

Looking Forward, Looking Back: Afrofuturism and Black Histories in Neo-Slave Narration

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Abstract: In this article, I argue that Afrofuturist neo-slave narratology imagines temporal simultaneity and, as a result, it is an especially productive space for thinking about the critical matter of black identity. If Afrofuturism considers black futurity in view of existing cultural frames, then Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives not only imagine what could be, but what might have been. These texts open space for remembering otherwise – not just counter-memory but the opening of a space where the black past still contains possibilities for black futures. I examine Amiri Baraka’s play, *The Slave* (1964), and Octavia Butler’s novel, *Kindred* (1979), two formative Afrofuturist texts that reveal black potentiality through the reclamation of the iconography of slavery, by remembering the past otherwise. These works underscore the continued relevance of slavery on the black experience and unveil the inadequacy of post-racialization in the 20th century and beyond into the blackness of black futures. Through their utilization of the past and weighty consideration of the present, both authors attempt to elevate the overlooked humanity of African Americans by connecting the black experience through the centuries and into the future. In this way, when these neo-slave narratives are engaged through Afrofuturism, they reestablish slavery not as an overdetermining facet of black life but instead as an inescapable reality of black existence within the national imaginary. Indeed, as these works demonstrate, there can be no black futurity without necessarily acknowledging slavery’s continued reach.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Neo-Slave Narrative; African American Literature; Memory; Amiri Baraka; Octavia Butler

Afrofuturism - Black Histories and Black Futures

Afrofuturism might be most simply defined as an aesthetic connecting science fiction, racialization, and the African diaspora with the aim of elucidating black futures. The broad imprecision of this description speaks to the difficulty that accompanies any attempt to definitively identify which texts should be classified as Afrofuturist. Yet, rather than reading its ostensible vagueness as a

weakness of the genre itself, we can understand this ambiguity as a potential strength. The term Afrofuturism offers ways of thinking about black identity within permeable spatial and temporal boundaries, and the term itself is malleable because it treats these traditional realms of time and space, of identity and context, as malleable – it practices what it preaches. Past experience is

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contextualized through future insights, the future holds the possibilities of the past, and both influence the present. I want to focus on the ways that this ostensibly forward-looking theory of black identity and black self-making glances backward to face the past and reframe it. In this sense, Afrofuturism not only constructs counter-memory, but also instantiates a nuanced engagement with overt methods of counter-remembering – the active act of remembering, recalling, and restating the past otherwise. It makes manifest the effect that the present has on our understanding of the past, and the ways that the present influences black futures and a sense of black futurity. The framework of Afrofuturity is comprised of notions that foreground the liminality and temporality of blackness and the black body, and so Afrofuturism is inherently fluid – it can operate as a genre, a frame, a mode, and a way of being and understanding one's own sociocultural positioning, both fragmented and simultaneous. In thinking about the inextricable relationship between the past, present, and future for the purposes of this essay, I limit the use of the term Afrofuturism to its meaning as *mode*, an approach to treating diasporic ideas of futurity as indissoluble from historicity.

Afrofuturist neo-slave narratology imagines temporal simultaneity, and so it is an especially productive space for thinking about black identity within historicity. Is this speculative reconstitution of slavery the necessary reappropriation of the ancestors, honoring them by doing the work of reclamation, or is it the exploitation of the traumas of the past? When analyzed through the lens of contemporaneity, these neo-slave narratives encourage our remembering the past otherwise with an emphasis on the humanity of the slave – no longer mere theoretical idea but living, breathing flesh and blood – to purposefully reclaim black

identity. If Afrofuturism allows its practitioners to consider black futurity within existing cultural frameworks, then these neo-slave narratives reimagine the figure of the slave through the lens of the postmodern, through a post-soul aesthetic¹ free from limited or limiting didactic obligation. This reclamation asserts significant rights to blackness through the articulation of a self-defined black identity, or what Reynaldo Anderson (2016) explains as “future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists... not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about others, past, present and future—and challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures” (n.p.). Indeed, then, Afrofuturism not only imagines what could be but also what might have been in traditionally silenced stories of black identity. It is this sense of remembering otherwise – not just a counter-memory but, instead, the opening of a space in which the black past still contains possibilities for black futures. I want to examine, in particular, Amiri Baraka's² play, *The Slave* (1964), and Octavia Butler's novel, *Kindred* (1979), as two formative Afrofuturist texts that help establish and underscore the continued trajectory of Afrofuturist inquiry to the present day. These two narratives reveal black potentiality through the reclamation of the iconography of slavery, by remembering the past otherwise – they underscore the continued relevance of slavery on the black experience and unveil the inadequacy of post-racialization in the 20th century and beyond into *black* futures.

Neo-Slave Narratology and Afrofuturism

Lisa Yaszek (2013) explains, “In early Afrofuturist stories, slavery produces misery, but it also produces technoscientific genius. In later stories, the stories of slavery and colonization – the

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story of modernity's bad past – becomes the source of inspiration for imagining what might be truly new and at least slightly better futures" (p. 10). Indeed, both Baraka's and Butler's Afrofuturity overtly imagines slavery as a site of productive space and energy, emblematic of the *repetition with a difference* characteristic of African American literature and cultural production throughout history. This "repetition with a difference," as enacted in Afrofuturism, rearticulates narratives from the historical past and reshapes them within new temporal frameworks. In doing so, it acknowledges that slavery, rather than being an *overdetermining* factor of 20th- and 21st-century African American experiences, is an *unavoidable* factor – a communal experience that offers context for African Americanness as the history of slavery informs blackness in the nation and explains the structure and function of the nation itself. I think here of Sherley Anne Williams's explanation for why she was inspired to write *Dessa Rose* (1986), a neo-slave novel based on the fictionalized encounter of two historical figures – a pregnant black woman in Kentucky who helped lead an uprising and was subsequently sentenced to death and a white woman living on a secluded farm who offered protection to runaway slaves. The fictional relationship presented in *Dessa Rose* represents a reimagining of the past, and this imagining – this remembering otherwise – forms the crux of the novel. In her author's note, Williams (1986) explains that she found it "sad" that these two women never met (p. 5). It is from a desire to understand how these two women, separated across time and space and by race and social mobility – one a slave, one a former plantation mistress – engaged in dangerous abolition exercises that she began to write *Dessa Rose*. Afrofuturist neo-slave narratology offers reparative justice through seeming foreknowledge that widens the frame of historical slave narratives, thereby giving new

postmodern import to the Transatlantic slave trade and the chattel slave system. These texts refuse the comforting and comfortable historical distance contemporary audiences generally adopt in view of slavery, where slaves are relegated to the realm of relics from a distant past and where empathy becomes nearly impossible, leaving only sympathy which often emerges as condescension.

Alongside their many other interpretative possibilities, these Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives occupy what can be termed a literary funereal space. Funerals fulfill an immediate desire to honor the deceased and to provide a sanctioned, cathartic space for the living to appropriately express grief at the loss of a loved one; they also serve to celebrate life and legacy – what has been left behind and what is pledged to continue on in perpetuity. Functioning in much the same way as an obituary – literarily constructed as a commemorative space surrounding the dead to systematically articulate legacy – these narratives commemorate not the experience of *slavery* but the personhood and humanity of the slave as both a figure and as a person. When constituted through an Afrofuturist mode, these neo-slave narratives look ahead and refuse the liminality of time or prescriptions of space, shifting the focus of these stories from the past and of the slaves themselves from the realm of legacy to that of actual lived experience. These texts, then, are not constructed simply for the purpose of mourning or to serve as reminders of the destructive nature of chattel slavery, but so that 20th- and 21st-century readers can actively identify with the slave, recognize the humanity of the slave, and, in doing so, come to understand the often understated but omnipresent ways in which black bodies have *always* naturally fought against their own destruction – showing that ideas of black resistance in theory and in practice did not emerge *only* after

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emancipation. Unlike the slave narratives of the 18th and 19th centuries, these postmodern authors write with comparative impunity - there are no friends or co-conspirators in the South to protect, no fear of violent retribution if one's identity is revealed - and so the modes of resistance that have *always* existed are now more clearly articulated. This contemporary resistance allows for the unveiling of the black interior, the valid and self-affirming articulation of blackness separate from the white gaze.

Through this revelation of the black interior, neo-slave narrators recenter the slave experience to foreground active and unmasked dissent. An inclination toward revolution and freedom was seldom overtly present in historical narratives, not because it didn't exist, but rather because it could not be included due to censorship, a potentially-unreceptive readership, or the looming threat of violence against the author or the author's family who often remained in the South. This general absence of what postmodern audiences view as radical and overt resistance in many 18th- and 19th-century texts breeds a sense of undefined possibility for Afrofuturist reconstructions. Williams (1986) continues to frame her work, explaining the reconstructive nature of the neo-slave narrative by stating, "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth - and made of that process a high art - remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us. I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free. I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expression" (p. 5-6). Resultantly, these neo-slave narratives offer repetition with necessary difference from the master narrative to present the trauma of the past for a new audience; the author's revisions make

connections and allusions necessary to provide greater relevance for willfully-resistant and stultified 20th- and 21st-century readers.

The Slave and Afrofuturistic Revolution

Amiri Baraka's 1964 play, *The Slave*, is an existential neo-slave narrative performance that utilizes the absurdity of satire as it disrupts historical distance and passivity surrounding slavery. The play offers a proto-Afrofuturist sensibility through the use of magical elements, blurred temporality, and engagements with the past that overlap with present and future - what could perhaps be termed an Afrofuturist-inspired magical realism, in which magical realism takes on specific conversations surrounding blackness and black bodies. During the course of the play, the protagonist, Walker Vessels, shifts between subject positions as a slave and as a 1960s revolutionary - assumed tropes of resignation and radicalism respectively - without a change in actor, costume, or name. As a performative black radical - his motivations and inclinations are marked entirely by a compulsory revolutionary impulse - Vessels returns to his white ex-wife, Grace, and her new white husband in some near-future temporality to take their biracial children away as a race riot continues to erupt in the streets outside their home. Baraka focuses this neo-slave performance on the permanence of slavery not only as an American institution, but also as part and parcel of an understanding of Americanness more broadly. In doing so, he reasserts that the legacy *is* lived experience as slavery continues to shape contemporary relationships between blacks and whites. Because blackness is othered and becomes synonymous with racial difference, whiteness is naturally normalized as the absence of racial difference - blackness is what whiteness is not. *The Slave* is an especially interesting narrative not only

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because it sees so clearly into the past but because of its apparent prescience – it anticipates the continued utility of Afrofuturity as it interrogates the possibility of black survival within the frame of revolution. In this play, it is this sense of the anticipatory within Afrofuturity that opens up space for the nuances of the black interior that were veiled and devalued during slavery.

Afrofuturism underscores that this inward articulation of blackness existed before the more public assertions that “black is beautiful” in the 1960s and 1970s. What is especially interesting about this emphasis is that *The Slave* was published in 1964. If Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965 is viewed, often too casually, as a critical moment when African Americans began to more seriously consider means of resistance other than non-violent protest, Baraka anticipates that this more forceful revolution will occur even without this assassination as catalyst. Baraka, then, indicates that Black Nationalism doesn’t emerge as retaliation or grief over preeminent figureheads and leaders lost, but instead out of mourning for the loss of Emmett Till, the loss of the nameless thousands lynched, millions enslaved – a much broader sense of collectively lost humanity and the significant loss of black futures and black potentiality. Here, there is a sense of possibility, to be sure, but also a simultaneous acknowledgement of both death and revolution as inevitable occurrences. These Afrofuturist frameworks do not necessarily beget optimism or the revelation of a black utopia, but instead open up space for the potential recognition of, and sites for, black autonomy within these futures through a reexamination of the past.

It is this Afrofuturist re-vision of the past that supplies neo-slave narration with its peculiar temporality – it is simultaneously of the time in

which it was written, and yet out of step with its prescribed parameters. *The Slave* begins with a prologue told in the voice of the black protagonist. Walker Vessels thus contextualizes himself, “I am much older than I look... or maybe much younger. Whatever I am or seem [significant pause] to you, then let that rest. But figure, still, that you might not be right. Figure, still, that you might be lying... to save yourself” (Baraka, 1964, p. 44). This strange articulation of selfhood seems thus to explicate a new form autonomy that dwells within black ambiguity. Here autonomy emerges in Vessels’s assertion of his own outward imperceptibility, in his idea that “[w]e seek nothing but ourselves” (Baraka, 1964, p. 43). Vessels describes himself in shifting language that initially refuses race itself. How can a slave exist in defiance of racial essentialism? He makes no moves toward an overt description of his color until later in this prologue, explaining, “Brown is not brown except when used as an intimate description of personal phenomenological fields” (Baraka, 1964, p. 45). The language moves from avoiding a concrete depiction of race to describing it in non-traditional, although quite literal terms – his skin color is in fact “brown,” but the meaning of this brown, similar to his explanation of what he is or seems, differs based on the viewer; it cannot be located within the traditional confines of mere race or even deliberate phenotypic classification. Even as Vessels’s language implies a vague sense of racial plurality, he signals through these linguistic shifts his awareness that his consciousness – his own personal constellation of phenomenological fields – emerges in view of the demarcation of the color line. This is not, however, the double consciousness DuBois experiences, marked by the anxiety surrounding the twoness of his very existence as black and American. Instead, the trauma of the play emerges in negotiating the shift from the past to the present to an unstable intermediate form –

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from slave to revolutionary and back again, remaining in the midst of a race riot as the eponymous slave.

In the last moments of this introductory monologue, he speaks of “Discovering racially the funds of the universe. Discovering the last image of the thing” (Baraka, 1964, p. 45). It is in this brief phrase that Vessels finally overtly acknowledges the possibility of racial difference, concisely articulating that not only is there racial difference, but that this difference is exemplified through a racialized system of value and capitalism, the allotted “funds” of mobility and opportunity provided through a race-based pseudo-meritocracy. He acknowledges and refuses the thingness that attempts to attach itself to his consciousness, an Afrofuturist rejection of the continued objectification and commodification of the image of the black body, of blackness as symbol. Here the monologue becomes a disjointed and emotionally-driven stream of consciousness – is this an intimate description of personal phenomenological fields, or a failure to effectively describe? – as if while acknowledging “the thing” Vessels becomes enraged by the inherent inequality and his place(lessness) within the system. He moves quickly to what he describes as “old, old blues people moaning in their sleep, singing, man, oh, nigger, nigger, you still here, as hard as nails, and takin’ no shit from nobody” (Baraka, 1964, p. 45). The syntax here is confusing – it is unclear if the “old blues people” are “niggers,” or separately moaning and singing about the “niggers” they are not. Does it matter? For Baraka, here, the possible distinction is irrelevant through time and space, an anticipatory articulation of Jay-Z’s (2017) assertion, “Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga/ Still nigga” (n.p.). Through Vessels’s monologue Baraka indicates that race and racism remain unavoidable

and any denials change nothing – a particularly important concept in a play that foreshadows the inadequacy of post-racialization. Even as Walker-as-slave refuses the labels of his brownness, he is inevitably called to acknowledge its connection to his consciousness and then sent through time, becoming Walker-as-revolutionary only to return once again to Walker-as-slave – the men are literally indistinguishable. Although race may be a social construct, its impact on racialized bodies exists in reality and the language of race is loaded and evocative. There is room for both of these truths within the realm of Afrofuturity – this blackness or brownness may not mean *everything*, but arguing it doesn’t mean everything must not imply that it means *nothing*.

Signaling once again this use of figurative time travel – the textual liminality allows time to change without Vessels ever leaving the space in which he exists – Baraka’s (1964) brief stage directions at the end of the play indicate that Vessels “is now the old man at the beginning of the play” (p. 88). One is left to wonder if any change has actually occurred for this man – Vessels as revolutionary takes up the heart of the performance, but the return to his origin as slave is the last image on the stage. As a result, the slave itself is not only the play’s title or context but also its unexpected revenant. Vessels—as embodied black form, slave or revolutionary—is the most consistent presence on the stage. By introducing him as the eponymous slave, this condition haunts the rest of the plot and serves as the obvious undertone for the revolutionary action, bookending his revolutionary futurity with the funereal mourning of the past. His sudden and unexpected reappearance at the end, transformed as slave, adds a paranormal, ghostly and ghastly atmosphere to the play, which is particularly appropriate as slavery becomes the lingering

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phantasm that directs race relations in the 20th-century context and continues to inform the ideologies of Afrofuturity. It utilizes the roots of slavery, alongside both antebellum and postbellum accountability, to decentralize race while elucidating the circuitous and lasting nature of slavery and racialization in America.

In view of this racialization, Vessels' ex-wife, Grace, reminds him, "Walker, you were preaching the murder of all white people. Walker, I was, am, white. What do you think was going through my mind every time you were at some rally or meeting whose sole purpose was to bring about the destruction of white people?" (Baraka, 1964, p. 72). Vessels's angry response speaks to the inherent impossibility of post-racialization, where race is imagined to be meaningless. He explodes, "Oh, goddamn it, Grace, are you so stupid? You were my wife... I loved you. You mean because I loved you and was married to you... had had children by you, I wasn't supposed to say the things I felt. I was crying out against three hundred years of oppression; not against individuals" (Baraka, 1964, p. 72). And herein lies the difficulty with which Baraka grapples. The revolution is the fight either for racial justice or the preservation of the status quo. And it is the continued necessity of revolutionary action that emphasizes to us that a post-racial world cannot exist. Post-racialization never means that race no longer exists, but instead that blackness disappears; blackness is subsumed into whiteness. For Baraka, the problem of the post-racial lies in the concept's inherent necessity of assimilation, both the personalized loss of self and a much broader racial death. Is it possible to both assimilate and self-actualize? The notions are incompatible. Indeed, even in his *Dutchman* (1964), Clay - Baraka's prototypical assimilated black man - is ultimately killed.

At the end, it is uncertain whether or not Vessels' and Grace's children live. However, even this initial question becomes ultimately irrelevant as the audience is left wondering if these children *can* live. Does it matter if their deaths are literal or figurative? The children of Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement have no respite from a racialized society - a society that only reifies their sense of placelessness and nonbelonging. Ambiguity engulfs these children, even surrounding life and death as Vessels tells Grace that their daughters are dead. The audience is later privy, at denouement, to a child's cry off-stage. This child's cry, the symbolic birth of the meta-language Vessels calls into being at the outset, is a haunting echo that ties together the antebellum and postbellum periods. And, as Richard Wright (1940) states in his explanation of *Native Son*, this narrative likewise allows no "consolation of tears" (p. 454). This cry is no catharsis. It is a howl of indignation that marks the beginning of racial realization. If, as Grace asserts, Vessels "is playing the mad scene from *Native Son*. A second-rate Bigger Thomas" (Baraka, 1964, p. 57), the difference between the two men is that Vessels acts not out of fear or the impassioned realization of his lack of options, but because the revolution is the only way he can save his own black body rather than acquiesce to an assimilationist self that disallows his own actualization. Assuming a confessional tone, Vessels states that, "I, Walker Vessels, single-handedly, and with no other adviser except my own ego, promoted a bloody situation where white and black people are killing each other; despite the fact that I know that this is at best a war that will only change, ha, the complexion of tyranny..." (Baraka, 1964, p. 66). He fully acknowledges here that post-racialization, or *any* racialized utopia, is a myth. For Vessels, the only possibilities are a society that remains white over black - or an inversion that creates black over

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white. This is no “all power for all people,” but a mere reversal of supremacy. Vessels seeks a tenuous form of self-actualization, which in this revolution can only take the form of self-preservation through annihilation of all others because it is the only frame with which he is familiar.

As the play ends, there is no explanation given for Vessels’s change from slave to revolutionary, nor for his reversion back to being a slave. Certainly this transformation might imply that Black Nationalism is in itself humanizing, but why then the return to his former slave state? Despite the play’s existentialism and absurdity – indeed, its forward-looking *blackness* – it is ultimately a look at modern race relations grounded in an Afrofuturistic realism that emphasizes *realism* despite its temporal liminality. Regardless of Vessels’s efforts to agitate and enact social change, he cannot unmoor himself from the trappings of his past or of the national history. He can instead only hope to incorporate them into his current emancipatory efforts. In this way, the Afrofuturist mode reanimates ideas of rebellion as individual/collective and contemporary/ancestral spheres of being.

Afrofuturist Reinventions, Black Womanhood, and *Kindred*

Even within this pessimistic sense of (im)probable black futurity, for Baraka there seems to be no need for black female centrality, or even presence, either in *The Slave* or more broadly in his oeuvre. Many of Baraka’s most prominent works show this marked lack of black female perspective, again signaling the phallogentrism of the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism, an artistic echo of Stokely Carmichael’s assertion, as cited by Mary King (1987), that the “position of women in SNCC

is prone.” Is the phallogentrism of Vessels’s failed revolution its cause, or its effect? Baraka notably does not engage this question—the absence of black women seems mere happenstance, as if black women are a distraction from or superfluous to the revolution’s articulation of black identity. Octavia Butler, the author of *Kindred*, is particularly conscious of both the historical and contemporary reduction of the black woman, and she approaches a remedy in her own work. Her 1979 novel introduces Dana, a 26-year-old African American woman living in 1976 who is transported from her home in California to her enslaved ancestors in antebellum Maryland (the mechanism by which she is transported is unexplained and seemingly irrelevant to the plot). *Kindred* responds to *The Slave*’s lack of black female perspective and the popular ideology of the figure of “the slave” as masculine by concentrating the text on Dana’s very personal, expressly female experience, reasserting the centrality of black womanhood for black futures. Although Butler’s work includes black male characters, none are particularly developed, and none appear in Dana’s contemporary society – her husband, in an inversion of Baraka’s earlier interest in 20th-century interraciality, is white. *The Slave* and *Kindred* are both concerned with the lasting, generational impact of the trauma of slavery and how these remnants of slavery continue to shape identity. However, while Baraka demonstrates the humanizing effect of the revolution for black men and the ways in which the revolution moved black liberation from theory to practice, Butler uses science fictional Afrofuturistic frameworks to respond to the masculinist nature of Black Nationalism in the popular imagination by instead privileging the female experience and demonstrating the myriad and important ways in which black women have always exercised resistance in America.

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For this reason, when examined as the emblems of the Afrofuturist mode that they are, *The Slave* and *Kindred* are especially interesting narratives not only because they are able to see so clearly into the past but also because of their anticipatory logic. *Kindred* was written at a time when slave narratives were beginning to be examined as their own discrete genre within African American literature, but it also emerged at the cusp of a period of critical black female literary contributions in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of these works began a new literary tradition of de-objectifying black femininity through the heightening of a fully-realized female experience – black women such as Sherley Anne Williams, Toni Morrison, and Butler herself were writing themselves into history. What would it mean for the language of the slave to include women, not as niche *slave women*, but as an integral part of the central experience of slavery? It might naturally shift our language of black history, black futures, and black freedom. Certainly, Butler's *Kindred* is responding to the masculinized nature of much of the more famous work of the Black Arts Movement, but, like Baraka, she also seems to anticipate the future and the failures of "post-racialization" in identity formation. Indeed, even within the fantasy of the post-racial utopia, it is necessary to concede the reality of not only ancestral trauma but of interracial ancestral memory – not only who our ancestors were but who the ancestors of those we encounter were, who they bring with them when they enter a room across temporality and spatiality. Dana's narrative begins "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" (Butler, 1976, p. 9). Dana has experienced a trauma that resulted in amputation. Presumably the pain is gone – save the phantom limb pain that may exist where nothing physically remains – but the arm is lost forever. As people encounter Dana, they wonder if her husband is responsible for her injury; he is not, but

the suspicions and doubts linger. The suggestion Butler makes here is twofold; the trauma of slavery is very real and lasting, and it is difficult to explain and assign blame in a contemporary context – Dana's husband is *not* responsible in any literal sense, but as a white man who benefited from white male privilege in their time travels *and* in the present, who benefited both literally and figuratively from slavery, does he bear some responsibility? Butler expands on this dynamic by bringing it into the 20th century and broadening the scope of interracial engagements. When considering Tom Weylin, the plantation master, Dana muses that he "wasn't the monster he could have been with the power he held over his slaves. He wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper. But I had seen no particular fairness in him. He did as he pleased" (Butler, 1976, p. 134). Yet despite the fact that Weylin was not the worst of all slave masters, and despite the fact that he was certainly, to use an ever-present and unsatisfying explanation, *a product of his time*, Weylin was still guilty of doing "as he pleased." Indeed, it is this pushback against the simplistic notion that one can be a discrete product of one's time that marks Afrofuturism – there is no clear sense of timeliness to offer pardon within a historical frame. Instead, time is not only circular but overlaps – Dana travels from 1976 to the antebellum past and back without experiencing any spatial difference, and her arm, trapped and ultimately severed by the plaster of her reappearing home makes this lack of distance evident. Similarly, just because Weylin was not the most violent master, he is also not absolved of the sin of slavery – it becomes clear that a comparative frame cannot obscure the view of the immensity of the trauma of slavery.

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Dana's baptism into slavery comes quickly as she is held at gunpoint when first encountering Weylin. In this moment, all of Dana's preconceptions about the nature of chattel slavery are unceremoniously removed. She becomes a slave although she is literally free, despite having no personal experiences to give shape to her new circumstances. This is the reverse chiasmic moment experienced by Frederick Douglass. Instead of learning how a slave becomes a man, the audience witnesses how a 20th-century woman instantly becomes a slave without preamble. It is at this moment that Dana is fortunately jolted back into 1976. Butler uses the frame of time travel to indicate that, while modern sensibilities may temporarily allow individuals to eschew engagement with slavery, this avoidance tactic cannot permanently protect; the repercussions of slavery linger and shape an understanding of race and racialization in the postmodern era. Indeed, as Dana is ultimately a descendant of the Weylin line, this assault reminds that there is no white-adjacency that can ever protect black futures. Encounters with slavery and its effects are inescapable. Dana survives this near-death experience, but is summoned back to Maryland and the Weylin plantation multiple times at intervals outside of her own discretion. It is through this lack of choosing, and through the assertion that points on a timeline may be moveable and overlapping, that Afrofuturist inquiry emphasizes the immediacy of the past and its influence on black futurity.

On her second trip, Dana witnesses the whipping of a male slave. Butler again evokes Frederick Douglass as this moment parallels the iconic incident of Aunt Hester's scream. In Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* (1845), he describes the whipping of his Aunt Hester and her resultant screams – the first “bloody scene” to

which he bears personal witness on the plantation. It is this moment that fully elucidates for Douglass the horrors of slavery, as he was never privy to physical violence before. Suddenly, the full potential of the brutality of slavery becomes inescapable. For Dana, this is more than “seeing is believing”; now the act of witnessing becomes a rebirth all its own. It is the moment in which she is fully immersed in the terror of slavery – she is baptized in someone else's odor, blood, sweat. This scene also exemplifies Butler's important privileging of the female experience. In most literary recollections, autobiographical or otherwise, the male subject is witness to the abuse of a woman-as-object or woman-as-lesson, but now Dana is fully subjected to the trauma of the (male) object of brutalization; she gazes and is shaped and informed by the scene. Butler's decision to engage intertextually with Douglass is especially important because his experiences form the quintessential account of slavery although bereft of black female subjectivity. By locking a whipped, male slave in Dana's female gaze, Butler reverses the traditionally gendered roles and endows Dana with an ironic modicum of power within the context of slavery and imagines what black female centrality might mean for black futures as a more dynamic articulation of the black experience within Afrofuturity.

Butler continues in her examination of the stereotypes surrounding slavery by addressing Dana's interactions with Sarah. Dana describes this older slave on the Weylin plantation, saying,

She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and

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who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. (Butler, 1976, p. 145).

The term "Mammy" has been used to designate a subservient performance of blackness by African Americans in the 20th century and beyond - a way to stratify and quantify blackness and black pride ideology. Dana learns soon enough that Sarah's seemingly small methods of resisting the slave system are noble, and that Sarah is, in fact, quite brave - indeed, braver than Dana herself. She performs her racialized role - just as Dana performs her role both in antebellum Maryland and in 1976. Yet Butler seeks a necessary reclamation of the mammy trope by fleshing out Sarah's character and disallowing a static portrayal - the "mammy," as such, is a fabrication. Butler reveals the private thoughts of slaves with impunity, rather than resting on safer stereotypes or maintaining critical distance to promote an abolitionist message as inoffensively as possible. Not only this, but Butler illuminates the complicated nature of the mammy trope and puts into question what specifically defines "the mammy" by describing in detail Dana's hesitant although undeniably affectionate relationship with Rufus, the master's young son. It is the insidious nature of expectations at the intersection of race and gender, emphasized by the fact that Dana returns home when she has a physiological response to fear, and she begins to return fewer and fewer times the longer she stays on the plantation. Dana becomes socialized and acclimated to the slave system, and this blurring of the line between acquiescence and revolution-between "the mammy" and resistance-is so significant within this Afrofuturist mode, as it

attempts to destratify blackness and defies simplistic and erroneous feelings of moral or mental superiority within contemporary frames.

In an effort to continue to disturb contemporary notions of black progress and selfhood, Butler's Dana is likewise judged, both in and out of time, for her relationship with Kevin. In Kevin's absence, one of Dana's ancestors, Alice, angrily tells her, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining and crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!" (Butler, 1976, p. 165). Dana's paradigm is shattered. While she had the luxury of considering herself the modern, intellectual superior, she begins to see how her behaviors are interpreted when she is - quite literally - out of time with her companions. Alice's comment shows that Dana is not without fault in the slave community and that her modern perspective does not shield her. In the 20th century, her relationship was condemned by members of both Kevin's and Dana's families, and they are viewed with the same suspicion and condemnation in the 19th century - perhaps for many of the same reasons. In her incredible *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman (1997) explains that, "The intimacy of the master and the slave purportedly operated as an internal regulator of power and ameliorated the terror indispensable to unlimited dominion. The wedding of intimacy and violent domination as regulatory norms exemplifies the logic through which violence is displaced as mutual and reciprocal desire" (p. 92). Thus Dana's relationship with Kevin as transported to the 19th century is not just problematic, it is a betrayal - willing acquiescence to a subservient, gendered role that overshadows any potential black pride.

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Likewise, Dana returns home suddenly without Kevin, while Kevin remains in antebellum Maryland for five years – a period much longer than any Dana experiences, perhaps because Kevin experiences no sense of impending danger in any temporal sphere. When they are both able to return to the present, their relationship has been dramatically altered. Kevin is uncomfortable and distant, needing time to adjust again. What is particularly troubling about this change is that Kevin has lived his entire life in the 20th century, and it only took a scant five years for him to begin to subscribe fully to the national consciousness of the 19th century. Dana explains, “He pulled away from me and walked out of the room. The expression on his face was like something I’d seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly” (Butler, 1976, p. 194). Despite living in a society where slavery does not exist – indeed, despite having a black wife – he is as susceptible as others to the social context he is provided. Despite the fact that Kevin helped slaves escape, he cannot immediately shake the conventions that trail him back to the 20th century and, indeed, those conventions that underlie and inform his contemporary era, despite his presumable protestations. Butler indicts readers in this way, demonstrating that they cannot accept a comfortable cultural amnesia that argues that we could never be slaves and that *this* could never happen to *us* because it happens to Kevin and Dana – and it is, ultimately, unsurprising when it does. The players in the antebellum period were products of their time, *as are we all*. Butler and Baraka both view post-racialization as an impossibility. While it undeniably exists as a useful theoretical framework, even rhetorically it only functions to highlight race and to contextualize resultant social inequities, exemplified through an Afrofuturistic analysis of the lingering effects of slavery in intraracial and interracial contexts.

Remembering Otherwise and Fluidity of Time

Both *The Slave* and *Kindred* begin with a prologue spoken in the voice of the black protagonist. This convention is especially significant because it revamps and reimagines the traditional “preface to blackness” found in slave narratives where the story is validated through the words of a white abolitionist who speaks to the legitimacy of the text and the decency of its author. In *The Slave* and *Kindred*, however, the expected “preface to blackness” becomes “blackness as preface.” Blackness now has the opportunity to stand alone and validate itself – it need not be situated in anything other than itself. Likewise, Baraka and Butler implicate their readers as they wonder how personal slavery must be for its impact to be recognized in the present. Dana ultimately kills Rufus as he – no longer the little boy she nurtured, helped to raise, and saved countless times – attempts to rape her on her last trip to antebellum Maryland. As he falls on her while she suddenly travels back to 1976, her arm is caught within the plaster of her own home as it rematerializes. She is literally and figuratively forever scarred by her engagement with slavery – the weight of slavery and the slave master lingering forever as acute trauma – and she struggles to understand what she has experienced. As she and Kevin travel to Maryland in their present day to research her ancestry, she nervously ponders why she is interested. Kevin gently posits, “You probably needed to come for the same reason I did... To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane” (Butler, 1976, p. 264). His assertion holds echoes of the white male supremacy he has come to more overtly embody – the idea that Dana, who will bear a lost arm as remnants of her time in the antebellum period, needs concrete evidence is not only absurd but

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damning evidence of his inability to empathize with Dana's experience in any effectual way. He finishes both his statement and the novel itself by saying, "And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way" (Butler, 1976, p. 264). This is certainly a statement about slavery, but also a statement about living in a society with slavery couched in its past. It is telling that the novel ends with Kevin's certainty that they may now remain sane because Rufus's death seems to insure that Dana won't be summoned back against her will. Yet Dana never articulates this same comfort in predicted sanity, or even the possibility of sanity. As a black woman, she has been forever changed by slavery. Her scars are notable and distracting - what further "evidence" might she need? While Kevin bears a scar on his forehead, Dana loses an arm, retains the scars from whippings on her back, and suffers from Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome in the most literal sense. For Kevin, this is mere inconvenience. He forgets that in their 20th century context, "the boy" has always been dead, and they've still had no chance of moving past this racialized trauma, on either ancestral or national levels, whether they physically return to the present or not.

Ultimately, the Afrofuturist mode reasserts humanity through neo-slave narratology by depicting a not-so-distant past that isn't, in fact, even past. The connection to slavery and the necessity of remembering it, and remembering it *otherwise*, grows more insistent and more acute as a response to the neoliberal impulse to be rid of race, thereby somehow eradicating racism - as if it is race, rather than racism, that merits our condemnation. Afrofuturism posits the permanence of race while refusing race itself as an inherent social ill. Instead, it acknowledges racism as an inherent evil and opens up space for black autonomy that pushes the boundaries of the

present day parameters of racialization. For this reason, the slave remains a necessary context for considering black personhood in a variety of evolving art forms. I am reminded here of Janelle Monáe's album and subsequent performances as *The Electric Lady* (2013), the pure embodiment of black liberatory spirit in both human and mechanical form. Grace D. Gipson (2016) argues that when Monáe takes on the persona of Cindi Mayweather, an android sent from the distant future to our near future to emancipate the citizens from a society without love - because aren't these conversations about emancipation and liberation and liberatory love tantamount to the black experience itself? - it is the Afrofuturist mode itself that allows her "to present new and innovative perspectives and pose questions that are not typically addressed in canonical works" (p. 92). In Monáe's articulation, futurity closely resembles the past and present, where there is no utopic sense of post-racialization or inherent equality. Ultimately, the figure of the android stands in for new neoliberal ways to marginalize beyond overt declarations of race and racism and new realms for the Other to emerge; it also represents new possibilities for revolution and freedom in the changing same of black identity. Indeed, this Afrofuturist mode opens up a space for Monáe to imagine, like Baraka, how the articulated black self might beget revolution and, like Butler, what it might mean to embrace intersectional narratives and dwell in the interstices of blackness and womanhood as revolution begins.

Saidiya Hartman (1997) argues convincingly that after emancipation,

On one hand, the constraints of race were formally negated by the stipulation of sovereign individuality and abstract equality, and on the other, racial

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discriminations and predilections were cherished and protected as beyond the scope of law. Even more unsettling was the instrumental role of equality in constructing a measure of man or descending scale of humanity that legitimated and naturalized subordination (p. 121).

With abolition, American society ostensibly embraced notions of comparative and tacit equality while systematically marginalizing blackness and criminalizing black bodies. As society moved further away from the chattel system, the roots of this marginalization were lost and replaced by a comfortable cultural amnesia that instead suggests that a distantly sympathetic perspective will suffice in consideration of slavery – no one is accountable, no one presently benefits, and no one need consider any lasting ramifications or significance. These works seek to redeem

traditionally marginalized blackness through an Afrofuturistic mode that overtly parallels slavery with black experiences in the 20th century and beyond – in this way, they emphasize that slaves resisted and had a sense of black pride that is often overlooked contemporarily. Through their utilization of the past and weighty consideration of the present, both authors are attempting to elevate the overlooked humanity of African Americans by connecting the black experience through the centuries. In this way, when these neo-slave narratives are engaged through Afrofuturism, they reestablish slavery not as an overdetermining facet of black life, but instead as an inescapable reality of black existence within the national imaginary. Indeed, as these works demonstrate, there can be no black futurity *without* necessarily acknowledging slavery's impact and continued reach.

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Notes

¹ I define the post-soul aesthetic here as a new way of thinking about and engaging with both black art and black identity, temporally located in the sociocultural productions of artists who came of age *after* the Civil Rights Movement.

² I have chosen to call the playwright Amiri Baraka rather than his former name, LeRoi Jones, in honor of the name he chose for himself, one year after the publication of *The Slave*, in response to the assassination of Malcolm X.