienced a spiritual conversation.
When we finish, he is confused, wanting to put the experience behind him; but
the scars of slavery run deep, for masters and slaves alike, so it is unlikely that he
will be able to do so. Both characters’ pensiveness as the novel concludes is the
most we can ask for because it indicates they are disquieting the historical
turmoil and preparing to *really* unpack.
Wilkerson wanted to weep for Willie. For all the Willies and Sweetmen and shadows like himself dreaming puny dreams, alive at best in some muted fantasy underworld, lying, cheating, even killing to avoid the simple truth. How they dream of dignity, of vengeance, of confronting the immensity that dribbles out their portion, portions which barely fill a box, a can, a paper bag, the cold sheets of a hospital bed (144).


Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) begins with suicide and ends with murder. In the opening pages of the novel, Robert Smith, a North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent and member of the Seven Days, leaps from atop Mercy Hospital to his death, his suicide note ending in apology to the black community of the unnamed Michigan town, “Please forgive me. I loved you all” (3). In the final pages of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, anti-hero and youngest member of the Seven Days Guitar Baines fires the fatal shot that kills Pilate Dead. According to Guitar’s own characterization of the secret society, the Seven Days was created to combat the genocide of generations of African-Americans by
whites. According to Guitar, “Any man, any woman, or any child is good for
five to seven generations of heirs before they’re bred out. . . . You can’t stop them
from killing us, from trying to get rid of us. And each time they succeed, they
get rid of five to seven generations” (154). In an effort to “keep the ratio the
same,” the ratio of white to black that is, the Seven Days murder white people in
a manner similar to those crimes committed against African-Americans that go
unpunished in a court of law, “If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro
was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder” (Morrison
155). Both Smith’s suicide note and Guitar’s characterization of the Seven Days
suggest that the work they do in secret is not only an effort to “keep the numbers
the same”; more than that, it is the desperate attempt to assert the right to
personhood by claiming the weapons of the dominant and, in so doing,
murdering one’s self and, in the case of the Seven Days, one’s community into
visibility.

Even if we do not know the details of these acts, we can approximate
them because we know the record of the violence enacted upon black bodies
since the group’s inception in 1920. Who can forget the image of the battered
body of young Emmett Till on the cover of jet magazine in 1954? Or the sorrow
of the African-American community in 1963 when Denise McNair (11 yrs),
Cynthia Wesley (14 yrs), Carole Robertson (14 yrs) and Addie Mae Collins (14
yrs) were killed in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama? Or the countless
lynchings, murders and rapes before, after and in between? Because we can
know the horrific details, we also know that the ideology of the Seven Days is misguided and destructive as is evident in both the case of Robert Smith and Guitar Baines. Their actions do not change conditions for the black community because in theory, the Days aim only to maintain the status quo, the current balance of power. But what seems to be just as much the case is that the secret society is comprised of men who have grown tired of feeling impotent in the face of a siege on the black community and specifically black manhood. Not only do they feel powerless, but they are also unable to pinpoint a foe, the source of this powerlessness, thus all white people become the enemy. Says Guitar, “White people are unnatural. As a race they are unnatural. . . . The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes” (156-157). Significantly, Guitar’s participation in the Seven Days is precipitated by incidents of violence that acted as catalysts to non-violent resistance during the Civil Rights Movement. Similar to the four protagonists of John Edgar Wideman’s The Lynchers and Wally in Reuben, the violence of the Seven Days becomes a way of challenging the larger system of white supremacy that does not value black life. In deciding for their victims that “[their] day has come” the Seven Days attempt to appropriate the power to define the limits of a white life by ending one.

The Seven Days, as Guitar explains it to his best friend, protagonist Milkman Dead, isn’t about “Hating white people. It’s about loving [black people]. About loving you. My whole life is love” (Morrison 159). But, as Morrison notes in the The Bluest Eye “Love is never any better than the lover”
(205) and, because this love requires hatred (of whites), she critiques this “love” as poisonous. That Robert Smith asks for forgiveness from the community he sought to preserve implies an acknowledgement that his love for the black community was misguided and the weight of the atrocities he committed in its name became too much to bear. Guitar Baines’s “love” for the black community leads him to hunt Milkman down when he suspects Milkman has stolen the gold Guitar needs to avenge the deaths of the four girls in the Birmingham church bombing. It also leads him to murder Pilate, the character who Morrison describes as the timeless ancestral presence in the novel (Morrison 2289). In adopting the weapons of white supremacy—rage, hate and arbitrary violence inflicted on arbitrary victims—the Seven Days as represented by Guitar self-destruct and turn on the community they want so desperately to protect. Despite being asked to be critical of the ideology, readers, particularly African American readers can, I think, identify with the rage that leads Guitar to join the Seven Days, the desire to fight a concrete battle against an invisible predator (he is fighting a “disease,” a pathology of whiteness), and the feelings of impotence and helplessness that are the inevitable byproduct of one’s inability to act on behalf of one’s family and community.

In chapter two, I discussed the way Octavia Butler appropriates the legal enslavement of African Americans as a vehicle for a critical interrogation of colorblind racism in the present, and I asserted that the danger of colorblind racism lay largely in its ability to render the suffering of marginalized others
invisible. In this chapter, I examine two works by John Edgar Wideman that interrogate the rage and frustration of African American men living in the shadow of colorblind racism and the mechanisms they develop to resist being defined into oblivion. In Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the mechanism is the Seven Days; in Wideman’s *The Lynchers* (1973) and *Reuben* (1987) characters attempt to appropriate dominant narratives of power by embodying their racial angst in symbolic figures of the white racial establishment and then planning elaborate acts of violence against their chosen symbols of racial oppression. As in *Kindred*, the law continues to be a vehicle for engaging the colorblind racism in the post-Civil Rights era in both of Wideman’s novels.

In *The Lynchers*, a group of four young black men led by Willie “Littleman” Hall plan to catalyze a revolution by lynching a white police officer known throughout the Philadelphia ghetto to be prostituting a black woman, Sissie. They intend to kidnap the woman and the policeman, mutilate her body and frame the policeman for her murder. According to the plan, when the black community hears about the murder at the hands of the white police officer, they will demand justice which the lynchers will provide by offering up the police officer in the form of an “old fashioned lynching.” The lynchers then plan to harness the rage and energy of the rioting black masses and destroy the city and the established racial order. The plan fails, however, before the morning of Sissie’s kidnapping. Littleman is arrested at a nearby high school for attempting to start an impromptu rally days before the plan is to begin. He is badly beaten.
by the cops and ends up in the hospital unable to participate in the elaborate plan he has designed. Wilkerson, realizing the implications of the plan (that black people—his people will—inevitably, be killed) attempts to stop it by going to Graham Rice’s basement apartment to retrieve the guns Rice has been holding for the group. Rice, in a fit of paranoia shoots Wilkerson with a shotgun. And Lenny Saunders, former hustler and the group’s muscle, is left at a bar, waiting for Wilkerson who, of course, will never come.

The “Matter Prefatory,” which opens the *The Lynchers*, provides an interesting context to the action of the novel itself. In a manner similar to the Dick and Jane Primer that begins Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, it acts as the foundation of the novel, orienting the reader and contextualizing the plot. This portion of the novel is made up of a series of excerpts from historical documents—essays, letters, travel logs, news articles, folk stories and slave narratives—all testifying to the fact of white supremacist ideology as well as the subjugation and resistance of African Americans. In one excerpt from 1710, former Virginia Governor Alexander Spotswood attests to the need for legislation to control the black population and prevent slave insurrections. Says the Governor, “freedom Wears a Cap which Can Without a Tongue, Call Togather [sic] all those who Long to Shake off the fetters of Slavery and as Such an Insurrection would surely be attended with Most Dreadfull [sic] Consequences so I Think we Cannot be too Early in providing Against it” (3). An excerpt from Benjamin Franklin speaks to the notion of the preservation of a
pure white nation as he poses the question, “why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? Why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White Red . . . ?” (4). The writings of Spotswood and Franklin are demonstrative of the notion that the “Sons of Africa” were a growing threat to white power who needed to be contained. The excerpts from Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery document the great lengths to which whites went to manage that threat by subjugating black Americans in order to preserve power; they also testify to the spirit of resistance of the African American community. The final pages of this section which fall under the subheading “On Lynching” testify to the uses of lynching as a ritual of terror and arbitrary violence. Wideman includes Frederick Douglass’s scathing indictment of lynch-law in the South and the silence of the North and news articles and editorials recounting in graphic detail lynchings in Tennessee and Mississippi.

For Wideman, the “Matter Prefatory” serves a necessary function as a precursor to the novel’s plot. According to Wideman, the excerpts from the various historical documents “immerse the reader in a reality that for one reason or another would seem fantastic to him” (O’Brien 9). He asserts that by contrasting the historical documents with the fiction of the novel, he “do[es] not have to try to convince anybody that those things happened. They happened, that’s all” (9). This serves to disarm readers, making the lynchers’ plan
seemingly more cogent and less radical. In fact, when couched in the context of such material as that in the “Matter Prefatory,” the plan seems as American as apple pie. On the other side of the coin, by familiarizing readers with the dehumanizing cruelty of black subjugation, the “Matter Prefatory” also implies that such acts of oppression are toxic to the mythical purity of the American Dream. Both readings ultimately foreshadow the failure of the plan as a form of black resistance and as catalyst for black empowerment. I argue that the lynchers’ appropriation of the lynching spectacle and the fact that in each articulation of the plan Littleman emphasizes the act’s symbolic currency suggests a sort of yearning for a coherent articulation of power, is in fact a struggle to make visible and plain the disembodied system of white power. In their desire to attack symbols of white racial power, however, the lynchers are directing their efforts at superficial targets and alienating themselves from the humanity within the community the lynchers seek to empower.

Bayard Rustin, advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and architect of the March on Washington in 1963, identifies what he defines as the “classic” phase of the civil rights struggle exemplified in the non-violent challenges against discriminatory policies predominantly in the South versus a second phase of the struggle that was largely, according to Rustin, class-based, emphasizing challenges to poverty, employment and housing discrimination in the urban centers. In his essay “From Protest to Politics: the Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” Rustin writes that the ten years between the Brown Supreme Court
Decision in 1954 and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would “undoubtedly be recorded as the period in which the legal foundations of racism in America were destroyed,” despite the continuing “pockets of resistance” (Rustin 116). However, Rustin posits that the overt legal obstacles that were the targets of the “classic” civil rights strategies—sit-ins at lunch counters, Freedom Rides targeting segregated busing and bus and train depots—were superficial or, as Rustin describes them, “relatively peripheral both to the American socioeconomic order and to the fundamental conditions of life of the Negro people” (116). By the beginning of this era, Jim Crow had become “anachronistic, dispensable, and vulnerable” (Rustin 116). In other words, as civil rights victories were won yet more and more cities erupted in violent resistance against the conditions of the urban ghettos, it became apparent that the law was just a symptom of the interrelated tendrils of race, class, politics and power. The interrelatedness of these problems led to the continued growth of “racial slums” thereby causing the spread of nihilism and utter hopelessness in residents of black ghettos. Writes Rustin, “... racial slums [are] spreading over our central cities and trapping negro youth in a milieu which, whatever its legal definition, sows an unimaginable demoralizations” (118).

By the time Rustin had written this piece in 1964, urban riots had already begun to erupt across the nation; between 1964 to 1968, major incidents took place in Harlem (1964), Watts in Los Angeles (1965), Chicago (1966), Cleveland (1966), Newark (1967), and Detroit (1967) (Gale 10). On August 28, 1964,
residents of Philadelphia, home to Wideman’s fictional lynchers, rioted in North Philadelphia. As was the case with the majority of the riots of the sixties, the violence was precipitated by a quickly-escalating public altercation between police officers and local residents. White-owned businesses in neighborhoods were looted and burned while black businesses were spared (Countryman 155-156). The riot continued for three days and claimed the lives of two people, while 339 others were wounded, 308 arrested and 116 businesses burned (Countryman 159). In the wake of the urban uprisings such as that in Philadelphia, President Lyndon Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1967 to examine the root causes of the revolts and put forth a plan of action to reduce similar violence in America’s urban centers. In chapter four of the Kerner Commission Report the authors list what they call the “Basic Causes” of the uprisings, but what their findings reveal are a body of intertwined, interwoven racial, social and political factors resulting in an air of hopelessness, disappointment and frustration. Among the list of integrated factors were: housing discrimination and segregation; poor and overcrowded housing for African Americans; educational disparities; a lack of opportunity for upward mobility; a lack of government resources; high rates of unemployment; disappointment with civil-rights progress; an increase in “white terrorism” in reaction to civil-rights progress in the South; a lack of legal recourse and government sympathy to various forms of racial oppression leading to an increase in “hostility toward the institutions of law and government and the
white society which controls them”; an increase in racial pride; and a refusal to submit to “the system.”

The rhetoric of the commission—“white terrorism,” “institutions,” “the system”—is as vague and nebulous as the loaded racial descriptors like “the man” and “whitey” used (with great currency among African Americans) to describe institutional racism. In his study of institutionalized racism, social and behavioral scientist Graham C. Kinloch defines the “institution” as “any society’s social arrangements or group structures set up to deal with its political, economic, and social needs, including physical-material requirements, the transmission of norms, and social control” (21). “Institutional racism,” then, is when race is the foundational principle underlying the distribution of resources, the construction of societal norms, and the policing of a nation. Similarly, Monte Piliawsky defines institutional racism as “public policies and social arrangements which fix unequal opportunities for Black and White citizens, thereby perpetuating the lack of proper food, shelter, medical and educational facilities for Blacks” (198). Piliawsky goes on to note that the power and malevolence of institutional racism is that it hides behind seemingly neutral policies that have an unbalanced and discriminatory impact on African Americans (198) and cites examples such as redistricting to “dilute the Black vote,” the uneven distribution of funds to public schools which so often leaves African American children without the resources necessary for a productive learning environment, and
zoning regulations that construct invisible borders around America’s suburbs thereby locking many African Americans within the walls of the urban ghettos.

With _The Lynchers_, Wideman dramatizes the ongoing plight of the black urban poor through characterization and setting. The emotional and material grit and grime of the streets of post-riot Philadelphia pervade the novel—from the claustrophobia enveloping the characters as they sense both the trap of institutional racism and their own inability to articulate its presence to the downtrodden and dilapidated neighborhoods that exist in stark contrast with the monumental American iconography in the City of Brotherly Love. In addition to being represented by the lynchers themselves, black urban life is embodied in characters like Orin Wilkerson and his wife. The image opening Part 1 is a powerful contrast: Orin in a drunken stupor, dreaming of his days singing in a choir, his voice a “pure, effortless tenor rising to the mellowest, highest note possible” singing “Nearer, nearer my God to thee” (27). As Orin sings, his voice joins with the other members of the choir, “. . . sweeping up his solo in their gust of rich chanting” (27). The dream evokes memories of the black church and a sense of community found in the sharing of song and voice. But the scene in the Wilkerson apartment is quite different; his wife sees Orin “sprawled in the soft

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14 In _Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals_, Trudier Harris argues that the lynchers’ plot fails partly because, being from the North, the men do not suffer the same oppression as African Americans living in the South that provides the anger and vengeance necessary to make the plan a reality. Harris writes, “There is no repression immediate enough to mid-twentieth century Philadelphia to make the black men feel the wrongs committed against them as acutely as would a black community which had, say, witnessed a lynching in Mississippi around the same time” (135). I emphatically disagree with the ethics of Harris’s analysis of comparative black suffering. Instead, I argue that northerners like the lynchers contended with a peculiar brand of racial oppression that was simultaneously immediate and distant, real and abstract. So, while different, it was certainly no less damaging.
chair mouth open, head flung back, pasted to that perpetual grease spot on the slipcover. The rug did not quite reach the corners of the room and two legs of the soft chair dug knurled toes into the linoleum” (27). The kitchen, where Orin and his wife go through a ritual of their own, fighting over his drunkenness and whereabouts and their poverty, is described as having “pocked walls breathing sourly, patient mirrors of everything and if peeled layer by layer pain to paper to paper to paint you would see old lives crowded as saints in the catacombs” (29). Thus, instead of song and community, in the Wilkerson home, one finds silence, alienation, anger, sorrow and hopelessness—an intangible nihilism that invades everything from their spirits to the dingy, peeling walls.

Orin is up at dawn every morning riding with the other sanitation workers through the concrete, steel and waste of the city. When they arrive at work, the garbage men spend the first thirty minutes of their day anesthetizing themselves, “pass[ing] around a taste” and swapping stories about sexual conquests. The depot where the garbage trucks are housed is described as being in the shadow of a dilapidated bridge, giving it the feel of a cave. As Orin and his crew of sanitation workers make their way to their route, they cross a dilapidated bridge. Wideman describes “Steel plates used to reinforce the bridge surface had been loosened by the pressure of heavy traffic and flapped when struck” (48). Orin’s best friend, Childress, comments, “The muthafuckas gonna come clean apart one of these days” (48). Childress’s comment eerily echoes the Kerner Commission’s “basic conclusion” in 1968 that “Our nation is moving
toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” and foreshadows what the Lynchers expect to be the outcome of the plan—the recognition of a black nation that Littleman already sees reflected in the city around him. Ultimately, Wideman uses the imagery of the city to signify the literal structural impact of racism on the residents of Philadelphia’s inner city.

In an extensive discussion about the plan, Littleman and Thomas Wilkerson (a local elementary school teacher and Orin Wilkerson’s son) walk through the streets of Philadelphia, contrasting the urban renewal restoration projects in historic Philadelphia with the dilapidated housing of black neighborhoods.

Look around us, Wilkerson. I wish I could teach every black boy on South Street what I see. We can’t let them do it again. Order, right reason, the white man just under God at the apex of creation. The buildings foursquare, proportioned, what they call classic because they think are reproducing the harmony of dead Greeks. . . . Fountains and squares and columns, the best of all possible worlds. Sublime order. Everything, everybody in its place. That’s what they dream. . . . What should a black man feel walking down this street, the Liberty Bell almost close enough to spit on, the fat, ugly boats full of money laying down there in the Delaware. What should he think when he knows about South Street over the other shoulder. South Street giving the lie to every promise, every pretension of the architecture the city is restoring. On South Street you
see what really happened. Here is where it began, what they wished might happen, but there is reality, the twisted guts, the filth, the million ways to be crushed. South Street like a sewer to drain off what they don’t want over here. . . . South Street stretches as far as you can see. This street means they are killing us, whittling away day by day, a man, a woman, a baby at a time. (111-113)

For Littleman the architecture and structure of the city are metonymic of inherent racial contradictions and divisions which are re-manifesting themselves in “insanity” of urban renewal projects.15 According to him, the restoration of “buildings foursquare, proportioned” and “Fountains and squares and columns” structurally reaffirm the established racial order, putting “Everything, everybody in its place.” The extension of South Street throughout Philadelphia (and the metaphysical “South Streets” in every city in the country) provides evidence for Littleman’s argument. That historic Philadelphia, recently “cleaned and restored” lies in such close proximity (on the same street) as the “twisted guts, the filth, the million ways to be crushed,” makes a mockery of black suffering and American values. Indeed, the architecture and the urban landscape are Littleman’s way of crystalizing the myriad institutions out of which black ghettos

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15 In “Model Cities Revisited: Issues of Race and Empowerment,” June Manning Thomas characterizes urban renewal, which ran from 1949 to 1974, as having often caused more problems than it resolved. Thomas writes that under urban renewal initiatives, “cities bulldozed countless inner-city neighborhoods, many of them African American, with scarce attention to the social and economic needs of residents, with scant or nonexistent help for relocation, and with little chance for speedy return into project areas” (143-144). For this reason, urban renewal is often referred to as “Negro Removal” (Thomas, 144; Shipp, 188). Sigmund C. Shipp, however, points out that in some cities there were segments of the African American population who participated in the urban planning process. However, these segments usually were comprised of politicians and business-owners (Shipp, 188).
emerged. “Do you believe what we’re seeing this morning?” Littleman asks Wilkerson. “How simple and concrete everything is. . . “How vulnerable the lies are that hold this mess together as it stands. Do you realize how we have all the evidence we need to expose the lies, to shatter the arbitrary balance and order. Nothing but an alley between two alien forms of life” (116). By condensing the intangible interconnected dynamics of race and power into “marble, concrete, stone [and] brick” (110), Littleman rhetorically transforms institutional racism into a slayable dragon—he, at least for himself and the other lynchers, remakes this phantom form of racism into a material entity that can be resisted, destroyed and demolished.

Just as the city landscape becomes a symbol in Littleman’s explanation of the plan, the decision to “lynch a white cop” for the alleged mutilation of a black woman is charged with racial symbolism. In order to catalyze the black community to “cross the alley,” Littleman centers the planning on the lynching of a white police officer known widely throughout the community for prostituting Sissie, a black prostitute and first victim of the plan. For Littleman, the significance of the lynching is its currency for black and white audiences as an American symbol. “What this town needs is a good old fashioned lynching,” Littleman tells the other lynchers, “I mean a formal lynching. With all the trimmings. And that’s a world away from the crudities of your poor white vigilante necktie parties. I would eschew that western model, go to the South where tradition means something” (60-61). Here, Littleman demonstrates his
familiarity with the history of lynching, delineating between the early model and its southern adaptation. Lynching emerged during the Revolutionary War when there were very few established courts and judicial servants making it difficult to try and punish lawbreakers and British-sympathizers (Dray 21). In pre-Civil War America, lynching victims rarely included African Americans as they were thought to be too valuable a commodity to their slave masters (Dray 29). Rather than a means for keeping blacks in line, lynching began as a way of establishing a community-based form of law and order in the emerging country (Dray 22). It was not until the era of Reconstruction that the lynching spectacle began to morph into the graphic torture rituals used to terrify and contain the newly freed African Americans who were exercising rights in the South afforded to them by the Reconstruction amendments (Dray 32).

Littleman understands that in the history of lynching in America, this gruesome spectacle is an attempt to reassert power and reaffirm the established racial order of the South. He explains to the other men that a lynching, “Puts things in their proper perspective. Reminding everybody of who they are, where they stand. Divides the world simple and pure. Good or bad. Oppressors and oppressed. Black and white. Things tend to get a little fuzzy here in the big city. We need ritual. A spectacular” (60). Much like his explanation of the structure of the city, for Littleman the currency of lynching ritual is that it unmuddies the waters and defines everyone’s place in the racial hierarchy. He notes that in “the big city” everyone’s place is not as clearly defined as in the South and believes
that the appropriation of a ritual peculiar to the South, where the lines between “Oppressors and oppressed. Black and white” have historically been more visible will crystallize the murkiness of institutional racism facing African Americans in urban centers across the country.

In addition to giving definition to the system of power surrounding African Americans, Littleman imagines that the lynching ritual will result in a clear statement of African American resistance that is legible to the white power structure. He explains,

When we lynch the cop we declare our understanding of the past, our scorn for it, our disregard for any consequences that the past has taught us to fear. We also deny any future except one conditioned by new definitions of ourselves as fighters, free, violent men who will determine the nature of the reality in which they exist. . . We are saying crystally clear in the language they invented: We are your equals. Accept that or go to war. (117-118)

In *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940*, Amy Louise Wood argues that the lynching spectacle does indeed have the currency Littleman describes and is, in fact, a symbol African Americans have been taught to fear. Wood explains that the lynching spectacle condensed the “the everyday humiliations and hostilities that black southerners endured under Jim Crow” and eventually became “the primary representation of racial injustice and oppression as a whole” (1). According to Wood and as Littleman explains, the
violence of the lynching ritual was “representational, conveying messages about racial hierarchy and the frightening consequences of transgressing that hierarchy” (2).

Beyond being a symbol of terror for African Americans, lynchings were powerful symbols for those whites who were witnesses to the act. Woods defines “witnessing” as when one’s spectatorship is active, bestowing meaning on the spectacle (4). Woods notes that white lynching spectators were not passive crowds, they participated by yelling and cheering and often took souvenirs and pictures of lynched black bodies (38). For white witnesses, the lynching spectacle served several purposes. First, it allowed southerners to embody in the lynching victim(s) their fears about African Americans. White Southerners, feeling threatened by black political and economic progress expressed these concerns “as anxieties about moral dissolution and personal safety” as well as “fears about moral and physical safety” (Woods 7). Thus lynching became a way to punish transgressors of racialized social, moral and legal codes. Second, the lynching spectacle reaffirmed white supremacy and created a sense of unity amongst white Southerners. Woods argues that white supremacy was/is not fixed, but fluid; white supremacy and white solidarity, she argues, were “ideologies that needed to be constructed and established and that required constant replenishing and constant re-envisioning. That is, they need to be performed and witnessed” (8). Thus, by gathering together to actively participate in the lynching of individuals deemed to be a threat to white
dominance, white Southerners performed white supremacy and created a sense of unity amongst themselves, created “a community of white southerners united by a common interest and purpose” (8). Finally, lynching witnesses, in assisting in policing black criminality via their active spectatorship, felt a tacit connection with the state, understanding themselves as an extension of the state’s power (Woods 38).

Indeed, lynching had great cultural capital for white and black communities. By reversing the lynching spectacle, Littleman hopes to make use of both sides of the coin. First, by choosing the policeman as the victim, the lynchers are mapping the black community’s frustration and suffering under the guise of neutral law onto the figure that is most readily identifiable to that community as a representative of the oppressive state, “that primary agent of social control in black communities since lynchings decreased in frequency” (Rushdy 112). Historically there has been tension between law enforcement and the African American community; this tension manifested in the 1960s in images of police officers beating non-violent protesters with night-sticks and attacking them with police dogs. Notably, most of the urban riots of the 1960s began with an altercation between local law enforcement and urban residents who resented discriminatory police practices and, undoubtedly, viewed these practices as an extension and representation of the intricate web of white power. Within the symbolism of the plan, the policeman comes to represent the all-encompassing power of the law to define either the expansive or limited possibilities of white power.
and black life respectively. During the act of lynching the white cop, a host of sins—the suffering and frustrations embodied in the city landscape in the lives of characters like Orin—are transferred to the policeman “in his obscene black uniform” (63). Imagining the scene of the lynching, Littleman says, “Here he is . . .. Same old story, people. The Man gives and the Man takes away. This is not a guilty man. He’s the judge and jury and we could hardly expect him to convict himself. . . His hands are white. His eyes are blue. If that’s not innocent I don’t know what is . . .” (66).

While the policeman is to be publicly humiliated and lynched for allegedly murdering Sissie, in reality he is a loaded racial signifier for white power over black lives. By participating in the lynching of “the Man” as spectators, the audience will be striking out against a disembodied form of oppression that surrounds them every day. Littleman also sardonically plays upon the diachotomy of guilt and innocence; in a traditional Southern lynching, black victims are assumed to be guilty simply because they are black; their physiology signifies guilt. The opposite, of course, is thought to be true of whites—blue eyes and white skin are thought to signify innocence. Knowing that his audience is well aware of the disparities in the treatment of blacks versus whites when it comes to the criminal justice system, Littleman wishes to use this trope to encourage spectators to be complicit in the lynching act.

Also, as Woods explains about the traditional lynching, Littleman believes that the lynching spectacle will unite and empower the black community just as white witnesses were united by the lynching spectacle that reified white power.
According to the plan, the unity of the community (as represented primarily by black men) is instigated by an understanding of a common fear of death at the hands of whites. Littleman argues that “Every black man carries a fear of death in his heart, a fear of death at the hands of white men. Each is isolated by his fear of death. It’s that terror we must release our people from” (118-119). Killing the white policeman should provide such a release because it is a rejection of this fear and a declaration of the community’s “understanding of the past, our scorn for it, our disregard for any consequences that the past has taught us to fear” (117). Rejection of the fear of white retribution should give African Americans a sense of freedom to challenge white authority and define their own existence “or die.”

According to Littleman, the lynching of the white policeman will say to the white establishment, “No, you cannot define us, you cannot set the limits. . . . We will lynch one man but in fact we will be denying a total vision of reality . . . We also deny any future except one conditioned by new definitions of ourselves as fighters, free, violent men who will determine the nature of the reality in which they exist.” (116). Just as Woods notes that the lynching of black victims facilitated a connection whereby white witnesses became an extension of the power of the state, so in Littleman’s logic the lynching of the white cop is a rejection of the established order and marks the emergence of a black nation, a notion that echoes black nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s. Black nationalism challenged white derogatory and detrimental definitions of black
reality and selfhood. As Ashraf Rushdy argues, the lynching of the white police officer is a “challenge [to] the worldview that presumed and rearticulated the idea of black inferiority, the belief that black life was expendable and subject to white control, either materially or symbolically” and a claim to the power to establish of a new system of definitions (112). I argue that this logic constitutes one of many flaws in Littleman’s plan because, interestingly, it relies on the same premise as the oppressive system he wishes to subvert: the power of a few to define the laws and set the limits of black personhood. Rushdy goes on to assert that the concept of a new nation is meant to signify a fresh start, a “state of innocence” that is “illusory” because this nation of “fighters, free, violent men” has been socialized by a system of white power and privilege and “can imagine their creation only by also imagining the destruction of those who shared with them that earlier colonization which they believe they (but not others) have transcended” (116). Littleman’s definition of the emerging black nation as one comprised of “fighters, free, violent men” is dangerously prescriptive as it both masculinizes the nation and, as Rushdy and Roland Murray assert respectively, makes physical and psychological violence an inherent component of nation-building.

In Our Living Manhood: Literature, Black Power, and Masculine Identity, Murray argues, the rhetoric of revolutionary nationalism often mapped the politics of liberation onto the black male body. “Through their representations of black men afflicted by oppression and triumphantly reconstituted in liberation,
they made the effects of black subordination intelligible to the African American public, rationalized the mandate for communal violence, and shored up their own institutional authority as leaders of a radical vanguard” (42). Indeed, when the lynchers envision the path to a liberated black polity they think of themselves as warriors and leaders, having been capable of seeing through the tangled web of racial politics and symbolism and enacting a plan to mobilize the black community into genuine action (violent revolution).

Ironically, Littleman, too, struggles to bring about any form of genuine action as he has defined it, and even admits to Wilkerson that he is often tempted to remain an observer of the workings of power and oppression. “I need you,” he tells Wilkerson, “because there is this silly ass part of me always wants to sit back and observe, do nothing but talk and think. A part that’s past caring about anything” (112). Littleman’s elaborately detailed plan which he reiterates several times over the course of the novel suggests that it is in fact this “silly ass part” of himself that governs his actions and inactions. Indeed, Littleman is considered the “brains” of the group, planning out the elaborate spectacle, but the movement of the plan is left solely to the other members of the group—Wilkerson, Rice and Saunders. Littleman’s participation in the plan remains rhetorical. This is solidified by the fact that weeks before the plan is to be carried out, Littleman attempts to provoke an unplanned rally and is subsequently beaten by the police and hospitalized. In the hospital, Littleman is alienated from the
group and the community and, without his crutches, becomes literally a talking head.

Moreover, Littleman’s physiology implies he is incapable of bringing the plan to fruition or conceptualizing a plan that is a departure from the cruel spectacle represented in the “Matter Prefatory”; he is described as “a grotesque puppet . . . half a man bent in the middle with doll legs splayed in front of him that would never move unless someone tugged the invisible strings” (58). His inability to act without a puppeteer implies that, although he believes otherwise, Littleman’s movements are not his own. To take Wideman’s metaphor a step further, the puppeteer/puppet dichotomy plays upon the broader relation between what Littleman understands as his (and black people’s) positionality within the white power structure. If one understands lynching to be a distilled symbol of black oppression (Woods) and the police officer as a distilled symbol of the ability of the white power structure to determine the lives of black people, then by lynching the police officer, Littleman believes they will be cutting the puppet strings, so to speak. In this way the plan is an action emanating from the black community. However, what Littleman and the other lynchers fail to understand is that the plan is still conceptually within the framework of white supremacy. As Trudier Harris notes, the plan is based on a template that is reactionary, not generative in nature; “and no matter how powerful reaction may be, it is still imitation, not creation” (134). By mimicking a white ritual of power, Littleman and the other lynchers are unknowingly still being jerked and twirled
about by the same invisible puppeteer they aim to embody and destroy by lynching the white police officer.

Furthermore, Murray argues that the novel’s critique of the configuration of the masculine body as the site for black liberation exposes the “inclination to subordinate women that was a hallmark of black revolutionary nationalism” (53). Murray reads Littleman’s primarily sexual relationship with Angela as an example of the interrelatedness of sexual dominance and the revolutionary agenda, arguing that Littleman “needs her to exist as a kind of lack or absence” as he “appropriates her body to refashion his own” (52). By dominating Angela sexually, Murray argues, Littleman is not only refashioning his body but his masculinity as the two are inextricably linked. Sissie is constructed in a similar way. She is not a random victim for the plan. Rather, she is deliberately chosen for her sexual relationship with the white police officer (he is her “pimp”) as well as the fact that she is the ex-girlfriend of Saunders’s brother, Raymond. Her sexual relationships with these men make her the lynchers’ ideal sacrifice.

Because she both prostitutes herself for the policeman and rejects Raymond, Sissie is literally cast out of the community, living in a dilapidated house behind South Street which Wideman has already described as marking the divide between white decadence and black poverty; in other words, Sissie lives in a marginalized space behind and detached from the already marginalized black community. All of the row houses on the street where Sissie lives are condemned and abandoned. Of the house, Wideman writes, “The house had
obviously been ransacked, everything of value carted away, even to the iron pipes which would at best bring pennies in a junkyard. The burner on the drainboard, the kerosene lamps, the gutted sink implied that all utilities had been shut off, that like its neighbors this shell had been condemned” (160).

Sissie’s residence is a testament to her isolation and alienation from the community. The street has been completely abandoned, cutting Sissie off from people except for those johns who visit and the policeman who profits from her sexual exploitation. Moreover, the fact that the house’s utilities have been shut off even further indicates Sissie’s isolation—she has no connection whatsoever to the broader black community only a street away. As Saunders notes, “If the whole damn street wasn’t there one morning nobody would give a fuck” (218).

The novel implies that to some degree, Sissie’s isolation is a consequence of her decision to leave Raymond, whom she supported and with whom she had a child, and to pursue a relationship with the policeman, who even Saunders considers to be a “a surer, more competent protector” (152). In leaving Raymond for the white policeman, Sissie alienates herself by violating a major taboo in the black community, conflating and embracing two symbols of white power—white masculinity and the law. Although Sissie’s relationship with Raymond was also sexually exploitive, her relationship with the white police officer embodies the legal and extralegal complexities of white power in relation to the black community. That the white policeman is sexually intimate with Sissie and actively controls her intimacy with other men alludes to the history of the legal
exploitation of black women at the hands of white men as well as the
emasculaton of black men who were powerless to protect their mothers, wives
and daughters from sexual predators who were empowered by the law. In *Ar’n’t
I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* Deborah Gray describes the lives
of enslaved African American women; she notes that slavery took a peculiar toll
on relationships between African American men and women particularly when
female slaves were sexually accosted by their white masters. Husbands who
attempted to protect their wives were beaten, others were forced to wait until
after dark to assist their spouses, while still others, feeling helpless, turned the
other way (145-146). Similarly, Angela Davis in *Woman, Race & Class* describes
the systematic rape of black women during slavery as a “weapon of domination,
a weapon of repression, whose overt goal was to extinguish slave women’s will
to resist, and in the process demoralize their men (23-24). Sissie’s relationship
with the policeman is a personal affront not only to Raymond, but to all of the
lynchers whose masculinity is scourged by what they understand to be her
preference for a white man far more powerful than they. When considering his
role in the plan (to kidnap and murder Sissie), Saunders contemplates having sex
with Sissie before he abducts her:

> Get the bitch with her drawers down, flat on her back. Raymond had his
pick of lots of wenches. His taste was good. No sense wasting a good
thing. A little trim first. He would make her groan. Get his hands up
under her skinny6 backside. Make her shut those big eyes turn her on like
no white pig could. . . . Tomorrow you both going to Hell. Maybe we throw them on the same heap at the dump. But might as well fuck her first. See what she got that’s worth seeing. If she won’t go with me, I’ll do it in the rate trap. On their wedding bed. Kill her before that pussy has a chance to dry. In her place easy to kill. So rotten you doing her a favor, getting her out the only way there is. (251)

Saunders’s fantasy reveals the complexities of his own subjectivity which he seeks to use Sissie to validate. He objectifies Sissie, reducing her to the sex act by equating her value with the pleasure he can exact from her body. Though the violence of the sex act Saunders contemplates suggests otherwise, he envisions the act of intercourse to be mutually gratifying to both him and Sissie and her gratification empowers him. The violence and the pleasure of the intercourse he anticipates is an expression of a historical angst over the emasculation of black men and an assertion and validation of his own masculinity by controlling Sissie’s body, forcing her to yield to him sexually. In this way, Saunders needs Sissie. However, because he needs her, he hates her and revels in the idea of killing her on the bed in which she sleeps with the white policeman, her chosen lover.

But Saunders’s and the lynchers’ contempt for Sissie goes even further than a deeply bruised ego. I argue that they also choose her because her subjugation in many ways mirrors their own. Prior to meeting Sissie, Saunders is hesitant to kill “a pitiable victim,” but eventually comes to accept Littleman’s
rationale that her “life had been stolen,” and that murdering her was actually a subversive act because “she functioned as a puppet in the oppressor’s system” (154). In reality, though Sissie’s attachment leads to her sexual exploitation, following Littleman’s logic, all who do not actively resist the system of white supremacy “forfeit” their lives and are “eligible for slaughter,” an assumption that roundly includes the lynchers whose plan is no more than a replay of a ritualized terror. Saunders actively chooses not to think about the faultiness of Littleman’s logic: “He hadn’t pushed Littleman to answer the next question. Wouldn’t all sufferers who submitted, who allowed themselves to be used rather than striking back at the users, wouldn’t all of them be guilty, eligible for slaughter” (154).

Though Saunders represses the thought, it manifests itself in his illogical hatred for Sissie. Saunders’s own characterization of Sissie represents her as a woman actively attaching herself to a symbol of white power in an effort to better her own situation even if such betterment will always, in reality, remain illusory to her (the likelihood that her policeman/pimp will marry her and help her better her life as he promises is slim). A look at the lives of the lynchers reveals much the same: Graham Rice works as a janitor in a building of white tenants but must live apart from them in the basement and “hide from them while [he]do[es] their dirty work” (52); Thomas Wilkerson is a socially conscious school teacher who struggles to make a difference in the lives of his black students whose heads are filled “with visions he could not budge when the
children came to school sleepy-eyes, sated” (75); Saunders, formerly a pimp and a hustler, now works for “the Man eight hours a day” in the post office (151); And Littleman seems to have been pushed to the logic of the plan because employers, not believing a disabled man can be an apt worker, will not hire him. During his relationship with Angela, his inability to find work to provide for them leaves Littleman feeling weak and emasculated. Like Sissie, all of the lynchers are beholden to “the Man”; they are in various ways puppets just as they believe Sissie is. Their having chosen Sissie as the primary victim of the plan, then, is because her subjugation at the mercy of the white policeman mirrors their own; they wish to kill in her what they hate in themselves.

Beyond being a scapegoat for the lynchers’ own frustrations, Sissie is to be used as conduit for the community’s rage; just as the policeman is to be a symbol of the white racial establishment, Sissie’s mutilated black female body is to be a way of channeling the racial frustration that for many in the community is always already there. In order to do so, Littleman plans to narrate Sissie’s murder in the form of a call and response. The description is quite gruesome:

No you haven’t read in the white papers what he did to Clara Mae. Not news when some part time pimp cop slices up a black woman. . . . He’s been serving her black meat to his customers all along. (Glory) She was his property. He had absolute power over her to do as he pleased. And he did as he pleased. Cut her the way you would a dead chicken. . . . Why shouldn’t he leave Clara Mae soaking in her blood. . . . So he killed her and left her lying in her blood till the rotten black
meat began to stink and her neighbors opened door. (God rest her soul) . . . And the voice goes on signifying, insinuating. It’s like a prayer meeting. Some old sister in the amen corner shouting back at the speaker. Blood of the lamb.

Somebody weeping Oh god hunkies did it to my sister too. (66)

Much like Orin’s dream of a community of voices joining with the soloist until the lone voice blends seamlessly with the choir, call and response represents a unification of the speaker’s words and the audience’s experiences, where his or her recitation creates a space for the vicarious identification of the audience who baptize this identification with their own voices—“Glory,” “God rest her soul,” “Blood of the lamb,” “Oh god hunkies did it to my sister too.” By design, the lynchers are not asking the community to concern themselves with Sissie’s death; notably, the name used in this iteration of the plan is “Clara Mae” because it is prior to Sissie being chosen, suggesting that for the lynchers, the victim is immaterial—it is the symbol that matters. As I’ve explained, Sissie lives on the outskirts of the community, she has no “neighbors” who care enough about her whereabouts to question them much less notice that she has been kidnapped by members of their own community. It’s not Sissie or Clara Mae or any particular prostitute that the lynchers will encourage the community to identify with; instead, they plan to emotionally manipulate the community into identifying with the experience of black exploitation at the hands of “the Man” more broadly while the humanity of the brutalized and mutilated black woman (the description of what the lynchers intend to do to Sissie is horrifying to say the
least) is lost in the symbolic trickery of the plan. She is reduced to a template on which others will be able to inscribe their own suffering.

That the plan falls apart when Wilkerson decides he must find Sissie and discover not what but who she is suggests that the cruel and inhuman use of symbols that comprises the plan is in fact counterintuitive to the concept of community much less to the empowerment of the community. Wilkerson gradually begins to see that he is no different than Sissie, his mother and father, and other members of the community. He has no right to gamble with their lives and choose which among them have forfeited their lives for the sake of a vision that they have had no hand in crafting. Following this epiphany, knowing the dimensions of the life of the lynchers’ primary victim becomes a compulsion for Wilkerson as does understanding the contours of black oppression:

“He needed to know about Sissie, the woman he was plotting to kill. And all the other deaths. Was killing Sissie unavoidable? Had she forfeited her life? Had Childress forfeited his? And the Sweetman? Was everything an accident? The madman an accident, the white people, the cop? What was the limit of accident? How could you form a plan in a world where all that mattered was accidental, a jumble of blind forces? . . . Who was Sissie? What accidents had made her the plan’s first victim?

(213)

“Accidents” becomes Wilkerson’s way of describing the origins of the pain and tragedy that fill the lives of those around him. By this time, his father, Orin, is in
jail for killing his best friend, Childress who attacked Orin seemingly over ten dollars, but in actuality was attacking an invisible enemy that was much larger than Orin and that had made the need for the ten dollars so desperate and immediate. To describe the world as a system of interlocking accidents captures the essence of the normalizing power of institutional racism and reveals Wilkerson’s own dilemma. On the one hand, to answer yes to his question is to argue that African Americans living in poverty on one end of South Street just opposite decadence and luxury are simply unlucky and unable to catch a break; their situation is not inherent or systematic—just unfortunate. On the other hand, to answer no is to believe, as Littleman does, that the magic of institutional racism is its ability to make itself seem tragically coincidental; if this is the case then the only corrective measure to be taken is to destroy everything. That the lynchers must manipulate the community or that members of the community will surely die is a necessary means to an end.

Wilkerson believes that the plan is the only path to freedom but cannot bear to cause the death and destruction the plan dictates and determines he must put a stop to the plan by going to get the guns from Rice who is keeping them hidden in his basement apartment. Wilkerson pounds on Rice’s door, calling his name. In a fit of paranoia, Rice aims the shotgun at the center of the door and fires, presumably killing Wilkerson. Interestingly, Wilkerson never finds Sissie, and instead of approaching her, Littleman, or Saunders, he chooses the most volatile course of action: challenging the well-armed Rice and obviously unstable
time bomb. Wilkerson causes his own death because he is unable to see beyond
the limits of the binary logic of the plan which calls for destruction or complete
submission. In this binary, Wilkerson’s compassion for Sissie and Lisa is an
expression of his own personal weakness. Rather than pose a new revolutionary
strategy utilizing the potentially generative energy of the community, energy he
sees flowing in those around him (his students and family), Wilkerson chooses
suicide, becoming the first victim of the plan.

Ultimately, at the end of the novel, nothing has changed for the
community at large, but as Wideman himself notes, the success or failure of the
plan is irrelevant, what matters “is what certain social realities have pushed these
characters to” (9). As a counter-narrative, what this novel demonstrates is the
ability of the extensive web of white supremacy to lead these characters to deny
their own humanity and the humanity of others who are similarly positioned. Of
course, this is not intentional on the part of the lynchers; they believe they are
doing the right thing and that they have developed a sure path to black
empowerment. Their certainty, however, only further demonstrates the power of
white supremacy and how difficult it is to escape, how so often it has always
already co-opted our imaginations and visions of freedom and empowerment.

Wideman has described the The Lynchers and his seventh novel, Reuben
(1987) as thematically similar, both being about black men’s attempt to locate
“constructive change” through the imitation of damaging myths (70). However,
whereas The Lynchers ends in self-destruction, the inevitable result of such
imitation, *Reuben* is about moving beyond negative, top-down myths and finding “positive rituals and myths that can shore up, that can reconstruct, the sense of reality in the black community, in its own terms, in terms that have been there all along” (Wideman, 70-71); in fact, Wideman describes the title character as a “traditional healer and magician” (Wideman, 71). Reuben seamlessly blends storytelling, rituals of healing and magic with his knowledge of the law. A makeshift lawyer, Reuben’s perspective of the law is unique, having been gleaned literally from the margins (he was the “mascot” for a fraternity of white law students and learned the ins and outs of the legal system from “borrowing” their books).

Reuben uses his rituals and knowledge to provide legal assistance to the less fortunate members of the Homewood community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Among his clients is Wally, a troubled young basketball recruiter searching for an outlet for his racially charged frustrations for which he finds temporary release by killing an unsuspecting white man in a Chicago bathroom. Reuben and Wally are a fuller exploration of the reactionist/activist juxtaposition first alluded to in *The Lynchers*. Like Littleman, Wally is a self-proclaimed reactionist; he “Needed to go against some other body. That’s who he was” (162). However, when it comes to his growing internal frustrations with race, Wally does not have “some other body” to challenge, leaving him with the same feelings of impotence, helplessness and rage that haunt Littleman and lead to the conceptualization of the lynching plot.
In fact, when readers are first introduced to Wally, he is on a baseball field, batting baseballs from tees. Wideman’s description of Wally gripping the bat and swinging at the baseballs is textured, tactile and violent. Wally enjoys the feel and weight of the bat, “He squeezed its heft. Wiggled the end invisible over his shoulder, danced it” (24). His body reacts to it, responds as he prepares to use it as a weapon; he feels “the lightness of it teasing his fingers, stirring the big muscles bunched in his shoulders, the muscles rippling across his back. The terrible weight, the quick, blink-of-an-eye swiftness hovering, ready to explode as he waggled the bat, gripping tighter, digging his spikes in for the swing” (24). In Wally’s imagination, the baseballs become the heads of white men, propped and waiting for him to release the tension in his muscles:

The rows of heads stretched as far as he could see, from life-size just a few feet away to the last one, shrunken small as a golf ball on a tree where the row slanted to meet the earth. No one’s face in particular. Features hidden. . . . These were like the heads of businessmen who flew with him into the wide blue yonder, over the amber waves of grain. How many times had he found himself stuffed into a jetway, crammed in the aisle of a plane behind a legion of these balding white heads, these ringless collars, dull suits, the stink of motels, rich food in ridiculous weather and connections, getting the worlds work done? (24-25)

Wideman introduces Wally as a young black man who, again much like Littleman, is yearning for a target for his angst. The faces Wally imagines have
no detail, but are representative of the mass of white faces Wally encounters whose indulgent lives are beyond Wally’s reach and who themselves represent a white establishment bent on keeping Wally “down.” So, just as the white policeman, or the city structures become a symbol for Littleman, so these imagined white heads become a symbol for Wally that he can control and react against. The release that follows each stroke of the bat is euphoric for Wally who is always “Grateful there are more. As many as he can bash in a lifetime. He twists his firsts around the wood. Lets it dangle to test its weight. Again. He wants to hit again. . . .” (25). Although it feels good to him, this ritual is no more than a temporary high, an attempt to anesthetize himself against the tension that rages in his muscles that must be repeated again and again in order to dull his anger.

Wally needs these targets because the racism he experienced was also disembodied; it was something he often sensed as an undergraduate in white college atmosphere. For example, Wally went to college on a basketball scholarship, an opportunity he viewed as a one-way ticket out of his poverty-stricken Homewood neighborhood. For Wally, there is always a dull ache in his legs because “He scared them one day into fleeing from blackness, from having nothing, and now they never stop, don’t know how to stop” (29). During his time at the university, Wally felt alienated in unfamiliar territory. Wideman does not describe incidents of overt racism as the trigger for Wally’s self-loathing and anger at whites; rather he endured a steady subterranean assault on his
perception of himself. He tells Reuben that what was most toxic to him was the “little shit that made me feel like a fool,” and he wonders “why was small stuff connected to big stuff in such treacherous ways. If the game was set up so you could never win . . . if you’d never be one of them, why play?” (111). From Wally’s perspective, even though his university education will afford him some opportunities, he must pay a high price to “play the game.” He resents the fact that he must assimilate in order to fit in; he postulates, “If those social occasions sponsored by the student activities board were mixers, what was being mixed? Wally’s drop of blackness in an ocean of whiteness. Whose color was spozed to change?” (111). For Wally, such assimilation calls for an erasure of his self and such an erasure requires a hatred of his self; he thinks, “You never know exactly what’s at stake when you give up on some little point and go along with the suckers. . . . One thing sure they accomplished. I learned to hate the face in the mirror. My own face. Hate it for giving in, hate it for not being the right one, hate it for hating itself” (112). Much like the lynchers’ complicated relationship with Sissie, Wally’s relationship with “the face in the mirror” is a garble of the desire to resist the powerful and invisible force which has convinced him that his face is not “the right one” and self-loathing for his conviction that this force is right. This self-loathing places Wally in a racialized liminal space; already alien in the white university atmosphere, he also feels he must assimilate and escape “blackness” and becomes isolated from black community members. While he lives among them, he also lives apart from them; he is purposefully distant.
This distance, however, should not be confused with a hatred of the community. In fact, I would argue that quite the opposite is true for Wally—the novel suggests that Wally feels deeply connected with the Homewood community. This connection is apparent in Wally’s relationship with Reuben who becomes a sort of community elder from whom Wally seeks guidance beyond the purview of legal advice. For example, when Wally considers his college experience, he believes he “needed Reuben that first year at the university. So many questions he wanted to ask someone like Reuben. Someone who’d been there before, someone like Reuben who’d survived it once, a witness, someone, some ways like him” (110). Wally is lamenting the loss of a connection with someone like himself to share his experiences with. Significantly, as I argue in chapter one, a powerful consequence of colorblind ideology is that it so often personalizes the experience of racism, leaving victims feeling alienated from others who have similar experiences. This is also evident when Wally is on the road recruiting. For example, as he goes from town to town recruiting black basketball players he is increasingly frustrated with the level of control white coaches have over the process which he likens to a slave auction where the white coach is a master selling livestock, and he, the recruiter, is the buyer. Wally despises the recruiting process; his job as a recruiter is a vivid reminder of the way he was recruited to play college basketball and spent four years as an outsider on the campus. Instead of participating in the buying and selling of
young black men, he wants to connect with the recruits who are so much like
him:

Wally always tried to catch a kid’s eye. Let the recruit know that Wally
Carter didn’t believe all this bullshit he was hearing. . . . I’m on your side,
my man. We both know [the white coach] is a clown. He burns us up, but
we can laugh at him, too, can’t we? . . . Wally searched for signs, a wink, a
nod, a shucking and jiving glint of intelligence in dark eyes that are
mirrors of his own. But if the intelligence, the smirk, the anger and hurt
are there, they’re buried so deep he can’t coax them out. He’s alone.
Detached. Watches the charade in the coach’s office from on high, the last
row of seats in a huge, domed arena. (101)

Wally finds that the recruits are also bound up in their own commodification and
alienated in a way similar to himself. This does not mean that they are
unreachable, as Wally seems to think, but that connecting with them would
require more than a wink and a nod. The students would need from Wally what
he needed of Reuben—someone to talk to whose experience reflects their own.
Wally, however, is so consumed by his own self-loathing and tension that he is
unprepared to provide this. Unlike Reuben who provides outside-in legal
assistance to community members, Wally has not yet found a way to empower
himself and others from within a system designed to commodify all its
participants. So, his connection to the recruits and other members of the community remains a longing.

This lack for a connection with a community he can share his experiences with leads Wally to stew in the hurt of seemingly arbitrary, subtle injustices and embolden him to act out his angst against white targets, escalating the targets from baseballs to white men. Interestingly, the lynchers choose a police officer as their lynching victim because of the officer’s currency as an iconic figure to both the black and white communities. Wally, however, struggles to give definition to his anger as the lynchers do. This is because the lynchers are seeking to put on a public spectacle to harness and direct black resistance to white oppression; Wally, on the other hand, copes with his rage in a much more private manner seemingly because the notion of large-scale change that the lynchers dream of is imperceptible to him. This is likely a result of the timing. As previously noted, the The Lynchers was published in 1973 during the apex of the Black Power Movement and following years of rioting in urban communities. The black civil rights scene was still very much in the public eye and the concept of mass movements was still very much at the forefront of the American conscious. Reuben, though thematically similar, was published 14 years later after much civil rights legislation had been rolled back and the white racial backlash was in full swing under Republican president, Ronald Reagan.

It is significant, however, that the law figures prominently in the way that the lynchers in the 1973 novel and Wally fourteen years later configure their
responses to white racism. For the lynchers, the white police officer represents the law as ever-present force, a system of suffocating definitions that creates a reality that has circumscribed African Americans to poverty and yearning and then makes a mockery of their existence. Although Wally’s victim seems to be a random white man, he sees himself as punishing whiteness for myriad legal injustices that have led to white empowerment and black powerlessness which becomes evident in the section of the novel titled “The Recruiter.”

Feeling the need to tell someone about his misdeeds, Wally decides to confess to Reuben by attributing his “crimes” to a hypothetical recruiter who supposedly sat next to him a flight during a flight from Chicago to Pittsburgh. Wally even transfers his yearning to share his story to the recruiter, “He don’t need me saying a word,” says Wally, “Once he starts it’s all gon come out. No doubt about it” (115). What follows is an allusion to a history of violence perpetrated against African Americans that was either explicitly or implicitly “legal.” According to Wally, the recruiter’s father was lynched by the Ku Klux Klan who then raped his mother, causing her to go insane. His mother later stabbed his brother and sister as they slept. The recruiter escaped with his life; his mother was institutionalized.

Wally says of the recruiter, “He been through shit like I read about in history books. Stuff I thought didn’t happen no more. At least not that way” (115-116). The death and subsequent trauma of the recruiter’s family is a result of the extralegal activities of the Ku Klux Klan, a group that, interestingly, held
its first official meeting in the law office of Judge Thomas M. Jones (Quarles 28). The recruiter’s backstory alludes to and is in fact emblematic of the interconnectedness of anti-black violence and the law. The death and emasculation of the recruiter’s father, the violation of his mother’s body and personhood by white men all were once given the sanction of formal and/or social law and continue to implicitly legal as black bodies continue to be devalued. While Wally at first suggests that the recruiter’s story is anachronistic, comprised of things that he had only “read about in history books,” that “didn’t happen no more,” in the very next sentence he reneges on that statement by implying that, yes, these things do happen—just “not that way.” Here, Wally acknowledges the shift in the politics of race, but acutely senses the continued relevance of this history to the shaping of his own life but is unable to articulate it as a part of his identity and frustration outside of his imagining the fictional recruiter. Wideman writes that “Wally had learned the dates, memorized acts of Congress, the debates and issues and personalities who had named him, decided his fate . . .” (120). Wally questions whether “he lived in America before he learned the shape of his country? Did he exist before he became acquainted with the tortured logic of his history in this land, the Compromises and Conventions and Supreme Court rulings determining what he was, what his life was worth, where he might live and go to school, how many of him clustered on the head of a pin equaled one white man?” (120). Wally feels as though his identity was pre-defined (even hyper-defined) before he was even born—who he could and
would be was already determined. And just as his subjectivity was already determined as less than human, only a fraction of a man, so was the subjectivity of his abstract white counterpart determined to be always already superior. The history of the recruiter becomes Wally’s way of connecting “the little shit”—the subtle yet toxic injustices he endured as a college student and that he endures now as a recruiter—with the “big stuff,” the vast system of white power that has historically disempowered African Americans.

As a way of explaining his anger and confessing the fact that he has been killing white men during his recruitment trips, Wally says that the recruiter developed a theory called “abstract hate.” The recruiter describes abstract hate as a deeply rooted contempt for whites that he has developed as a result of the violence perpetrated against his family. The “abstract part,” according to the recruiter, is whiteness, so that even if one likes a white person, there is still “something about that person, ‘the white part’ you can’t ever forgive, never forget. It’s a deep hate you can’t get over no matter what happens. You can live among them, thrive, love one or two, but you never move beyond the abstract part” (116). The recruiter describes abstract hate as a disease that eats its victims alive from the inside out; it “Fucks with your insides,” and sullies all that “you try to do, how you feel about what you’ve done. Whether you’re dealing with black people or white people or yourself in the mirror” (116). Abstract hate inhabits the black body like a cancer and must be “cured.” For example, although the men who murdered his father and brutalized his mother may be
dead, the trauma of it continues to victimize the recruiter. Although he continues to live a seemingly normal and successful life, “Inside, the hate still eating away. Abstract. He couldn’t put his finger on it. Like gas. Invisible but strong enough to choke you to death” (116). In order to be free from the abstract hate, the recruiter says one must commit an “abstract crime” or the murder of an anonymous white person. The recruiter rationalizes that, “If the hate, the anger, is abstract, if it’s a matter of principle, then you have to fight it on the same terms. Take your revenge in the abstract, on principle” (117).

The recruiter’s reasoning is remarkably similar to that of the lynchers’ symbolic plan. Facing a form of racial trauma that “he couldn’t put his finger on,” that is “invisible” yet toxic and deadly, the recruiter wages racial warfare on “principle.” His victims, in his mind, are not really people, but rather a manifestation of an invisible enemy—whiteness and white power. In his most detailed description of the Chicago murder, Wally kills the middle-aged white man for making him feel out of place, for the man’s power to make Wally feel crowded and inappropriate. Wally describes the setting of the murder as an “immaculate,” “almost antiseptic” bathroom, a “deserted, regularly cleaned oasis with no graffiti on its walls and toilet paper on the rolls, paper towels in the dispenser, mirrors clean and black as holes” (42). The cleanliness of this unused bathroom “off the beaten path” marks it as a liminal space untouched by signifiers of privilege and race; that the bathroom is unmarked in this way makes Wally feel displaced; he is “momentarily confus[ed],” wondering “Where the
fuck am I . . . where is everybody else?” (42). During this brief moment of disorientation, Wally is undefined; there are no signifiers in this space to determine who he is, so he feels lost. Interestingly, when his victim enters the bathroom, he is first described as “another human being”; he is then read according to his signifiers, “Male. Caucasian. Middle-aged. Unlucky” (42). When the white man enters the bathroom, Wally immediately defines himself against his victim, orienting himself as inferior and the bathroom as a space of white privilege and pitting his blackness against his victim’s whiteness. He believes the man is “dressed more appropriately for this bathroom,” and the white man’s gaze makes Wally feel like “a roach,” wanting to “scurry away, return to his proper element” (43). Wally even believes the white man has superior knowledge of bathroom etiquette because the white man “proceeds directly to the bank of marble-topped sinks and begins washing his hands. Not much water. Not much finger action. More a willing away of contamination, a ritual immersion in symbolic water of a symbolic sink bowl” (43). Because Wally’s belief in his own inferiority leads him to question his own bathroom ritual, he “wonder[s] if maybe this is what you should do before you piss. He’d never tried it or considered it, of course” (42-43). Wally’s anger and bitterness over his victim’s power to define his self leads to his split-second decision to murder the man, knocking him unconscious and drowning him in a toilet.

Wally’s mode of response throughout the novel is reaction. He cannot comprehend his own identity outside his racial construction against whiteness.
Wally’s logic rationalizes killing a white man as a personal victory in a battle against whiteness. The way of being ultimately proves toxic for Wally, rendering him violent and purposeless. Reuben understands Wally’s internal struggle and the danger Wally is in of drowning in his own rage; he also understands that Wally is not a murderer, but rather is suffering from a racial trauma that Wally himself cannot articulate. For this reason, Reuben encourages Wally to give detail to his story of the Chicago bathroom, whether it took place or whether Wally only dreamed it. When Wally first confesses, Reuben responds by encouraging Wally to give the anonymous white man a face and a name. Reuben says that Wally has to do this, “For the sake of the story. For your sake. For fun” (45). Later, Reuben warns Wally that his theory of abstract hate can only result in “abstract guilt” and that it will continue to haunt Wally unless he gives the memory definition. “It may be too late,” Reuben tells Wally, “To sort it out. What you did. What they did to you. But the past lives in us. There must be ways we can change things. Make them better” (201). Reuben seems to suggest that the first step in making things better is to absolve oneself of oppressive definitions; while the past does live in us, there is more than one way to reconcile one’s present with the past. While Wally spends his energies fighting the past with his back turned against others who share his struggle, Reuben considers himself an “advocate” for those community members. The difference in the two philosophies is perhaps most evident in Reuben’s and Wally’s response to Flora’s story.
In section 5 titled “Flora,” Reuben recalls his time as the “leader and mascot” of Alpha Omega, a fraternity made up of future lawyers who were also the sons of lawyers. From the fraternity, Reuben gathered the formal and informal knowledge that would comprise his legal education. One of his duties with the fraternity was to facilitate a twice-monthly encounter between “his boys” and “Flora,” a beautiful black woman who sold her body to the young men. He remembers Flora’s grace, power and independence, how she held, carried and defined herself. On one occasion, as a practical joke, the frat boys take up a collection to buy time with Flora for Reuben. Reuben and Flora only share a few brief moments, but they are intimate; he tells her of his reasons for being with the fraternity, a secret he has never told anyone: “For a while longer I need to use them. I’m dependent,” Reuben confides, “Not so much on the money as the job. Where it places me. The access it affords me to the university. You see, I want to be a lawyer. . . . that’s why I slave at Alpha Omega. I’m learning through keyholes. . . . I know more law than any ten of them combined” (82). Flora offers to support Reuben, help him get through the days when he feels he will not accomplish his goals. The two seem to come to an understanding and are on the verge of consummating a powerful alliance when the frat boys burst in, having eavesdropped on the entire conversation. They are enraged with Reuben for not knowing his place, believing that he was capable of being anything more than their mascot and for thinking that he would be allowed to “fuck where we fuck . . . Rub your nigger stink where we play” (86).
They accuse Reuben of “Sneaking around. Lying. Stealing. . . . Pretending to obey, to love us. . . . Wheedling your way into our affection when all you ever wanted . . . Was everything. Our books, our law degrees. Now our whore” (87). As they hold Reuben down, they tie Flora to the bed and prepare to rape her, while her lover and piano player, Dudley, douses the house with gasoline and sets it on fire. The frat boys fearing for their lives, throw Reuben out of a window and manage to escape themselves, leaving Flora to burn to death tied to the bed.

In the end, the frat boys go unpunished for Flora’s death, and during the subsequent fallout, both Flora’s and Reuben’s identities are transformed. The narrative that emerges from the tragedy erases Flora and she becomes an archetypal black jezebel. When Wally asks Reuben if the frat boys were punished, Reuben sneers, “Now granted, the Alpha Omegas were playing a bit rough with a whore and a renegade janitor, but most juries would not have wanted to hear that side of the story, would they? What decent judge would allow that tale to pollute his courtroom?” (91). The narrative that emerges validates the experiences of the frat boys and is an erasure of the connection and intimacy Reuben shares with Flora in the moments before the fire.

Wally responds to Flora’s story with anger and the desire for physical retribution—an eye for an eye, so to speak. He questions Reuben:

Didn’t you want revenge? How could you let them kill her and almost kill you and not do anything about it? . . . Shit, Reuben. The woman was
dead. They tied her to the bed. That was murder. You owed her. Love or not. Soon as I could walk I’d have been over to that frat house with a torch in my hand. Midnight . . . when the suckers were all asleep. . . .

What I’m saying is they would have paid. Tit for tat. One way or another.

. . . I’d have been on their ass, Reuben. Soon as I could walk. (91-92)

Indeed, for Wally, Flora’s story is about the injustice, the unfairness of her death and devising a plan to exact the retribution against the frat boys that Flora and Reuben are not able to attain through the legal system that recognizes them only as a “whore” and a “rogue janitor.” In interpreting Flora’s story in this way, however, Wally also erases Flora. He does not mourn Flora; rather his anger is directed at the systematic devaluing of blackness—black people can be murdered with impunity, someone must punish the murderers. For Reuben, the memory of Flora resonates in a very different way, so differently, in fact, that feels he may have told the story wrong because Wally is unable to understand its meaning.

To the admonition that he should have taken his revenge, Reuben responds thoughtfully that, “Losing Flora, the loss of her was all I could feel. Who or what caused me to lose her was immaterial. I missed her every second then. I miss her now. That’s the point of the story. How long I’ve loved her. How quickly she was gone” (93). Significantly, Wally’s interpretation is rooted in white hatred, Reuben’s in love. While Reuben does go on to “hurt them,” his understanding of retribution involves both “love and hate” (95).
In other words, Reuben reconfigures the notion of revenge and retribution; for him it is not about retaliatory action, but grassroots empowerment. He gains his revenge by empowering his clients to challenge definitions and stories that color their self-perceptions and interactions with the world. Kwansa Parker receives notice that her ex-boyfriend, Waddell, is filing for custody of her son, Cudjoe, and goes to Reuben for legal advice. In his small trailer/office, Reuben prompts Kwansa, “Please sit down. Tell me your story” (5). Reuben’s request befuddles Kwansa who does not think that she has a story, “Her life is now” (5). Reuben’s aid comes in the form of making the counter-stories of his clients legible to the legal system. So, within the confines of her impending custody case, the law defines Kwansa as a “dope fiend” and a “whore” because of her prior drug use and because she takes money for sex, thus hyper-defining her as an unfit mother. Reuben listens to Kwansa, wants to hear “Her story. Her once-upon-a-time. Reuben asked her to tell it, didn’t he? He wasn’t laughing at her” (7). Importantly, Kwansa trusts that Reuben is her advocate, looking after her best interests; he is not mocking her, but rather providing the opportunity and space for her to tell her own story, countering the way the law has defined her. In Kwansa’s story, she is young, foolish, spurned by her former lover, but a good mother who changed her life to care for her son. She says decidedly to Reuben, “Got Cudjoe to look after. Got to stay straight for him. Still ain’t no angel. But I ain’t no dope fiend nor no whore neither” (10). Reuben’s knowledge of the law proper and of its troubling relation to black life
as well as his willingness to work within the community, asking for little to
nothing in return make him an effective instrument for their stories.

Reuben believes in working with Kwansa and the other members of the
Homewood community in legal trouble to develop their own counter-fictions
lest they be “caught up in one fiction or another, and that fiction would carry
them wherever it was going. And its destination would have nothing to do with
where they needed to go” (17). Reuben understands that the law is “detail
work,” and in order to circumvent one conclusion, you have to provide another,
a counter-illusion. The members of the community know that Reuben is willing
to do the work that no one else is willing to do. No one else is willing to “get
down, down, down, stoop to the black-magic tricks you conjure to win the race”
(17).

I would argue that Reuben and Reuben mark an evolution in Wideman’s
thinking about race and the black community in the post-Civil Rights era. In
both novels, characters are struggling to conceptualize a way to fight an enemy
they can’t see—the lynchers, Wally and Reuben. The lynchers and Wally are
primarily concerned with dissension and destruction, embodying the white
racial establishment as a first step to striking out against it. For the lynchers, the
members of the African American community who may die in the process are
casualties of war, pons who forfeited their lives to the system long ago. For
Wally, his private battle leaves him a man apart from his community; he is only
able to love black people in the same abstract ways he is able to hate white
people. But Reuben is different; his character is looking in the opposite direction. He is not anti-white or anti-establishment; he is pro-black and pro-black community. Instead of embodying the white racial establishment in order to more effectively resist it, he embodies the black community in order to better care for it. In fact, Reuben carries a small talisman that he refers to as his twin, Reuben II. Reuben thinks of the idol as a living creature whose fate is connected to his own. He recalls a dream in which Reuben II was left to wither away in a prison; it was in this dream that a voice revealed to Reuben that the prisoner in “a cell too small for a dog, from which he’d never be released” was Reuben’s brother (66). Reuben wonders if he is responsible for his brother’s suffering and determines that despite having neglected his brother in the past, they were “joined now” in a bond of mutual understanding and reciprocity. Reuben “needed his brother’s eyes to see around corners, just as his brother needed Reuben’s oversize, crippled fingers to worry the clasp each morning” (68). Reuben understands himself to be his brother’s keeper, “Doing what had to be done to keep his twin safe, close” (68).

Reuben’s interactions with the talisman are representative of his relationship with the Homewood community around him; he describes himself as “a sort of go-between,” standing “between my clients and their problems. I intercede, let them step aside awhile. I take the weight. For a while at least ease a bit of their burden” (198). Reuben is the ideal community activist and agent. I am inclined to describe him in this manner not because of the results he achieves
for his clients because in actuality, at the end of the novel, readers do not see any of the direct fruits of Reuben’s labor, but in true Wideman fashion, the novel is about the journey, not the arrival. Rather, I describe him in this way because he understands that the role of a community advocate is not to fight the battle alone, but to empower members of the community to fight on their own behalf. With both novels, Wideman argues that the connections facilitated by the storytelling process are an imperative first step to combating any alienating form of racism. It is the personal connection between Wilkerson and Sissy’s daughter, Lisa, that leads him to sabotage the plan just as the lynchers’ determination to ignore personal connections allows for the conceptualization of such a toxic endeavor in the first place. Similarly, Wally’s having gone so long without a Reuben, without a listener and an advocate make him a powder keg sparked by the sideways glance of a random white man in a public restroom. Ultimately, Wideman’s work reveals the urgency of what seems like a simple first step; we must “sit and listen, learn the first words of the story [we] need to tell” (Wideman, 17).
Chapter 4: Missing Black Bodies in the “City too Busy to Hate”

On July 28, 1979, Edward Hope Smith was found dead in a vacant lot in southwest Atlanta, having been shot in the back. Edward, only fourteen years old, had last been seen leaving the Greenbriar Skating Rink where he frequently spent weekends with his friends and girlfriend; he disappeared on his way home. Only 150 feet away from Edward’s body, police found another dead child, Alfred James Evans. Alfred, thirteen years old, had left home to see a karate movie at a downtown Atlanta theater. He was last been seen by a friend who gave him a ride to the bus stop (Headley 34-36). The murders of Edward and Alfred marked the beginning of what is known as the Atlanta Child Murders. Within two years the “official” list of missing and murdered children and men in Atlanta would grow to an astonishing thirty victims: 2 girls, 22 boys and 6 men. Significantly, most of the victims came from low-income Atlanta neighborhoods. A task force comprised of FBI field agents and local Atlanta law enforcement officials would eventually arrest twenty-three year old Wayne Betrum Williams as the primary suspect in the case, and on February 27, 1982, Williams was found guilty of murdering twenty-one year old Jimmy Payne and twenty-seven year old Nathaniel Cater, the last two victims on the task force’s list; he was given two consecutive life sentences in prison. On March 1, 1982, police officials announced that they were counting twenty-three of the twenty-nine murders as solved, concluding that fiber evidence found on the victims
proved that Wayne Williams was responsible for most of the persons on the list of the missing and murdered. The authority’s speedy presumption of Williams’s guilt has left the case of the Atlanta Child Murders unsettled in the hearts and minds of many African Americans, particularly Atlanta residents and natives. Whether guilty or innocent, Williams remains the undigested sacrifice to a grieving community within a city struggling to preserve its racially progressive image as the “city too busy to hate.” The murders raised questions about the authenticity of Atlanta’s racially moderate rhetoric that remain unanswered.

Tayari Jones was entering the fifth grade when Edward Hope Smith and Alfred James Evans were found dead and subsequently chose to write about the Atlanta tragedy “from the vantage point of the playground” (Jones 2005). She recalls that, “Like all other children, we worried that we wouldn't be accepted by our peers, we fretted that our parents might divorce, but we also worried that a faceless predator might murder us” (Jones 2005). In this chapter, I explore Jones’s representation of a community coping with an “invisible predator” and how this predator shadows the childhoods of African American children coming of age in Atlanta in the years of the abductions. While one can argue that African American children have always been haunted by this invisible predator, what is significant about Jones’s novel is the contrast between the racial terror from 1979-1981 and the Atlanta myth. As a counter-narrative, Leaving Atlanta points out the inherent contradiction of the persistence of such a racialized threat in an era hailed as colorblind and in a city whose economic advancement fed on a myth of
racial harmony. In section one of this chapter, I explore the history of Atlanta’s persona as “the city too busy to hate.” The goal of this section is to contextualize the novel as well as to demonstrate that this image was not a result of changing perceptions of race in America, but rather a political and economic brokering that kept in place the racial codes of the south (and America) while presenting to the world a pretty picture of southern solidarity. In section two, I explore how the child protagonists in the novel develop an awareness of their own vulnerability as black children. In the third section of the chapter, I examine the passing on of intergenerational racialized knowledge from adult to child. This is significant because I argue that Jones represents this as a rupture to the Atlanta myth that reveals race and class tensions within the black community. The knowledge that is passed on from adult to child reveals black conceptions of who among them are worthy of protection and are vulnerable to harm because of their economic status. Finally, I will examine what Jones’s paradigm for closure and healing in the black Atlanta community.

When the body of Edward Hope Smith surfaced in that vacant lot in 1979, Atlanta was in its fifth year of African American political leadership. Maynard Jackson, who had served as vice-mayor for four years, was inaugurated as the first black mayor in Atlanta history in 1974 (Harmon, 277). His election was thought to be symbolic of the city’s racially moderate politics; however during Jackson’s tenure, racial tensions that had long been repressed began to bubble to the surface (Lopez, 197). In James Baldwin’s analysis of the Atlanta crisis, he
characterizes the city as one built on the American narrative of commercial progress, having come of age during “one of the triumphs of the industrial Revolution—the railroad” (3). Interestingly, that Atlanta emerged towards the end of slavery (it received its charter in 1847) had a large impact on the interconnectedness of Atlanta’s race relations and its evolution into “the city too busy to hate.” Historian Gregory Mixon asserts that rather than racial hierarchy being instituted through plantation life—few Atlantans owned slaves, those who did owned no more than ten on average—the “fabled paternal relationship between master and slaves that defined the Old South was more readily remade in Atlanta by the impersonal activities of the urbanizing New South” (2). So, when emancipation came fewer than twenty years later, the informal and “impersonal” forms of white dominance that had been characteristic of Atlanta were formalized through the process of urbanization, when commercial elites and elected officials, all sons of the confederacy (Civil War veterans and their children) formed alliances to institutionalize white control in Atlanta (14). Mixon calls this alliance the “commercial-civic elite” and argues that the members sought industrial growth while re-establishing the “racial, labor, electoral, and gender roles of master and subordinate—white over black, an ethos of domination—they believed existed before the Civil War” (14). They were able to accomplish this by excluding African Americans from the political process as well as by structuring industrial growth in Atlanta so as to exclude African Americans from public transportation and other services. Mixon writes
that “Paved streets, sewer lines, and streetcar tracks all were added to the downtown infrastructure to the neglect of the working-class and black neighborhoods (15).

The commercial-civic alliance legally solidified the marginalization of African Americans through tactics such as the 1872 Democratic white primary, which only allowed white males who were registered in the Democratic Party to vote; the 1877 poll tax law that “required males aged twenty-one to sixty to pay an annual tax on all real and personal property” (Dorsey, 128-129); and the 1908 Felder-Williams Bill that required that African Americans pass a literacy test or be “propertied and of ‘good character’” in order to vote (Dorsey, 129). It was not until the 1940s when these barriers began to fall and the African American population in Atlanta continued to increase exponentially that black Atlanta was able to accomplish large-scale participation in city politics. Specifically, in 1944 the Supreme Court declared the white primary to be unconstitutional. The Court reasoned that the primaries were a “part of the electoral process and thereby constituted state action”; to prohibit participation on the grounds that race was a violation of the Fifteenth Amendment (Harmon, 11). William Hartsfield, the mayor of Atlanta from 1937 to 1961, recognizing that the African American vote was growing rapidly, was the first politician to actively solicit the support of Black leaders during his 1949 reelection campaign (Bayor, 25). In doing so, Hartsfield created the “interracial coalition between Blacks and moderate whites that was to be the hallmark of Atlanta’s politics for the next 2 decades, and that
gave the city its reputation for having the best race relations in the South” (Burman, 156). The commercial-civic alliance determined that negative race relations would make Atlanta unattractive to outside investors. The city’s economic development, therefore, depended on the construction of an image of “peaceful and harmonious” race relations so as “to maintain a progressive image at a time when other cities across the South were sinking deeper into the obscurantism that set the stage for the turmoil of the 1960s” (Burman, 157).

Although the commercial-civic alliance maintained the vast majority of economic and political power in the city, its coalition with Black leaders and their collective investment in the outward image of Atlanta greatly contributed to the city’s economic growth throughout the 1960s (Burman, 159). Ironically, it was during the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s that Atlanta experienced its largest economic boost. The commercial-civic alliance sought to maintain this coalition because it ultimately cost them little while they gained much. The economic development of the city benefited them and the concessions made to Atlanta’s black population were often symbolic or brokered with the Black elite who were also invested in the city’s narrative of racial progress for their own economic and political advancement.

The burgeoning Black middle class of Atlanta viewed Jackson’s election as the capstone to a journey filled with compromise with the commercial-civic alliance. However, they, too, expressed concern about Jackson’s radical rhetoric, fearing that “he might jeopardize their gains by trying to push whites too far too
fast and spoil the culmination of a strategy that had taken them down a long hard road to political power and thus threaten the prospect of reaping the rewards of their patience and effort” (Burman, 165). Indeed, the Black middle class had come a long way since the establishment of Atlanta. As I noted above, the commercial-civic alliance established in the nineteenth century sought to impose severe limitations on Black autonomy through segregation, disenfranchisement, and often violence. Prior to the civil war and for many years afterward, these forms of subjugation grouped all African Americans in Atlanta together, regardless of education or economic status, thus creating a segregated yet diverse “black community.”

Because it was a community alienated on the basis of race, there was the common experience of racialized subjugation that connected, not unified, the community. With a host of black colleges and universities including Atlanta University, Spelman College and Morehouse College, Atlanta was home to “a well-established network of elite African Americans” in addition to the black masses—uneducated and unskilled blacks living in poverty. The successful subordination and segregation of all African Americans meant that both the black elite and the black masses were “consigned to the same living conditions no matter their wealth and background” (Ferguson, 25). Karen Ferguson, author of *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta*, argues that Atlanta is an ideal case study of the uplift paradigm that pervaded the rhetoric of the post-Reconstruction era. In the uplift paradigm, the black elite aimed to outwardly demonstrate that African
Americans were worthy of full citizenship by showing that they “aspired to the same moral and behavioral codes as the white middle class” (5). According to Ferguson, inherent in the politics of uplift is the division between the black elite and the black masses. The black elite are the self-selected custodians, “reformers,” and natural leaders of the race (4-5), while the rest of the black community is grouped together as the uncivilized and ever-burdensome black masses.

While in the early years of the city, segregation prevented the black elite in Atlanta from pushing a political agenda beyond very minor negotiations with the white political power structure, what is true is that their voices and agenda, by and large, became that of the entire black community. According to Ferguson’s thesis, President’s Roosevelt’s New Deal programs represented an opportunity for the black elite to distance themselves from the black masses and push their definition of a “black agenda” by working as federal bureaucrats to shape New Deal programming and policy. Ferguson goes on to note that, inevitably, the black elite were forced to make difficult choices when prioritizing the needs of black Atlanta. She writes,

Given the black reform elite’s dominance, it is not surprising that in Atlanta they chose to start their program from the high ground of the black-controlled [college and university] campuses . . . From there they worked their way down as far as they could . . . but never reaching the majority living in the hollows and bottoms of Atlanta’s hilly terrain.
While this limitation was first a product of black reformers’ circumscribed author and resources, it was also a continuing legacy of uplift ideology. When they had the opportunity to determine the recipients of New Deal largesse, they did not choose the ‘mudsills’ of the black working class but rather more prosperous elements who were most able to be respectable according to the reformers’ vision. (9)

Ferguson argues that, ultimately, the black elite saw their gains as the gains of black Atlanta, but in reality, black Atlanta was divided with the masses being left behind (11). Many of those left behind, according to Ferguson, sought relief through more militant strategies and organizations although the strategies of the black elite who eventually formed an uneasy coalition with the white commercial-civic alliance continued to prevail.

It is not my intention, however, to present the African American population in Atlanta as starkly divided. As I argue below, I think that Jones ultimately represents the picture as far more complex than this. As Allison Dorsey argues in To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875-1906, in the 35 or so years following the civil war, African Americans worked to create institutions and businesses that bettered the black community in Atlanta (29). According to Dorsey, black businesses that emerged after the Civil War did so from a desire of blacks to “have financial assets and to help their own” (30). This dual desire masks tension born of divergent interests and kinship born of a set of shared racialized experiences. So, I want to
acknowledge this tension while also noting that many African Americans were
left on the distant margins of Atlanta’s mythical progress. Even during the years
that are the focus of Dorsey’s study, during which she argues there was a sense
of racial solidarity and African Americans were investing in black
neighborhoods, she also asserts that “most African Americans in Atlanta
remained part of the working poor throughout the nineteenth century” (Dorsey,
53). This was still the case during the years of the Civil Rights Movement. David
Andrew Harmon’s analysis of Atlanta from 1946 to 1981 reveals many African
Americans lived in “dilapidated housing [with] outdoor privies, unpaved and
uncleaned streets, and vacant lots covered with trash (Harmon, 177). Much like
in other southern states, the civil rights actions and protests in Atlanta largely
focused on desegregation, not the fundamental structural challenges that would
have changed the conditions under which many black Atlantans suffered.

In August of 1971, an article in Ebony hailed Atlanta as the “black mecca of
the south” (Garland, 152). The article applauds black business owners and civic
leaders, including the vice mayor Maynard Jackson, for pursuing a bold vision.
Jackson is described as “a leading light in the promising ranks of the city’s young
black political speedsters” (Garland, 154). The article goes on to note that black
capitalism in Atlanta is one of its most glowing claims, with black-own
businesses taking a place amongst the skyscrapers in the city. The fact of
Atlanta’s poverty stricken communities, however, was no more than fine print
under the broader headlines of Atlanta as a racially moderate, bustling
metropolis. While the article notes that there are “160,000 people living in poverty . . . and two-thirds of them are black,” it chalks up the poverty plaguing much Atlanta’s black population as minor “flaws” and “growing pains” in an otherwise healthy city that “might well turn out to be the town that taught the nation how to live” (Garland, 157).

The paradoxical irony of the celebratory rhetoric of Atlanta’s supposedly racially moderate politics was that advances in black politics and business was not the result of the romanticized, amicable brokering of shared power; the white commercial-civic alliance did not experience an “ah-ha” moment with regard to fair and equitable treatment of African Americans. Rather, these advances were largely a result of a complex set of racialized circumstances—whites fearfully fleeing the city to the outlying suburbs; major businesses fleeing to the suburbs following the white (and black middle class) tax base; and divergent interests and class divisions within the black community. Thus, despite the overt symbols of racial moderation, much remained of the racial attitudes that had long been engrained in the Old South. Furthermore, the unstable, ever-shifting pieces that made up the puzzle of “the city too busy to hate” both created and silenced a large, marginalized, segregated, and poor black community.

Just eight years after Ebony characterized Atlanta as a city where “blacks who once were barred from downtown eateries and drank from segregated fountains go anywhere they can afford and their dollars are as welcome as anybody else’s” (Garland, 152), small, battered, black bodies, mostly from low-
income black neighborhoods in Atlanta, began to appear in vacant lots, abandoned schools, and wooded areas. The literal surfacing of these bodies revealed the fissures in the constructed narrative that circulated in the media. By writing about her experience of having lived through the Atlanta tragedy, Jones demonstrates the continued vulnerability of the black community couched within the Atlanta myth. In *Leaving Atlanta*, she proves herself to be a master of the coming-of-age story. For her young black protagonists, part of growing up black in Atlanta is distinguishing myth from the realities of their lived experiences through the process of discerning their vulnerability to racial harm.

LaTasha “Tasha” Renee Baxter, protagonist of the first section of the novel entitled “Magic Words,” while acutely familiar with class distinctions between her and her classmates, slowly becomes aware of her own vulnerability through vicarious interactions with the images of the missing and murdered children on television. When the novel opens, Tasha is in the thralls of a complex, but not exceptional, childhood. She is pained by her parents’ separation and later elated by their reunion. She is from a working-class family and struggles to find her place amongst her peers from varying socio-economic groups. She is also coping with her first crush on a “project boy” named Jashante, who eventually becomes one of the many victims in the case. When Tasha first learns of the missing children, she is watching television with her sister, DeShaun, and her mother during dinner—the television is a recently acquired luxury and privilege meant to mask the notable absence of her father who has moved out of the home. While
watching the news, Tasha sees the school pictures of the nine missing and murdered children. Although seven of the nine pictures are of boys, Tasha is fixated by the photograph a little girl: “who was about her same age. The girl was smiling with her mouth open, as if the photographer had been playing with puppets to make her laugh right before snapping the picture” (24). This moment is one of identification as Tasha comes to understand herself as the girl in the picture; not only are they about the same age, but Tasha imagines the girls’ liveliness to her own—her smile and her laugh in a moment of joy that Tasha has likely experienced herself. Later, as a frightened Tasha lay in her mother’s bed, she imagines herself being “asphyxiated,” dying as the little girl in the photograph did:

Tasha pressed her face into her pillow to see what it was like to be smothered, to be deprived of something as necessary as air. After a few seconds, her heart moved harder and she felt a desperation in her chest. She held her face there as long as she could and then she lifted her head. Her body acted without her, drawing a long, deep breath as if it were making up for lost time. (29)

While Tasha attempts to identify with the young girl once more by testing the waters of asphyxiation, the identification is, of course, incomplete. Rather, much like the lessons taught by the bodies in the Mississippi, her ability to identify with the photograph of the little girl leads Tasha to think about her own vulnerability. By experiencing the “desperation in her chest” and the yearning
for air, Tasha vaguely comes to understand her own mortality even though it
remains unclear to her what type of “creature” threatens it.

Naturally, her imaginings of the young girl in the photograph frighten Tasha and she ultimately seeks out a way to reject the identification with her and the growing list of children whose school photographs are organized in neat rows on the television screen. One way Tasha creates this distance is by interpreting her father’s absence and presence. As stated above, when the novel begins, Tasha’s parents are “living apart.” After Monica Kaufman begins consistently reporting on the kidnapping of Atlanta children, Tasha’s father returns, reassuring his two daughters who are frightened of the mysterious child murder lurking around Atlanta, that “Nobody is going to take you out of this house. Nobody is going to hurt my family as long as I’m around” (31). Her father’s presence soothes Tasha and provides her with the distance that she seeks. She tells her sister, DeShaun, that it is their father’s presence that keeps the child murderer at bay; conversely, she reasons that the missing children did not have fathers, which made them vulnerable to harm. “The only thing keeping the creature from getting us,” Tasha reasons, “is Daddy... Think about it... When somebody gets killed, they show just the mama crying on the TV. Those kids that got snatched, not one single one of them has a daddy” (42). As I discuss below, as Tasha sees her parents cope with the attack on Atlanta’s black children, she learns that the invisible predator is older than the disappearances of
the children on the television screen and that her father, a symbol of protection for her, is as frightened by the unseen “creature” as she is.

Tasha also learns of her vulnerability by perceiving the changes in her routine that are meant to provide her and her sister with additional protection. For example, as latchkey kids, Tasha and her sister spend two hours home alone together before their mother, Gloria returns home from work. Tasha cherishes “the silver key hanging on a shoestring like a pendant” around her neck as a symbol of her maturity; she cherishes the two hours before her mother arrives even more because for that time “She was in charge” (19). The key and her time in charge, however, become a burden as the number of missing children continues to grow. By the time her parents decide that the girls should stay with a neighbor after school, Tasha is terrified to be at home without the protection of her father. This fear is evident in the description of the girls’ afterschool ritual:

Although she had once been especially proud of the silver key, she had begun to dread turning it in the door and entering the empty house with DeShaun. After school Tasha, in charge, would turn up the thermostat, get their snack from the counter and put it in their room (although they knew better than to eat in there). Then, the girls would go to the bathroom, each one sitting on the side of the bathtub keeping watch while the other was vulnerable. This completed, they would go to their room, shut the door and put a chair in front of it as an obstacle for child
murderers who might be lurking in the house waiting for sisters coming home alone. (31-32)

While seemingly a minor detail, it is important to note that in the girls’ minds, danger is present enough to lead them to break house rules by bringing their snacks into their bedroom. It is also worth noting that Tasha, who enjoys her privacy and time away from sister feels vulnerable enough to have her younger sister keep watch during an extremely private moment. Here, the two girls first come to sense that the danger is not a creature “out there” but is a present threat in their home.

Further changes in their after-school routine both validate and expand their sense of vulnerability. When the number of missing youths reaches twelve, Tasha’s parents decide that they should go to the home of their neighbor, Mrs. Mahmud, after school as they did when they were younger because it is not safe for them to be home alone. When they arrive at Mrs. Mahmud’s, Tasha and DeShaun note that her home has been transformed. On previous occasions when they spent after-school times with Mrs. Mahmud, her home had been “full of knickknacks that children were forbidden to touch” and the girls “had sat on the living-room couch, still as mummies, until their parents came to retrieve them” (32). After the rash of child murders, Mrs. Mahmud’s house has been transformed into a playroom for children: “the fragile glass rocking horses had been removed and the carpet covered with a plastic sheath. Children were all over the place engaged in rainy-day activities. . . . They had spent so many
afternoons locked in their room they hadn’t noticed that none of the neighborhood kids played outside anymore” (32). Similarly, recess time since the killings began consists of “ad hoc discussion group[s]” with children sitting in circles discussing what they’ve heard on the news or the bits and pieces of information that they have caught from their parents. After Jashante is abducted, Tasha and her classmates decide silently among themselves that, “Recess was postponed indefinitely. No one announced it or made it official. The bell had just rung and nobody moved. . . . All of the kids wore weird expressions, like their eyes had been reversed and they were all staring inside their own heads” (73).

The empty desks of their missing classmates require Tasha and her classmates to reflect on their own childhood in ways that are largely new to them, and watching adults scramble in fear is telling because it affectively informs the children’s sense of well-being; they understand that they are not safe. As Trudier Harris argues in That Scary Mason-Dixon Line, Tasha realizes that she is not safe when she sees “all of the people and institutions that kids can usually count on for safety start to fall apart” (156). Her fear is compounded when she learns from her father that the invisible predator stalking the children of Atlanta is much older than the case itself.

In “Cultural Narratives Passed On: African American Mourning Stories,” Karla Holloway argues that “When it seems as if there is nothing left but a trace of language, or a disturbing photograph of the dead, or the threat of a dead
daughter’s return, or news cameras that glimpse the mere remains of our children only mourning stories persist” (Holloway 657). Holloway defines “mourning stories” as those that are “passed on” thematically, as in they are stories about the deaths of African American children, and literally, passed on as trans-generational artifacts through varying modes of storytelling. Holloway references the death of Emmett Till, asserting that “In African American families, recollections of Emmett Till’s death are known across generations. The story is retold—like the ‘Where were you when . . . ?’ narrative some in this nation still connect to John F. Kennedy’s assassination. These mourning stories are ghostly touchstones—mooring places for cultural memorials” (655). Parents and other adults find it imperative to “pass on” these ghost stories as a way of ensuring the survival of a younger generation. In Tasha’s section, when the fear and frustration overtake her father, her protector, he begins to divulge these ghost stories, believing that the children in Atlanta would be safer if they understood how vulnerable they were to the exercises of white power.

In one important passage, Charles, Tasha’s father, has returned home after a day of combing the woods with a search party, looking for the bodies of missing children. When he arrives home, he is described as being “different”; over the course of the day he has transformed from Tasha’s protector to a frightened child (75). While at the dinner table, Charles vocalizes his theory that a white person is killing the young black children of Atlanta, and he argues that
this theory does not make him prejudiced, just aware of the history of white
violence against black children. Jones writes:

“Does a man have to be prejudiced to see what is right in
front of his face?”

Mama was still quiet.

“I’m asking,” Daddy said, staring at her.

“All I’m saying is that you don’t know.” She spoke the
words slowly, pronouncing each letter. . . .

“Well, let me tell you what I do know. I know that a black
preschool blew up just six months ago.”

“What happened at Bowen Homes was an accident. The
boiler exploded.”

“An accident like Birmingham,” Daddy spat. “Nothing has
changed. When they found that little light-skinned boy, the one
that was just down here visiting from Ohio, all I could think about
was Emmett Till.”

“Who?” DeShaun asked.

Mama looked over at the girls. Before she could send them
away, Daddy answered the question.

Emmett Till was a little brother in Mississippi; white folks
killed for no reason. Hung him and—”

“Charles. Hush now.”
“No,” Daddy said. “Don’t hush me like I’m a child. I won’t hush. That’s the problem. We been hushed up too long. These children don’t know nothing about lynching. They don’t know about white folks burning niggers alive. That’s why we had to go out today—This whole thing is because black kids don’t have sense enough to be scared of a strange white man.” (76-77)

In order to prove his point, that whites still kill blacks “for no good reason,” Charles creates parallels between past acts of white racial terrorism and events that have taken place in Atlanta. Indeed in October of 1980, there was a large explosion at the Gate City Day-Care Center in the Bowen Homes housing project. The explosion “had the force of fifty pounds of dynamite and was as powerful as a huge fragmentation grenade . . . the day-care center itself was blown inside out” (Headley, 62). When the smoke cleared, four African American children and one adult had been killed. As Gloria notes, officials attributed the explosion to a “faulty boiler” despite twelve bomb threats that were made that day to local black schools, and despite recent Klan activity and reports from community members who claimed to have seen several adult white males on the roof of the building before the explosion (Headley, 63-64). For Charles, the explosion at Bowen Homes is eerily similar to the explosion that took place in a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, and killed four little girls.

Similarly, Charles mentions the “little light-skinned boy” who was visiting from Ohio. Clifford Emanuel Hones was from Cleveland, Ohio; he came
to Atlanta with his mother to visit his maternal grandmother (Headley, 54). Much like Emmett Till who was from Chicago visiting relatives in Mississippi, Clifford “had been in Atlanta long enough to be warned about the danger. It was a warning his mother repeated the afternoon of August 20, when Clifford left his grandmother’s house . . . with his cousin to scavenge for aluminum cans to sell” (Headley, 55). Clifford went out looking for cans so that he could scrounge up enough money for his mother to do the laundry; he left with his cousins but got separated from the group. His body was found the next morning beside a dumpster (Headley, 55). For Charles, Clifford’s murder evokes memories of Emmett Till, who was also an outsider in the south and perhaps somewhat unfamiliar with the social regulations. It is impossible to know the exact motivation for Clifford’s murder as he was among the many murdered children whose case was never brought to trial, but the reaction to his murder and the other early killings in the case was quite similar to the reaction to the Bowen Homes explosion—the official narrative that local government pushed indicated that race had nothing to do with the abductions and killings.

Charles is not the only parent to pass this knowledge on. As I mentioned previously, during recess the fifth-graders sit together to discuss the murders. Tasha contributes to the circle the information she has gleaned from her parents’ whispered and hushed discussions. She tells the others, “it has to be somebody white that’s doing it” (38); the other children nod in agreement, one says, “That’s what my mama says too” (38). Later, after Jashante has been abducted, Officer
Brown, a white police officer from the APD, visits the students’ classroom. Officer Brown asks the children, “What have you seen that has to do with kids and safety?” (92). Cinque, Jashante’s cousin, replies, “Everybody knows somebody is killing black kids” and later contributes, “My daddy say it’s the police that’s doing it . . . How else a white man going to get a kid to get in a car with him?” (92, 94). Cinque’s comments succinctly articulate what the other children have heard from their parents as well.

Bernard D. Headley, exploring the role that the media played in preserving the image of the city over pursuing stories that challenged the official line argues in “The Atlanta Tragedy and the ‘Rule’ of Official Ideology” that the media worked in concert with the commercial-civic and black elite to derail readings of the case that suggested that the murders where racially motivated because such arguments were bad for the city’s image. He argues that while, perhaps, some of the city’s elite rulers “may have been” concerned that Atlanta was exhibiting traits similar to those of other southern cities (i.e. racial violence directed at blacks), the more immediate concern was that any rumors about a racist child murderer targeting black children was bad for business. Thus, Headley argues that the media acted as a vehicle for the commercial-civic alliance to propagate the myth that such racialized violence was not possible in Atlanta. Headley writes, “The official ideology that emanated, therefore, from the Atlanta ruling circles can be summed up in one basic line: ‘It [i.e., racially motivated killings] couldn't happen here’” (455-456). The effects of this myth
were quite detrimental—community members leveled charges at the Atlanta Police Department (APD) that their unwillingness to consider the racial aspect of the crimes kept them from connecting the murders earlier, leading to more victims. Also, members of STOP (Committee to Stop Children’s Murders) accused APD of being unwilling to investigate the usual suspects (specifically the KKK and other white supremacist organizations). Conversely, Atlanta’s city leaders accused families of the victims and other community members, represented in Jones’s novel by Charles and other parents, who insisted that the perpetrator(s) was white of being paranoid and conjuring up conspiracy theories.¹⁶

My point here is not to deliberate about the race of the child killer(s), although the murder of thirty or more black children is a racial issue no matter the race of the killer(s). Rather, I am interested in what Charles sees as the other side of the Atlanta myth, where racialized violence against African Americans is reinterpreted either as more of the same (black people killing black people) or as happenstance (the victims just happen to be black) when in reality Atlanta’s race relations reflect those of Alabama and Mississippi. During his outburst, Charles implies that the image of Atlanta as a city that, while located within the south, is

¹⁶ For an analysis of the various “conspiracy theories” that were circulating as the case unfolded, see Patricia A. Turner’s “The Atlanta Child Murders: A Case Study of Folklore in the Black Community.” According Turner, theories ranged from the Ku Klux Klan to a child pornography ring and from the children being kidnapped and used as drug mules to speculation that the Centers for Disease Control was having children kidnapped in order to harvest genetic material found in the tips of the penises of young black men.
ideologically outside has lulled parents into not passing on the racialized history of southern violence. “That’s the problem. We been hushed up too long,”’ he declares when Gloria attempts to hush him because she does not want her daughters to hear the story of Emmett Till. For Charles, this is precisely the problem; these stories have not been passed on, leaving children vulnerable to the predator that is stalking them. He believes that by passing these stories on, adults ensure the survival of a younger generation coming of age in an environment sanitized of all references to race and racial histories.

When Wayne Williams was accused of the murders of two adult males and then implicated in the murders of more than twenty children, one factor that contributed to his characterization as a child murderer was comments that Williams was said to have made about low-income black children living in Atlanta’s Southside. According to Headley, after Williams was brought in for questioning, he held a press conference to discuss accusations that he was involved in the child murders. During the conference, Williams expressed what many read as telling comments about the demographic of the victims. Williams said, “‘Some of these kids are in places they don’t have no business being at certain times of the day and night . . . Some of them don’t have no kind of home supervision, and just running around the streets wild. I just feel some of the parents just need to tighten up and get strict on the kids”’ (150). During his trial, these comments were interpreted as illustrative of Williams’s disdain for black children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and thus, part of his motive
for victimizing them. Rather than representing these sentiments as the killer’s motive, Jones indicates that members of the black community felt this way as well and, as a result, perceived the victims as disposable or in some way responsible for their own victimization. So, even while the parents in the novel passed on stories about racial violence in the south, they do so through a lens colored by intraracial class dynamics in black Atlanta.

During “Magic Words,” the section where Tasha develops a relationship with Jashante, Tasha’s and other’s perspectives of African Americans from the projects of Atlanta largely shape their views of Jashante’s potential to succumb to violence and his eventual abduction. As I noted above, Tasha struggles to understand her crush on Jashante, a project boy, as she simultaneously struggles to perceive what the child abductions mean for her own safety. While Tasha enjoys his attentions, she also knows that social customs dictate that she be ashamed of her interactions with Jashante. When during a recess outing Jashante asks Tasha to be her partner during the relay races, Tasha refuses because Monica Fisher, the most popular girl in school, teases her about her crush on a project boy. When Tasha refuses Jashante’s invitation, he accuses her of thinking that she is better than him and pushes her to the ground, dirtying her brand new coat with Georgia red clay. Tasha’s coat was a very special gift from her father; in addition to its beauty, the coat is made all the more special because it was expensive (her mother later implies that it was too expensive and that she was against the purchase). After pushing Tasha to the ground and knocking her
down a peg or two, Jashante notes with satisfaction that she is, “not too good now.” Embarrassed, hurt, and angry, Tasha curses Jashante with death at the hands of “the man.” Through her anger, Tasha spits fiery words at him: “I hope you die. I hope the man snatches you and . . .’ She searched her mind for the word she had heard on the news. ‘I hope you get asphyxiated and when they find you you are going to be . . .’ What was the other word? ‘Decomposed’” (45).

This moment between Tasha and Jashante is one of mutual exposure. Tasha does not want the fact that she has a crush on a “project boy” to become common knowledge on the playground, thus she rejects Jashante, exposing the class differences between them. In return, Jashante, feeling exposed, strikes out at Tasha, dirtying her coat and exposing her own class insecurities. She confesses that in the moment that she spoke the words, she wanted the threat to materialize; she recalls, “she had meant it when she said it. Mad about ruining her coat, stinging from the laughter of her classmates, she had meant it” (72).

Similarly, when Tasha spends a few precious moments with Jashante at the skating rink, and he buys her candy with the money he earns from selling air fresheners to help his mother with household bills, Tasha’s father is uncomfortable with their interactions because Jashante seems to be an older boy from a lower economic class. Charles tells Tasha to, “Stay away from that boy. He ain’t nothing but trouble”; moments later he mumbles to himself, “That boy’ll be lucky to see the other side of eighteen” (68). When she learns that Jashante is missing, she believes that she, Monica and her father have all contributed to
Jashante’s disappearance. Tasha overhears Charles tell Gloria about partnering with a white man during the day’s search; Charles says that his search partner seemed to understand that, “[blacks] can’t forgive [whites]. Especially not at a time like this” (78). But Tasha does not believe that whites are completely culpable in Jashante’s abduction and wonders, “Could [she, Monica, and her father] be forgiven? Maybe not at a time like this, but ever, at all?” (79). Their words signify a reading of Jashante that marks him as disposable so as to relieve themselves of some of the fear and anxiety haunting the community.

Tasha is so confident in the power of these curses that when Jashante is abducted, she thinks it is her fault. Certainly, this is not the case, but what is significant is that the curse represents the hierarchy that Tasha and Charles attempt to establish in order to distance themselves from the racialized class vulnerabilities that mark Jashante as disposable. As I noted previously, one of the characteristics that Tasha feels separates her from the children who are being abducted is that she has a father to protect her. Her reasoning is complicated, however, by the fact that her family is on the verge of falling apart because, until it became apparent that a serial killer was stalking black children, Tasha’s parents were separated and her father was living with his girlfriend. Similarly, when Charles names Jashante as “trouble,” predicts that “he’ll be lucky to see the other side of eighteen,” and demands that Tasha stay away from him, he implies that Jashante is at risk of being ensnared by a matrix of invisible predators and
that Jashante, even at the age of thirteen, is *choosing* to participate in activities that will lead to his demise.

Interestingly, it is Rodney Green, the polite boy with the well-to-do parents, who chooses to go with the killer rather than go home with his parents. Rodney’s section, “The Direction Opposite of Home” is written in the second person, inviting the readers to fully participate in the experience of being a child of Atlanta’s mythic black progress. Rodney’s father is a small business owner, proud to “be his own boss” (110). Whereas other parents are passing on stories of violence against blacks in the South in order to give the children coming of age in Atlanta a context for the terror that is gripping the community, Claude L, Rodney’s father, correlates survival with upward mobility. For example, when he sees Maynard Jackson on television asking for people to come forward with information about the abductions, Claude tells his wife, “I can’t stand to see that yellow bastard up there acting like he care about black children. It makes me sick to my stomach” (111). He argues that when his brother, Joe, and other Atlanta sanitation workers went on strike for more pay that the mayor did not support the workers receiving an adequate living wage; “He didn’t care nothing about Joe’s kids when Joe and them said they didn’t want to work for free,” Claude argues, “He didn’t want to give them a decent wage to feed their family. But he’s acting like he is so worried about the children” (111). In Claude L’s mind, poverty and vulnerability are bound up together and the stories he tries to pass on to Rodney reflect this.
In one instance, Rodney brings home his report card and, though Rodney is very intelligent, he shows no interest in school and gets poor grades. Rodney’s mother argues that he is not challenged by the work in school, to which his father responds, “this boy’s problem is he never had to pick cotton. When you pick cotton you don’t sit out there and see if you can be challenged by the cotton . . . You just pick the goddamn cotton!” (128). Claude L “beats” Rodney for his poor grades, emphasizing with each lick that he has to “learn to get [his] lesson” or risk never amounting to anything (129). The following morning, Claude L explains to his son that he is merely passing down the same valuable lessons that his father, Rodney’s grandfather, taught him. His father was illiterate and worked in a sawmill for his most of his life. He beat Claude L because he wanted more for his son, so “He always made sure [he] got [his] lesson” (131).

Comparing himself to his brother Joe, Claude L tells Rodney that, “Daddy was too old when he was coming up to give him a good whipping when he needed it. What’s Joe doing now? Picking up the garbage. If his boss decides to cut his wages, there ain’t much that Joe can do. But me, I’m my own boss. . . . Your mama don’t even have to work” (132). Each interaction between Rodney and Claude L is a recitation of the American bootstrap narrative of individual economic success and upward mobility. His expectation is that Rodney will be motivated either by his success or his belt. Neither, however, is an effective source of inspiration. Claude L’s defines success solely as economic gain and the
projection of middle-class family values. This definition, however, precludes engagement with his son outside of vocalizing his disappointment.

An interesting pattern throughout the novel is Rodney’s consumption or rejection of food. What is most interesting about this pattern is Rodney is never able to consume food prepared by his parents nor prepared in the cafeteria at school. In fact, Rodney eats only the candy that he steals from Mrs. Lewis’s store; he eats this as he simultaneously ingests the interactions of his classmates on the playground and in the classroom—the conflicts (he watches Tasha curse Jashante) and the heroics (he admires Octavia as she bravely wards off schoolyard bullies). In this context, when Claude L talks to Rodney about about the lessons he learned from his father and the importance of getting his lesson, it is over a breakfast that Claude L prepares. But, not knowing what children eat, he gives Rodney buttered toast and Coke. Immediately after his father’s lecture is over, Rodney goes to the bathroom and vomits. Rodney seems to wholly reject his father’s values as implied by the regurgitation of the food and his complete apathy toward formal education. Instead, he learns from the inherent contradictions of his own subversive behavior.

While Rodney’s family “has money,” about three times a week he goes into Mrs. Lewis’s convenience store to steal candy. Mrs. Lewis is a childhood friend of Rodney’s father and thinks of him as a good boy:

‘Hi, Miz Lewis,’ you reply, heading for the back of the store, ignoring the sign demanding that patrons leave all bags at the front counter. She
doesn’t object. After all, you are not the type of boy who steals. Boys who steal do not attend Greater Hayes AME Zion. They are not members of the Youth Branch of the NAACP. Boys who take things from stores without paying don’t wear corrective lenses for astigmatism, say ma’am, or fear their fathers. In other words, they are not well brought up. (102)

This passage combined with the frequency of Rodney’s visits to Mrs. Lewis’s store suggests that he feels a sense of exhilaration as he ruptures the good/bad boy dichotomy. When Leon Simmons, Rodney’s classmate who lives in a local project, enters the store, Mrs. Simmons immediately begins treating him as “a boy who steals” further emphasizing the imagined dichotomy. Days later when Rodney and Leon return to the store together to steal candy corn, Mrs. Lewis lumps the two together, greeting and treating Rodney with the cold firmness with which she responds to the low-income children like Leon. She even goes so far as to call Claude L to tell him that Rodney is spending time with the “wrong crowd” (136). Although Rodney has been stealing candy from Mrs. Lewis for some time (his mother has even seen the evidence in his backpack), it is being seen with Leon who, like Jashante, is assumed to be “trouble” that leads to his getting caught.

Rodney’s trip to the store with Leon marks the beginning of what I read as Rodney’s transition into a potential victim. During recess on that same day, Rodney falls asleep on the playground and wakes up to discover that he has slept through recess and lunch; when he returns to his classroom, his father is
waiting for him. Claude L tells Rodney, “You can hang out with your friends when you supposed to be in school. You can hang out with the crowd and steal from Virginia. But let me tell you this . . . when you have to make something of yourself, you stand alone. . . . We going to go in that classroom and I am going to beat your behind. And you’ll see that the crowd can’t do nothing to help you” (137). Ultimately, Claude L is beating Rodney because he refuses “to get his lesson” — his school lesson and his oft repeated lesson about hard work and upward mobility. So, in this moment, before father and son enter the classroom, Rodney is transformed from the “good boy” to “trouble.” However, when Claude L takes Rodney before the class, he announces that, “Rodney has got to learn not to go running off without no one knowing where’s he’s at. These days are too dangerous for that” (138). Claude L’s reasoning reveals a causal relationship between socio-economic transgression and putting oneself in harm’s way. Rodney’s literal “running off” can just as accurately be read as a figurative rejection of his father’s lesson. For Claude L, both readings put Rodney in harm’s way and both are worthy of humiliation and corporeal punishment.

As Claude beats Rodney in front of the other children, Rodney is, I argue, transformed into a scapegoat as multiple narratives converge on his body — black upward mobility; middle class respectability; black worth; black criminality; and social deviance. After dutifully embodying these narratives, Rodney is displaced. He knows he cannot go home, so when the blue sedan pulls up beside him with Jashante’s green air freshener dangling from the mirror, Rodney
voluntarily gets into the car with the man he knows is masquerading as a police officer and goes with him “in the direction opposite home” (140). In allowing himself to be “snatched,” Rodney seeks to return to a “state of not being” that will release him from fear, a “condition where there is no father, no mother, no candy or school” (113). Whether or not he accomplishes this, we readers do not know. His death, however, does facilitate the communal mourning of the child victims from the Southside community as (dis)embodied by Jashante.

Although the two were in the early stages of their friendship, Octavia mourns Rodney and attends his funeral. Jones writes, “The casket that Rodney was in was silver-gray and closed. I knew he was the one in there because, after all, it was his funeral. And the program in my hand had that same photo of him on the cover. But if you don’t think too hard about it, it could be anybody in that box. Anybody that you don’t know where they at” (252). Indeed, Octavia describes the scene as two funerals in one. Jashante’s body was never found and no funeral was ever held. At Rodney’s funeral, those who know Jashante fill the balcony of the church, even though they do not know Rodney. “Rodney’s family and all the money people” are seated on the main floor of the church (251). The two funerals differ drastically as Rodney’s family is described as the portrait of respectable mourning; his mother “looked beautiful and calm,” wearing a black hat and veil. During the funeral, she doesn’t cry. By contrast, in the balcony, Octavia describes the sounds of collective mourning:
I had never heard a whole room full of people cry before. The sound is loud and rolling, like when I cross the street halfway and have to stand on the yellow line while cars whoosh by on either side. A dangerous sound. . . . Then my mama held me to her [and] sang one of the songs we sing at our church. Moaning songs that don’t have words. . . . The music from the balcony was the kind of music that was meant for crying like some other kind of music was meant for dancing. (253)

The contrast of the two funerals serves as a reminder of the depth of the Atlanta child murders. The uncontained sadness that moans in the balcony and drowns out the polite piano licks coming from the main level make clear that there can be nothing civil, respectable or polite about losing one’s children. At the end of the novel, Octavia’s mother is sending her to South Carolina to live with her father, Ray. This, too, is a loss that is indicative of the invisible forces against which Atlanta parents were fighting to keep their children safe.

A native of Atlanta, Tayari Jones grew up amidst the fear and anguish that plagued the black community during the years of the killings. When the case reopened in a 2005, Jones believed it was a necessary step to healing those who lived through the experience. In her op-ed piece written for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Jones likens Wayne Williams’s “media” conviction to a wound that has not healed properly:

For us, it is more like a bone poorly set — painful, crooked and gimpy. The events of 1979-81 so ravaged our community that we
have been unable to speak of them in the years since. The arrest and conviction of Williams for the murders of two adults, and the subsequent closing of the children's cases, was neither balm nor tincture. Rather, it was just a plaster cast, ensuring that the fractured bones of our community would never properly mend. (Jones 2005)

Jones alludes to the politics surrounding the case, acknowledging that, “Re-examining this case will cause great pain to Atlanta, the city of my birth, the place where my family still lives. I don't anticipate that this will be easy. Tempers will flare, as will old rivalries and grudges. But as we know, the only way to repair a bone badly set is to break it again, and then set it right” (Jones 2005).

Jones is suggesting, in part, that legal justice acts as a type of healing or closure, conversely as easily as its elusiveness acts as salt in a festering wound. For example, the “factual” children’s deaths that inform Holloway’s reading are the murder of Emmett Till in 1954 and the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama that killed four young girls in 1963. Much like the Atlanta Child Murders, Holloway notes that these murders have been referenced time and time again in the works of African American authors and have, indeed, become a part of our cultural history.17 No doubt the frequency of such allusions is largely because the victims, the victims’ families and the black community received what can only be described as qualified legal justice at best. In the case

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17 As Holloway notes, both cases figure prominently in in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977) and the murder of Emmett Till is the foundation of BeBe Moore Campbell’s Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine (1993).
of Emmett Till, his murderers were acquitted by an all white jury that deliberated for only 67 minutes (Whitaker 210). It took more than ten years for authorities to pursue Robert “Dynamite Bob” Chambliss, who was subsequently convicted in 1977 for being the mastermind behind the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. One of Chambliss’s accomplices, Bobby Frank Cherry, was finally convicted in 2002, thirty-eight years after Cynthia Wesler (14), Carole Robertson (14), Addie Mae Collins (14) and Denise McNair (11), were killed in the bombing.

The story of the missing and murdered children in Atlanta has also found its way into various media. Most recently CNN aired a segment on the case which included interviews with Wayne Williams, who still attests to his innocence from prison, and several of the victims’ family members. In 1985 James Baldwin published a brief and insightful analysis of the case and the Atlanta community in the context of America’s racial history entitled *The Evidence of Things not Seen*. In 1999 Toni Cade Bambara’s *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, a novel that was twenty years in the making was published posthumously with Toni Morrison acting as editor. There has been a made-for-TV movie and in 2010, production began on a film adaptation of *Leaving Atlanta*. Certainly the proliferation of work on the case is because legally, it remains unsettled.

Or perhaps this true only in part. Of the deaths of young black boys in Atlanta in *Evidence of Things Not Seen*, James Baldwin writes, “never, in all my years on earth, have I expected White power, willingly, to protect my Black life” (86). Baldwin goes on to note that, “Some years ago, after the disappearance of
civil rights workers Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner in Mississippi, some friends of mine were out dragging the river for their bodies. This one wasn’t Chaney. This wasn’t Goodman. This one wasn’t Chaney. Then, as Dave Dennis tells it, ‘It suddenly struck us—what difference did it make that it wasn’t them? What are these bodies doing in the river?’ That was nineteen years ago. The question has not been answered, and I dare you to go digging in the bayou” (99). Those “other” black bodies that emerged lifeless from the Mississippi had not garnered national or local attention, and their quantity suggested that missing and murdered black bodies in the South are unremarkable. For Baldwin, the anonymous bodies were an embodiment of a familiar knowledge about African Americans’ relation to the state—black bodies are not of value and not worthy of protection. So, if it is illogical for African Americans to look to the state for protection and therefore value, perhaps Jones is asking for something more. In chapter one, I argue that Dana and Kevin, the interracial couple who are the protagonists of Octavia Butler’s Kindred, go on a difficult journey that necessitates a confrontation with the contemporary impact of the slave past on their present selves and their marriage. This also requires that they reflect on their own investment in varying forms of power and privilege. Jones makes a similar request of her characters, but more importantly, she asks this of the Atlanta community. The reopening of the case alone cannot and did not heal the old wounds or reset the bone. Rather, I think Jones argues that healing begins with the dialogue—the sharing of stories.
On February 24, 2011, literary scholar Kenneth Warren published an article titled, “Does African-American Literature Exist?” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the article, Warren argues that African American literature is now a historical period, having ended with the “fall” of Jim Crow segregation. The first lines of the article read as follows:

Like it or not, African-American literature was a Jim Crow phenomenon, which is to say, speaking from the standpoint of a post-Jim Crow world, African-American literature is history. . . . one can no longer *write* African-American literature, any more than one can currently write Elizabethan literature. That this fact should occasion no lament is because the society that gave us what we know as African-American literature is a society that black Americans did not want then and certainly don’t want now.

(Warren)

Warren’s argument rests on the following suppositions: first, African American literature emerged from the era of Jim Crow segregation, which Warren argues began at the end of the 19th century, following the decline of Reconstruction gains (Warren). According to him, it was during this period when African Americans had begun to lose most of the legislative gains made after emancipation that “calls for black Americans to produce a distinct literature began to proliferate and to shape black literary practice” (Warren). Second, Warren argues that black literature became a vehicle for racial “uplift” whereby
disenfranchised African American elites who had been pushed to the margins of the political process would ultimately establish “a politics based on appealing to a white-power structure, putatively on behalf of the whole race” (Warren). In other words, Warren argues that the literary voice of black America was really the voice of the black elite (DuBois’s Talented Tenth) appealing to a white audience because the black masses (the other ninety percent of African Americans) were kept from exercising their political agency by “racial discrimination, enforced by violence and by statute” (Warren). Thus, Warren characterizes African American literature as an elite, race-based phenomenon that emerged from and engaged Jim Crow segregation and “the race question.” Finally, Warren argues that the Civil Rights Movement ended Jim Crow segregation, so there was no longer a need for a politics of racial solidarity based on racial subjugation because racial subjugation was no longer a salient issue for African Americans. He draws the conclusion that in the contemporary “post-Jim Crow” society, racial discrimination “stands out most blatantly as the problem to be addressed when you’ve got a lot of life’s other problems whittled down to a manageable size” (Warren). “Other problems” are political and economic issues, which today, Warren asserts, do not trouble African Americans any more than they trouble white Americans.

There are aspects of Warren’s characterization of the Jim Crow era of African American literature (what he would term the only era of African American literature), with which I do not disagree. The role of literature in the
“uplift” of African Americans has always been sticky, so to speak. Indeed, as I discuss in chapter three, the term “uplift” of the early twentieth century had not only racial, but class connotations as well. So, agreed: the literature of the post-Reconstruction movement openly engaged the “race question” and attempted to aid in black uplift through the creation of humanizing representations of black life; Harlem Renaissance writers reconceived “uplift” to include a diversity of representations of Black life; some black authors (Warren cites George Schuyler and Ralph Ellison) resisted prescribed limitations on their writing, particularly that they had to address the “race question”; and much African American literature was rooted in a politics of protest directed at white audiences. I do not disagree with this characterization of literature of the Jim Crow period, but they are not the characteristics of African American literature more broadly.

Warren dehistoricizes African American literature, erecting arbitrary borders that obscure the continuity of the struggle for black liberation in the United States. His charge that African American literature emerged only after Reconstruction discounts the plethora of slave narratives written by authors such as Frederick Douglass, Linda Brent and others. To add insult to injury, by asserting that African American literature emerged only with the advent of Jim Crow twenty years after the end of Reconstruction, Warren is arguing that there is no continuity between pre and post-Reconstruction African American literature. Jim Crow was a system of state-mandates to maintain the white
power structure of the Old South that had been firmly established during slavery. The same can be said for the post-Jim Crow era.

I argue that African American authors of the Jim Crow period were countering one manifestation of white supremacy that evolved, not disappeared, during the civil rights struggle. So, even as *Her Fleece Was White as Snow: African American Literary Counter-Narratives in the Post-Civil Rights era* engages African American literature written after the legal dissolution of Jim Crow segregation, this project is also attentive to the continuity of the historic engagement between African American literature and the law through the exploration of the law as a trope in the works of black authors of the post-Civil Rights era. In other words, I argue that these authors demonstrate the continued impact of racial discrimination *despite* and *because of* the legal dissolution of Jim Crow. In this way, authors such as Octavia Butler, John Edgar Wideman, and Tayari Jones critique narratives of racial progress that are bound up in legal or symbolic victories.

When I began this project, President Barack Obama’s 2008 victory had sparked a barrage of back-slapping, self-congratulatory socio-political commentary about the end of racial discrimination in America that sounded suspiciously familiar to me even as it resonated with whites and African Americans alike. As I bring this project to a close, we are about two and a half years into President Obama’s first term. It has been a turbulent ride for him thus far, having taken office at the beginning of a sharp economic downturn and in
the middle of a war. While he has had one or two near misses, Obama has deftly avoided the “race question.” This does not mean, however, that issues of race have not surfaced during his tenure. On the contrary, anxieties about Obama’s race have surfaced frequently, disguised as questions about his education and political qualifications and with news media outlets at times using racial stereotypes to critique him.

For example, amidst all of the job losses and gains; dying soldiers and touchy world politics, at a constant simmer since Obama’s campaign has been the question of his citizenship; his father was from Kenya, and it was widely rumored that Obama was born there as well which would make him ineligible for the presidency. During his campaign, Obama released his certificate of live birth because Hawaii, the state of his birth, does not make long form birth certificates public. A growing faction of conservative republicans known as Birthers persisted in raising questions about Obama’s place of birth and the authenticity of his documentation. The rumors came to a head when real estate mogul Donald Trump began hinting to the press about his possible run for president in 2012 which most considered a joke that made for interesting loops on the nightly news. These rustlings gained traction, however, when Trump made Obama’s citizenship the focal point of his media campaign. In fact, it was Donald Trump’s growing base of conservative followers that led to the president’s authorizing the release of the “long form” of his birth certificate, a move Trump immediately took credit for. Despite his obvious lack of
qualifications and political knowledge, Trump’s challenges to Obama’s citizenship resonated with many Americans.

Beneath the talk of legal documents (Certificate of Live Birth versus Birth Certificate) and conspiracy theories (what is Obama really trying to hide?), was a familiar dichotomy—black and American. In other words, anxieties about the president’s race manifested as doubts about President Obama’s American citizenship. Perhaps following Warren’s logic, that the president was coerced into responding to rumors about his citizenship is a very small price to pay for having our first African American president (which Warren would no doubt see as a sign of racial progress). However, this small price extends beyond Obama who, as I argue in chapter one, worked tirelessly during his 2008 campaign to construct a vacuum-sealed image of Americanness (or rhetorical whiteness). If he can still be deconstructed through the displaced racial rhetoric of the 21st century, what will become of those African Americans who do not have the benefit of publicists to craft the ideal portrait of American identity? How do such portraits, though unsuccessful they may be, silence the stories and obscure the experiences of African Americans who live in the shadows of the lofty narratives of racial progress?

Upon reading an early draft of the first chapter of this project, a colleague of mine asked me, “what do Obama and the civil rights movement really have to do with literature?” My response at the time was that pieces of literature are socio-political artifacts of their respective time periods and that by reading a
work of fiction, exploring the absences, presences, and absent presences, one can excavate and estimate the tenor of an era and the struggles and tension of and between people. However, in African American literary representations of the struggle for racial progress, the response is far more textured than this, as I have demonstrated in this project. As a student of American literature and Critical Race Theory, I had been conditioned to be critical of the American promise by authors who had painstakingly outlined the distance between promise and reality. As a genre, African American literature has always been a space for critical engagement with ongoing dialogues on race and power. So, when I began thinking about CRT arguments about the relation between race and the law in the post-Civil Rights era, I naturally became curious about how African American authors were taking up these same shifts. Ultimately, the coded language of twentieth- and twenty-first century race speak necessitates new generations of code-breakers who are up to the challenge of translating the contemporary African American experience of race in America. The counter-narratives I examine paint a nuanced picture of African American characters struggling to comprehend, cope with, catalyze and counter the most recent manifestation of white supremacy. However, far from simply representing a community in pain or positing “solutions” to the sufferings of African Americans, these authors instead portray an array of possibilities and pitfalls that shape the black experience in America.
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