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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* share many thematic and stylistic conventions which illustrate intertextual connections between the neo-slave narrative and critical dystopias. Moreover, they both focus on the effect of history on the present and the continuing legacy of slavery on social ties, identity and agency. As the article argues, central themes of traumatic history and memory are problematized in these novels through the trope of maternal genealogy and the consequences its severance has on affective relationships, race relations and personal identity. Varsam contends that the violent legacy of slavery is transformed from a central marker of traumatic memory to a reference point of survival and personal and social renewal.

Keywords: neo-slave narratives, history, memory, trauma, dystopia.

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To Remember or Not to Remember: Traumatic Memory and the Legacy of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Maria Varsam

We, the younger generation
called upon to reap [...]
from your wounds, from your deaths
we, too, know and recognize, and yes
we, too, have our own wounds
in other parts of the body – hidden wounds
lacking the counter weight of pride and lauded blood
shed visibly, in visible battles, in visible struggles.
– Yannis Ritsos¹

Modern narratives on slavery are a particularly malleable generic category in formal terms. From Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1961) to Maryse Condé's *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1992), Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2010), and Morrison's own *A Mercy* (2009) they have been written as realist novels, fantasy, magic realism or science fiction. One category which is perhaps not often referenced in relation to slave narratives is that of the dystopian novel and, more specifically, what Tom Moylan defines as the critical dystopia because it "gives voice to [...] dispossessed and denied subjects" (189). Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) is both critical dystopia and neo-slave narrative written eight years before *Beloved* (1987) yet pre-figures many of the issues foregrounded in one of the best examples of neo-slave narrative from North America. Neither novel clearly belongs, at least formally, to one of the main categories described in Ashraf H. Rushdy's *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*² since both borrow tropes from other generic categories. However, both foreground the function of memory in their novels and this common ground also links

the genre of dystopian fiction to historical novels of slavery. Through the issue of memory, both novels examine important themes that continue to plague African American history, literature and subjectivity. In particular, it is the memory of traumatic events that form the central focus in both novels and it is these events that need to be re-remembered, understood and overcome by the female protagonists.

This paper will re-read *Kindred* in light of *Beloved's* focus on one of slavery's most traumatic legacies: the severing of natal ties within slavery and, in particular, the permanent separation of mothers from their children. *Kindred* foreshadows the centrality of these practices by highlighting the consequences on both individual subjectivity and collective memory and by emphasizing its lasting effects on the present. The first part of this essay will delineate the conventions of the dystopian novel and its thematic overlap with neo-slave narratives with regards to history and memory. The focus in the second part will consider the particular characteristics of traumatic memory in relation to mother-child separation and the third will merge genre and theme in order to examine the consequences of personal memory on official history, individual identity and affective relationships. What will emerge is a framework within which traumatic memory may be understood to be transformed from incapacitating violence to a medium of creative agency. My purpose is to re-configure the dominant theme of memory within a framework of a utopian process of re-memory, re-connection and renewal. Finally, the thematic focus on history and trauma viewed from the viewpoint of the dystopian genre will culminate in the re-assessment of the protagonists' responses to their traumatic history in an effort to evaluate its import for modern readers.

Memory and Genre

Two of the most often referenced quotes from Octavia Butler's many interviews³ point to two key issues which bind her *Kindred* to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in a narrative web which connects both fictional and non-fictional genres with issues that continue to pose problems, in particular, to female African-American writers. The first quote points to Butler's early motivation in writing a novel within the slave-narrative tradition as,

a reaction to some of the things going on during the 60s when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery. (Kenan 496)

The second interview explains her reluctance to confine her writing to the perceived conventional limitations of science fiction writing: "there is absolutely no science involved, not even time travel" (Kenan 495). Yet there are other literary forms of 'science fiction,' as I will argue, that do, in fact, embrace such non-realist stylistic conventions.⁴ The literary dystopia is one form of speculative fiction which does not necessarily fall under the category of science fiction, yet retains important conventions for understanding historiographical fiction and neo-slaves narratives in particular.

The issues to which these two quotes refer concern the content and structure of neo-slave narratives in so far as the former attempts to work through issues of history (official and unofficial), memory and trauma, whereas the latter focuses on generic conventions which best illuminate these matters and questions their continuing prominence in novels. Butler's chosen genre is a sub-type of science fiction combined with realism whereas Morrison's combines historiographical fiction with the (magic) realism of a ghost story.⁵ Ostensibly, they do not seem to possess much in common in terms of generic form, if we consider the strict conventions of magic realism and science fiction, but thematically both share a preoccupation with a specific aspect of slavery's history and its consequences that of the traumatic memory of separation for both the original slaves as well as their descendants. Rather than comparing how the two novels negotiate these issues at the formal level, this paper will discuss how the formal conventions serve to show the lasting cultural consequences of slavery through the trope of traumatic memory.

Genre as a heuristic device has been utilized by Sheryl Vint in her comparison of *Beloved* and *Kindred* because both novels "urge a rethinking of the relationship between African-American and fantastic literatures" (241). Part of her critique involves the limitations of realism as a genre but also of 'objective history' with regards to the portrayal of African American history. Thus, in attempting to give voice to the slave's version of history, new and multiple generic conventions are employed in order to narrate the gaps with which official 'white' history has burdened descendants of both slaves and non-slaves. Their moving away from purely realist modes suggest that realism is not sufficient for representing the experience of slavery, since the writers' purpose, according to Vint, is to persuade the reader that their stories are *not* happening "in a reality ontologically distinct" (243) from their own. Both novels illustrate the horrors of slavery but what binds them together is the focus on the significance of presenting these horrors in narrative forms that emphasize that slavery exists on a spatio-temporal plane as having lasting effects on present-day societies. Rather than viewing these forms as "postmodern" as Spaulding does (4), or as "liberatory," as Mitchell does (42), the genre of dystopia is a more appropriate narrative framework because it extrapolates from past

historical events to present the past as present and it suggests a critical stance towards the memory of this past.

This necessary movement away from realism becomes even more urgent when attempting to represent traumatic memories, in themselves unrepresentable because of their inaccessibility. While Vint argues that both novels attempt “to recreate the past as present” (245) in order to acknowledge what has been repressed and thus, detrimental in its effects, she focuses her argument on the necessity of “accepting embodiment as self” (245) for the resolution of trauma. Instead, this paper will argue that the desire to remember traumatic events is as significant as the events themselves; when Sethe starts “the day’s serious work of beating back the past” (Morrison, *Beloved* 75), and believes “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay” (42), it is because she wants to protect her daughter Denver from exposure to this past: “the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (42). Likewise, Dana, the protagonist of Butler’s *Kindred* is a descendant of slaves who travels back in time to the anti-bellum South⁶ to meet her ancestors and witness events she had never wanted to know about: “I don’t like it. I don’t want to be in the middle of it. I don’t understand how it can be happening, but it’s real” (46). Thus, the effects of the traumatic past do not concern only the original slave survivors but their descendants as well since repressed traumatic memories are capable of affecting future generations. Events are placed along a ‘dystopian continuum’ which posits a temporal-spatial relativism in so far as the present here and now is better for some, but much worse for others. Dystopian fiction in its modern form borrows from other literary forms so that there is no pure form of dystopian narrative but mainly a blurring of genres and a textual “ambiguity and self-awareness,” as Baccolini has suggested (“Gender and Genre” 24, 28). Thus, the employment of slavery as a theme, mode or metaphor is common in dystopian literature since the lack of freedom and the alienation of self from others and oneself are common tropes. Both the content and function of dystopias share with neo-slave narratives a preoccupation with history and memory but the critical dystopia, as Baccolini has argued, retains a critical position towards the past (“Journeying” 357). In the case of these two novels, the heart of the narrative’s plot revolves not simply around the representation of slavery but slavery as traumatic event, memory and legacy. By utilizing a hybrid type of neo-slave narrative, *Kindred* foreshadows the hybridity of *Beloved* since it utilizes genre as a formal ‘solution’ to the representation of the traumatic legacy of slavery. Indeed, there are many echoes of *Kindred* in *Beloved*, thus inviting a re-reading of *Kindred* after *Beloved*, not so much as a desire to trace these textual echoes but as a fruitful investigation into the narrative solutions presented in these texts concerning trauma, violence and memory not only

within historical slavery but also post-slavery. Both novels creatively draw from a variety of generic conventions in order to construct a coherent narrative that gives meaning to the slave's traumatic experience while investigating its repercussions on a psychological and social level for subsequent generations. For both novels, slavery represents an example of a 'concrete dystopia' which has existed not only in the past but may manifest itself in the present and future. Following Bloch's work on "concrete utopia" (17) we can posit as "concrete dystopia" all those events which form the material basis for the content of dystopian fiction which have 'inspired' the writer to warn of the potential of history to repeat itself.⁷

Within the pages of *Beloved* two kinds of slavery are juxtaposed: the cruel, inhuman standard where violence and fear keep slaves in check and 'Sweet Home' where Sethe lived, the lone woman amongst male slaves. This plantation is presented in *almost* utopian terms for its benevolent master (while still alive) and mistress and tolerable conditions, so tolerable that no slave wished to seek freedom. It is also utopian because compared to the treatment of slaves on other plantations, slaves on Sweet Home enjoyed a degree of humane treatment which scandalized other slave owners. But as Jewell Parker Rhodes has argued, Sweet Home remains nonetheless positioned within a greater slave society which can disrupt the maternal bond (86), separate families forever and subject slaves to the same violence which has always surrounded them. Thus, when Sethe remembers her time on Sweet Home, it is by filtering out the ugly memories. Rhodes considers *Beloved's* 'rememory' part of a utopian process of hope, of "being more humane" (90): "utopia is a process of re-living memories, recalling pleasures and pains, and succeeding in loving the self and maintaining this sense of self while joining and loving others" (90-91). But not all memories are equal, and in order to overcome traumatic memories a different kind of framework is necessary. By presenting the present as future, and the past as present *Kindred* considers the memory of slaves' suffering as an active force in the lives of their descendants. Whether spatially or temporally displaced, slavery's legacy haunts the survivors who must come to terms with its lasting effects. As Levitas writes:

"Utopian representations of the future claim that the future may be qualitatively different from the present involve a process of transcending the past [...]. It always involves managing the past, both individually and collectively. Thus, memory and forgetting, and their management, are necessary components of the utopian project." (20)

However, as I will argue, traumatic memory does not obey the rules of 'normal' memory and must be somehow managed in order for the protagonists to incorporate it meaningfully in their lives' narrative.

Kindred begins in June 1976 but its protagonist, Dana, travels back in time to the eighteenth century in order to find herself repeatedly saving her white ancestor and slaveholder, Rufus, from certain modes of dying over a period of many years which last only minutes or hours in the present. Eventually, her Caucasian husband Kevin joins her and they become part of a household which includes her great-great-great-grandmother Alice. The central storyline revolves around her relationship with Rufus and describes in detail the conditions of slavery on his plantation. The cause of her transportation to her own past is not given, although the fact that it is triggered by Rufus's near brushes with death suggests an aetiology related to a (common) trauma since she is able to return to her present only when her own life is in danger. Thus, from beginning to end, *Kindred* signals the trauma of death (or its possibility) and the fear with which it binds its characters as a central motif in the novel and like, *Beloved*, it provides a driving force around which meaningful action organizes, and manifests itself.

The inter-generational link is apparent in both novels. However, Dana is not the counterpoint to *Beloved's* Sethe. Dana's ancestor Alice is the original victim of slavery whereas Sethe's daughter Denver embodies the haunted descendant of slavery's past just as Dana's herself has only second-hand knowledge of slavery. Most importantly, the point of view of the novels, both set simultaneously in slavery's past and present, is from the mother's and daughter's perspective, thus emphasizing the experience of slavery and its consequences on future generations. In both novels, the clash between past traumatic experience and future effects is presented temporally in *Kindred* but spatially in *Beloved*, yet in both cases the purpose is a common one: to foreground the continuity of the traumatic past on future generations, even though they have not experienced the events personally. Thus, the nexus at which past, present and future intersect is memory, and specifically traumatic memory relived and transmitted to the next generation in an effort to come to terms with and overcome its detrimental implications on the lives and sense of identity of these protagonists. Where *Beloved* begins with the mother and ends with the daughter, *Kindred* begins with the daughter and takes the reader back to the first mother, the original victim of traumatic slavery. Despite efforts to suppress the past, both must confront it head on: Sethe in the materiality of *Beloved's* appearance and Dana in the physical encounter with her ancestors.

Memory and Trauma

In *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, trauma is defined as: “An event unexpected, shocking, unassimilated, producing anxiety, neuroses and repetition of the shocking event [...] possibly leading to a traumatic neurosis whose function is to enable the subject to “assimilate retrospectively an unexpected experience by [...] working through it” (Rycroft 187, 189). This short definition summarizes some of Freud’s early insights into traumatic events and their consequences on survivors. On the basis of Cathy Caruth’s exposition of Freud’s writing and what these novels illustrate and history books cannot – the reader gains insights into the legacy of slavery even upon individuals who have never experienced its horrors initially on the psychological level and inevitably on the social, and finally on the communal and national level. What begins as an exploration of the individual psyche and personal trauma ends with questions of social identity and agency in the aftermath of uncovering the suppressed trauma of historical slavery.

Freud defines the experience of traumatic events as those that the subject is compelled to repeat in the present with the same intensity as they were experienced in the past, and not merely as the remembrance of that past. Several important aspects are related to this compulsion, as Freud writes in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” First, the inability to recall points to the intensity of the original event: “The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it [...]. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as contemporary experience instead of [...] remembering it as something belonging to the past” (288). Second, in the process of forcing themselves to consciousness, these repressed events are never enjoyable, and they override any “pleasure principle” which dictates the subject’s normal conscious life (288). Third, the subject is compelled to repeat the traumatic experience until he or she are able to assimilate it successfully, that is, to overcome it (291). Finally, traumatic experiences are timeless so that the passage of “time does not change them in any way” (299). Freud’s formulations, groundbreaking at the time, have been further refined by modern scholars to encompass a wider range of phenomena Freud had initially limited to survivors of war. As Luckhurst explains, although a “psychical trauma” cannot be fully assimilated, it remains present in the mind “like an intruder or a *ghost*” (499; emphasis mine). As a result, physical symptoms are “enigmatic signposts pointing to traumatic memories hidden away in the psyche” (Luckhurst 499). Hence, “the individual is doomed to re-live the event until another means of repairing the wound has been found” (500).

In Butler's and Morrison's novels, the shocking, unassimilated event which produces anxiety is that which Patterson calls, in *Slavery and Social Death*, a crucial aspect of slavery: "alienation from all ties of natality" (26). Furthermore, unlike people exploited in other types of labour relations or "the new slavery" (Bales 15), "only slaves entered into the relationship as a substitute for death" (Patterson 26). By literally taking up the extreme choice of 'freedom or death' both novels expose the central unassimilated traumatic memory of slavery. In *Beloved*, Sethe decides to take herself and her children somewhere safe, where no one can "dirty them" (251) and during Dana's final trip to the past she witnesses her ancestor's suicide and realizes that she herself would rather die than be raped by Rufus. The constant threat to slave women of being forced to bear children by their masters and the subsequent threat of being separated from their offspring through their sale is also the dominant fear expressed in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). As Jacobs poignantly laments: "Always I was in dread that by some accident, or some contrivance, slavery would succeed in snatching my children from me" (277), and "my mistress, like many other, seemed to think that slaves had no right to one's family ties of their own" (59). This constitutes "natal alienation" (Patterson 7), that is, "the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations" (7). As a result of this constant threat of separation, women chose, unsurprisingly, to avoid attempts at escape in return for the possibility of retaining familial relationships, however precarious they were. When Rufus misleads Alice, as a method of intimidation, into believing that he has sold her children away, Alice hangs herself (Butler, *Kindred* 178). Since Alice had already been separated from the man of her choice, her only meaningful point of reference were her children and her 'choice' of death constitutes a tragic non-choice. As in dystopias, a corrupt system can only foster alienated relations as a result of constant compromises. Seen from this perspective, *Kindred* is a story of an African American woman's effort to overcome past collective trauma through the experience of personal trauma and vice versa. These novels suggest that "the past should be, even must be, retained and manipulated in order to formulate a cohesive identity in the present" (Schiff 118). The problem arises when, because of their traumatic content, events are not or cannot be remembered. Thus, the question remains: how do the characters of the novels incorporate traumatic memory into their personal identities?

Every time Dana returns to her present life, she is physically and psychically scarred as every return marks another stage in the level of comprehension of the events that marked the lives of her ancestors, quite unlike the media representations she has become accustomed to. From the outset, it is clear that the weight of history becomes heavier, not lighter, as she tries to forget its reality. The novel is a recording of the process of

both recalling the traumatic memories of her past and of the effort to make sense of them in the specificity of her own life. The mythical, allegorical motifs to which the chapter titles allude mark the 'repetition compulsion' typical of traumatic events. The chapters entitled "The River," "The Fall," "The Fight," "The Storm," "The Rope" describe the events during which Dana's great-great grandfather Rufus is in danger of dying, that is, events which are traumatic in his own life's trajectory. As Caruth explains, repetition alludes to the attempt to overcome a traumatic event and at the same time to come to terms with having escaped death (63-64). What does it mean to survive when it is at the expense of somebody else's death? She answers this question by saying, "trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is *not* directly available to experience" (60). Sethe and Dana slowly self-destruct in their attempts to incorporate the past into a sense of continuity with the present. It also signals the outline of official history, of those events that are considered important only by the white slaveholder's standards. In danger of losing her own self in his life's narrative, Dana is constituted as merely another "nigger" (Butler, *Kindred* 24) whose life story only gains significance in so far as it buttresses her master's. But in keeping with allegorical conventions which seek to make the invisible visible, there is another narrative to be read in the spaces between the lines of the master's fight with death. The titles also signal Dana's story, in so far as they also involve a fight with death, for her own life is at stake if her ancestor prematurely loses his, and at the same time, they signpost her unwilling complicity in sustaining the life of her ancestor's oppressor. These two parameters, the struggle for life against overwhelming violence and the necessary compromises involved in that struggle also form the titles of her story which threaten to disrupt the unity of the white master's narrative. For if Dana's existence depends on Rufus's survival, Rufus's survival also depends on Dana's existence. The interdependency of their life stories constitutes part of the traumatic events Dana is forced to understand in her visits to the past, and it impacts on her present sense of self. The complicity which forms part of the narrative of her ancestors' survival constitutes an additional traumatic realization to Dana who is forced into complicity herself. As Olney argues, the very fact of a slave's survival constituted the initial 'I exist' of any slave narrative (155) and this survival comes at a personal cost.

Relations become distorted in slave narratives as in female-authored dystopias and as a result, women are seen as inter-changeable breeders and female identity is reduced to the maternal. Rufus himself tells Dana during his attack: "You were one woman [...] two halves of a whole" (Butler, *Kindred* 257). Sethe is told her love is "too thick" (Morrison, *Beloved* 164) and identifies with her lost daughter. What constitutes the most se-

vere physical loss upon Dana's final return to the present, is the loss of her left arm from the elbow to her fingers. Schiff argues that by "attending to the spatial, temporal, and psychic doublings" (108), the fictional text attempts "to make history and memory productively creative—to serve as both a recovery of repressed historical narratives and a recovery from repressed traumatic memories" (108). In order to escape her own victimization, Dana must kill Rufus or be raped.

Rather than seeing this murder—in self-defense—as a kind of healing, reparative action or as offering a fantasy of healing (Schiff 111), I interpret it as part of the traumatized victim's attempt at overcoming, by mastering, the original violence of trauma. Far from being the price paid in the search for wholeness, or the cost of remembering the past (Rushdy, "Families" 138), the loss of her limb points to an essential part of the construction her sense of self which includes this amputation. Dana's maimed body is the physical manifestation of her psychic trauma, made visible. In other words, if killing Rufus and the subsequent loss of her arm were curative, her body would manifest some form of integrity rather than loss. In fact, Dana fails to change history, but this is a necessary failure, as her repeated trips to Rufus's estate show; in order to heal, knowledge of the past is insufficient, she must reconstruct her own narrative within the dominant white slaveholders' and understand her (and their) actions within this narrative. Rushdy concludes that "the path toward integrity, ironically, requires as a toll exposing one's self (and being) to possible mutilation" ("Families" 138). But he reaches this conclusion as a result of his reading of *Kindred* as the remembrance of social traumas, a sign of the 'brutalized' slave's body. He supports this metaphor by saying that Dana's physical loss signifies that "to flesh out the past means to leave part of one's being there" (139). Donadey also interprets this loss allegorically: "Dana's severed arm can also be interpreted as a reference to limbs that were broken off family trees through the discontinuities caused by slavery, both because of the silences of history and around the prevalence of white male rape of enslaved black women and because black family members were purposefully severed from one another through being sold to different owners" (72). Rushdy's and Donadey's interpretations may hold true as a metaphor, but nonetheless, Butler's text insists on the real loss of a limb. In fact, an allegorical reading would not insist on the loss of a limb in the present; here, the body's limb is not left in the past, rather, the past lives on in the present—the point of both dystopias and neo-slave narratives—so that it constitutes a constant reminder of that past. This literal representation of a traumatic past reminds readers that "to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or an event [...] the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth 4-5). Both novels choose to portray this literality via the generic forms of

fantasy and dystopia, in order to emphasize the reality of the experience for their protagonists. Like Morrison who implores the reader that "this is not a story to pass on" (*Beloved* 275), the question which remains is as enigmatic as the 'solution' the text of *Kindred* provides: "Can we separate memory from what we desire to remember?" (Luckhurst 501). The answer to this question, this desire, is inextricably wound up in the desire to narrate one's personal story, both in its uniqueness as a whole and as the overcoming of a unique trauma.

Memory and History

Margaret Atwood has stated that "any time you are remembering, it is in the present; it is what is happening to you at the present time" (qtd. in Bigsby 52). Dana's desire to reconstruct her personal and collective past uncovers a paternal white ancestor who repeatedly raped her maternal ancestor until, faced with the loss of her children, she commits suicide. Not only is Dana unable to prevent this event, but like Sethe's daughter Denver, she is witness to its immediate aftermath. So long as she has retained the line of descent, she is powerless to alter the course of history in any way, but is this the purpose of her 'compulsion to repeat'? Rufus's continually 'calling' from her past expresses the desire of the past for recognition "for every image of the past that is not recognized in the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin 245). But these images belong to the master's narrative, and Dana's ancestor's counter narrative threatens to disappear. The master slaveholder, like the hegemonic powers in dystopias, desires not only acknowledgement, but also love, loyalty and obedience. Alice is forced to bear Rufus's children, but he also demands that she love him. The past has a claim on the present, and as Benjamin writes, "it cannot be settled cheaply" (245). Dana is able to reconstruct her lineage, but only at the price of bodily harm and emotional scarring, as the loss of her arm is simply the last wound she is marked with after sustaining burns, whippings and beatings. Why then, is this recovery of the past important, if on the one hand, it plays into the narrative of the oppressor, and on the other hand, withholds that necessary mastery of the original trauma and merely offers the position of the silent witness/victim? Benjamin writes that "to articulate that past historically [...] means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger [...] The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (247).

The answer lies both in the articulation of Dana's personal story and the severing of her ancestor's. The true trauma lies in the severing of ma-

ternal ties in slavery, a severing of familial ties common in dystopias and necessary for the oppression of the sacrificial victim. With no blood ties to rely on – no kindred – the sacrifice of the female slave is a story that has not been told and cannot fully be told. Trauma, by definition, cannot be fully understood without destroying the psyche, hence, to be raped by Rufus would mean her own self-destruction. In a kind of poetic justice, the hand of the master that would destroy her becomes the hand that Dana loses when she kills him. The loss of her arm is evidence of that past and its absence the sign of the past's claim on her. Only the memory of the event remains, which leaves the self in a state of mourning. When Luce Irigaray writes from the point of view of the daughter, the severing from the mother is experienced as a psychic as well as a physical loss: "I received from you only your obliviousness of self, while my presence allowed you to forget this oblivion. So that with my tangible appearance I redoubled the lack of your presence [...] here you are [...] facing a mourning with no remembrance. Invested with an emptiness that evokes no memories [...]. Trapped in a single function, mothering" (65–66). The image of the lost relationship between mothers and daughters simultaneously points to the loss of subjectivity outside the maternal.

Having no other point of reference, Alice kills herself rather than live without her children. Yet, as a slave, she never 'owned' them. Dana too, has lost her female ancestry and is in danger of losing herself in a slave society which sacrifices vertical affective relationships in order to ensure compliance. The slave's story is lost and, in its place, only the master narrative leaves traces of its passing. When Dana goes in search of material evidence of her ancestors' existence, she finds no mention of Alice's children, just as the Bible with her family tree contains no mention of Rufus. Yet, Dana's desire to know the past remains. Cavarero writes that "the maternal continuum delineates the feminine root of every human being" (60) and that the "masculine – universal – neutral" worldview has "turned its gaze away from the place of birth, measuring existence on an end point which bears no memory of its beginning (69). Dana has gone in search of her roots in order to rewrite her story as one which originates in her ancestor's life and not death. Rather than measuring herself against the meaning of Alice's death – the master's narrative – she has understood her genealogy as the story of the triumph of survival. When Dana returns on July 4th, the symbolism of this date has changed no doubt from 1852 when Frederick Douglass was asked to give the keynote speech and lamented "What to the American slave is the Fourth of July?" (qtd. in Bales 262). Far from achieving wholeness, she is forever maimed. But this is preferable to the state of ignorance she previously inhabited and in place of her lost arm she has gained 'narrative' wholeness. As a result, she is unable to write of her experiences while they are taking place because

the story of her subjective past can only be written once its trauma is overcome. What Dana desires is that in giving back to Alice the story of her life, she will remain alive in memory even if official history has forgotten her: "what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive" (Irigaray 67).

Dana achieves a mastery of this traumatic history by incorporating it into her own story and by giving her story a unity, she has finally been able to become, as Cavarero writes, "*that which she already was*" (36, original emphasis). The self is thus able to recuperate the relational identity from which the story itself resulted (36). The desire for one's story to relate the uniqueness and unity of its subject cannot be disregarded. Cavarero writes that "the desire for one's story orients itself on the *here and now* [...] to hear one's own story *in life* [...] every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a *narratable self*—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory [...] above all, the unity, in the form of a story, which the tale confers to identity. A story is what is desired" (36, original emphasis). Dana's return to her slave past brings together the personal and social history of her identity. She gains knowledge of that past but also an understanding which confers a unity to her own personal sense of self. The social history of slavery cannot be changed, and the deaths of lives cannot be undone. But understanding the complicity her ancestors were forced to endure in order to survive and the compromises they made in order that she may live, is an essential part of her story and her severed arm is a constant reminder of that legacy. The final killing of Rufus is not a destruction of the part of the past that has harmed her ancestors but the death of the guilt which accompanied its effects on the present—her present. She has killed the part of the past which maintained a negative hold over her in her repressed unconscious by refusing to also become a victim, like Alice. By conferring the unity of a "narratable self" on her ancestors and herself, Dana has moved to occupy the position of the plaintiff who can bestow narrative wholeness onto her identity. Dana's husband points out that Rufus's death has freed them to live out their future, but more importantly, it is a future that can acknowledge the role of that past in the present.

Like *Kindred*, *Beloved* is a story "that embodies a particular historical contradiction, [...] the desire and necessity to remember and honor the past and the dangers of becoming locked in it" (Keenan 74). Like the loss of the daughter who cannot be fully recovered for Sethe, Dana will remain maimed; so that both protagonists must construct a new personal narrative with the knowledge that they are neither fully guilty, nor entirely innocent. It is this knowledge which paradoxically both provides psychic healing and at the same time mitigates against complete healing. In critical dystopias which enlist the conventions of neo-slave narratives the

formal innovations shed new light on the thematic concerns of the classic slave narratives while adding an extra dimension to traditional dystopian novels that emphasize resistance and hope for a better future. At the end of *Kindred*, and despite having lost her old sense of security, Dana is reborn through her understanding of the past with a sense of hope and “political renewal” (Donawerth 62) since, if her ancestors survived through the horrors of slavery, then she too can struggle for a better world. For Baccolini, this privileging of personal narrative over official history constitutes a revolutionary strategy: “By blurring the boundaries between science fiction and other genres [...] these new generic texts [...] deconstruct the confine between official history and personal stories and question the supremacy of the former over the latter (“Gender and Genre” 30).

Utopia and history meet at the crossroads of neo-slave narratives and critical dystopias in order to expose the legacy of slavery in the present and the sacrificial violence modern scapegoats are made to endure. In the enduring trauma of slavery, Butler’s assertion that there is no time-travel in the novel is a warning that slavery is not dead in the past, but alive and in the present. As Carby asserts, “slavery haunts the literary imagination because its material conditions and social relations are frequently reproduced in fiction as historically dynamic” (146) by influencing society, long after emancipation. To this I would add, significantly, that the ‘ghost’ of this traumatic past has not yet been exorcised. As a continual struggle for future healing, utopia as process provides the means through which trauma survivors can make sense of their suffering and eventually be cured. Far from being opposite, utopia is revealed, for Hayden White, as History’s Other,

in the sense of being an expression of a memory of a repressed desire, in this case, a desire for the future or rather a future against the claims of a social system which forbids us both to want a future different from our present and at the same time urges us to see in the present social dispensation the future which has already arrived and of which we ought not to want better. (13)

This holds even more true when history is traumatic and continues to haunt the present. But it is also subversive because, as Byerman asserts, “a reconceptualization of black experience as a survivor narrative” is also a “rewriting of the American grand narrative” (3).

At first reading, Butler’s text is a hybrid contribution to the neo-slave narrative tradition which employs a multiplicity of fictional techniques in order to attempt to resolve the questions raised by this initial inspiring event. At the same time, the re-configuration of the traumatic event of slavery from within the nexus of a contemporary viewpoint reinforces the ethical relevance of the story for contemporaneous readers. Thus, it pre-

figures many of the textual solutions employed in *Beloved* and, notwithstanding important differences, offers insight into the trauma of slavery that culminates in Morrison's *tour de force* eight years later.

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Notes

- ¹ Ritsos 9.
- ² Cf. Rushdy, "Neo-Slave Narratives", 533-35.
- ³ Cf. Conseula 28, 40, 79,196, 218-9. Kenan's interview in *Callaloo* is also reproduced in Conseula's collection.
- ⁴ Lisa Yaszek insists on using the term 'science fiction' as "a device of time travel to problematize the production of historical memory, especially in its commercialized form" (1058-1059). Others, like Ingrid Thaler prefer the more general term 'speculative fiction'.
- ⁵ Sherryl Vint argues persuasively for a comparison between *Beloved* and *Kindred* which utilises generic issues of realism and fantasy to illuminate themes important for neo-slave narratives.

- ⁶ An early example of a protagonist who travels back in time to criticize social and political institutions, including slavery, is Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*
- ⁷ Bloch adds that "Concrete utopia stands on the horizon of every reality" (223).