

In an essay published in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1998, Walter Mosley writes that science fiction and its relatives, including fantasy and speculative fiction, “have been a main artery for recasting our imagination” and consequently resonate most strongly with those who “are dissatisfied with the way things are.” People of African descent should have a special stake in these genres, Mosley says, because they “have been cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history.” Genres such as fantasy and science fiction “allow history to be rewritten or ignored,” opening up a unique set of imaginative possibilities for a literary tradition that has long been burdened by the demands of realist social protest.¹ For Mosley, the break from narrative realism can release African American writers from established protocols of racial representation in literature, freeing them to invent unexpected new futures.

Mosley’s essay is titled “Black to the Future,” yet a significant subset of this genre is better described as going “black to the past.” Rather than taking the futurist orientation we might expect from speculative fiction, several novels by African American writers published since the 1970s have turned not just to the past as such but more specifically to the past of slavery. The proliferating subgenre of speculative fiction meets neoslave narrative comprises literary as well as mass-market novels,² including Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Frank Yerby’s *A Darkness at Ingraham’s Crest* (1979), David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), Charles Johnson’s *The Oxherding Tale*

(1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), J. California Cooper's *Family* (1991), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1976), *Wild Seed* (1980), and *Parable of the Sower* (1992), Stephen Barnes's *Blood Brothers* (1996) and *Lion's Blood* (2002), and James McBride's *Song Yet Sung* (2008).³ Taken together, these novels actually represent a range of genres that break from realism, including fantasy, science fiction, ghost stories, historiographic metafiction, and even vampire tales; the term *speculative fiction* offers a convenient shorthand for discussing these various kinds of novels as part of a distinct literary phenomenon.⁴

Despite its lack of a future orientation, the genre of speculative fictions of slavery does break sharply from the past in its very use of non-realist literary devices to represent slavery. Documentary realism was an essential component of antebellum fugitive slave narratives; relaying the unvarnished truth about slavery was crucial to the political goal of pressing the case for abolition. As Mosley suggests, this realist imperative continued to constrain African American writers through much of the twentieth century, as literature remained a vehicle of social protest. Notwithstanding certain errant flashes of fantasy and fabulism, the burden of realist racial representation began to ease off only by the 1970s, or the beginning of what is commonly termed the post-Civil Rights period, which, as Mosley observes, witnessed an outpouring of fiction that flouts the dictates of realism. As Morrison has remarked, contemporary writers revisiting slavery are engaged in a "very different" enterprise than were the authors of antebellum slave narratives,⁵ and their turn to speculative fiction conspicuously marks this difference.

In this essay, I will try to account for the outpouring of novels of slavery in the late twentieth century and to identify the unique disposition toward history and historiography entailed in the generic choice of speculative fiction. According to the emerging critical consensus, recent novels of slavery by African American writers exemplify an exceptional brand of postmodernism marked by a strong commitment to the mission of historical recovery. Arguing against this consensus, I will show that speculative fictions of slavery attempt to know the past as something other or more than history. In refusing to comprehend slavery as an occurrence that has passed into the register of history, these novels dispute the idea that the Civil Rights movement marked

the completion of a long struggle against racial inequality launched in the era of slavery. The literary return to slavery gained momentum at a critical time of transition in U.S. racial politics; bespeaking a strong sense of pessimism about the future, these works obliquely register the uncertain prospects confronting black racial politics in the post-Civil Rights period.

The admittedly provocative claim that speculative fictions of slavery take a purposefully antihistorical approach to the past can be fleshed out through a brief comparative glance at the overtly historical aims of the realist novels of slavery that began to appear during the 1960s. We might expect that literature about slavery emerged in this period in response to widespread amnesia about the history of slavery. This initially appears to be a plausible account of early novels, such as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) or Ernest Gaines's *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), both written during the 1960s, as well as later realist fiction including Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemings* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Lorene Cary's *The Price of a Child* (1995), and Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Douglass' Women* (2002), all of which take a pointedly corrective approach to the historical record of slavery. But even this literary project attests to something other than repression of the past. As Ashraf Rushdy shows in his study of neoslave narratives, the post-1970s literary interest in slavery was in fact kindled by significant shifts in the historiography of slavery that occurred during the 1960s, when antebellum slave narratives and oral testimonies of ex-slaves (from Work Progress Administration interviews) first became admissible as historical evidence and, consequently, the history of slavery began to be related "from below."⁶ Realist novels of slavery are deeply indebted to this revisionist historiography and share its investment in recovering the first-person perspectives of slaves.

Authors such as Walker, Gaines, and Williams all draw on oral traditions to fill in the gaps of the official historical archive. Just as Walker adapts her great-grandmother's oral tales of slavery in *Jubilee*, the narrator of Gaines's novel transcribes the spoken testimony of Miss Jane Pittman, who was born a slave. When asked "What's wrong with them books you already got?" Gaines's narrator, a history teacher, responds, "Miss Jane is not in them."⁷ Among the realist novels of slavery, Williams's *Dessa Rose* launches the most potent critique of dominant traditions of historiography through its portrait of a histo-

rian, Adam Nehemiah, whose texts perpetuate degrading caricatures of slaves as simple-minded “darkies” devoid of reason. Like Gaines and Walker, Williams relies on oral tradition (especially song) to challenge Nehemiah’s “master text” and to convey a subjective experience of slavery. In her author’s note, Williams aligns the novel with the literary project of corrective counterrepresentation that African American writers had initiated during the 1960s. Noting her alienation from official traditions of U.S. history—“there was no place in the American past I could go and be free”—Williams instead draws inspiration from a work of revisionist historiography, Angela Davis’s essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves.” The character of Dessa Rose is based on an actual female slave, mentioned in Davis’s essay, who spearheaded a slave uprising and escape while she was pregnant. Williams observes that Davis’s article “marked a turning point in [her] effort to apprehend that other history”—the history of slave agency that was largely absent from the official archive.⁸

Realist novels of slavery by Chase-Riboud, Cary, and Rhodes remain committed to this task of historical restitution as they reinvent the lives of actual enslaved women who appear merely as passing references or footnotes in historical documents. Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings*, which recounts the long-suppressed story of Thomas Jefferson’s slave mistress, opens with an epigraph from John Adams that clearly signals the novel’s ambition to supplement a historical archive riddled with omissions and distortions: “Records are destroyed. Histories are annihilated, or interpolated, or prohibited.”⁹ Rhodes, whose novel *Douglass’ Women* alternates between the voices of Frederick Douglass’s first wife, Anna Murray, and his long-term mistress, Otilie Assing, asserts in an interview that her intention was to honor the lives of women “whom history erased or simply forgot”; as a result of her efforts, Rhodes says, two such women “have been reclaimed from history.”¹⁰ Chase-Riboud, Cary, and Rhodes all take pains to add afterwords, acknowledgments, or appendices citing the historical sources that went into the making of their novels, demonstrating their investment not only in the truth-telling claims characteristic of realist historical fiction but also in the revisionist historiographic enterprise of more accurate representation.

Realist historical novels of slavery have continued to appear occasionally even into the twenty-first century, but far more prevalent are novels that transgress realist conventions. By the late 1970s, the his-

torical archive of U.S. slavery was fuller than it had ever been before and, thanks to the reissue of numerous fugitive slave narratives following their reassessment as legitimate historical evidence, more inclusive of the testimony of those who had been enslaved. Speculative fictions of slavery began to appear only when the task of historical recovery seemed to be relatively far along, and in fact, the expansion of the historical archive formed a necessary condition of possibility for their emergence. These works pursue an approach to the history of slavery that is decisively different from the corrective historical purpose of realist novels of slavery. Of the many book-length studies of neoslave narratives to be published in the last decade,¹¹ A. Timothy Spaulding's *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005), is the only one to consider how non-realist genres shape the historical aims of recent novels of slavery. According to Spaulding, what distinguishes this subgenre from the wider stream of late-twentieth-century fictions of slavery is that its break from realism discredits the objective truth-telling claims of modern historiography.¹² This sort of disruption of historiographic conventions is what Spaulding identifies as postmodern about novels such as Reed's *Flight to Canada*. Spaulding's discussion of "fantastic" fictions of slavery meshes with influential accounts of the ways postmodern fiction irreverently sabotages reigning norms of historical representation.

However, having established the postmodern provenance of fantastical fictions of slavery, Spaulding contends that the "postmodern slave narrative" exemplifies "a distinctly African American form of postmodernism" (*RP*, 3); even as it challenges accepted methods of historical representation, it remains strongly attached to the task of historical reconstitution, thereby withstanding the wider postmodern drift toward referential indeterminacy (*RP*, 18–19). His claim that fantastical elements ultimately reinforce rather than undermine historical authority is echoed by other literary critics who have tried to reckon with the antirealism of so many post-1970s historical novels by black writers. For example, Caroline Rody argues that the magical romances of history authored by contemporary Afro-diasporic women must be differentiated from historiographic metafiction (Linda Hutcheon's term for postmodern novels dealing with history),¹³ because they uphold ideals of historical truth even as they employ postmodern formal devices to question dominant standards of historical dis-

course. In Rody's view, the genre of magical romance authenticates the counterhistories narrated in novels such as Morrison's *Beloved*, and in fact serves to "allegorize newly arising ethnic historiographic power."¹⁴

These seemingly paradoxical formulations—that antirealist fictions of slavery both are and are not really postmodern—capture a striking feature of many of these novels, which, despite their departure from realism (or, more precisely, because of it), confidently claim to reveal the truth of the past. But this kind of truth claim is not meant to “assert historiographic authority” or to “revitalize the historiography of slavery.”¹⁵ Instead, speculative fictions overtly situate themselves against history, suggesting that we can best comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing. This aversion is not only directly related to the choice of antirealist genres as the best modes of access to the past, but it is also symptomatic of a wider assault on history that began to gain momentum in the 1970s. The notion of history that came under attack in postmodern literature as well as scholarly discourse is the modern approach to making sense of the past that was institutionalized as a discrete field of knowledge in the early nineteenth century. Hayden White, the historian most prominently associated with the postmodern turn in historiography, observes that the constitution of history as a discipline depended on a normalization of positivist methods for recovering “the facts of the past.”¹⁶ Demarcated as a “discipline which purports to serve as a custodian of realism,” historical studies had to subordinate the faculty of imagination and dissociate itself from literature, in particular the novel.¹⁷ White contends that, for “subordinant, emergent, or resisting social groups,” the realist imperative that has characterized history since its inception as a discipline can only appear as the crowning element of the very ideology they wish to oppose. Effective opposition must therefore be based on a refusal of realism, on “a conception of the historical record as being not a window through which the past ‘as it really was’ can be apprehended,” but rather as an impediment to proper understanding of the past (“PHI,” 137).

In the last few decades, scholars spanning various disciplines who write about “subordinant, emergent, or resisting groups” have taken precisely this kind of incredulous approach to history. For example, sociologist Avery Gordon and literary critic Hershini Bhana Young advocate a subjective and corporeal knowledge of the past that dis-

avows historical standards of detachment and objectivity. Invoking the ideal of “embodied history,”¹⁸ Gordon and Young revive Raymond Williams’s term *structure of feeling* to promote an affective and sensuous encounter with the past.¹⁹ M. Jacqui Alexander, in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), applies this method to the specific task of “knowing Kitsimba,” a Kongo woman who was captured as a slave and shipped to the Caribbean in the late-eighteenth century.²⁰ The first step of this task is to confront the limits of both the historical method, founded on an “ideology of distance” (*PC*, 190), and the historical record, composed of legal and missionary documents that fail to convey “lived experience” (*PC*, 294). It is only once Alexander decides to occupy the “unstable space of not knowing” that the truth of Kitsimba’s life is directly revealed to her. After Alexander undertakes arduous “spiritual work” with a Bakongo teacher, Kitsimba “emerge[s] to render her own account of her life” and, in first-person voice, explains her active role in redirecting Alexander’s historical project (*PC*, 294–95). Kitsimba imposes a writing block in order to interrupt Alexander’s conventional research methods and to teach her that she “could no longer rely on what was written in books to convey or even arrive at Truth.” Instead, she wants Alexander to learn the truth of the past “by feeling” the reality of enslavement “as if she were the one who had lived it” (*PC*, 315). This “pedagogy” inspired by the Middle Passage is designed to displace secular rationality in favor of a “praxis of the Sacred” that positions “the body as a source of knowledge” (*PC*, 328–29).

I have lingered on Alexander’s deliberately antihistoriographic method in some detail because it perfectly encapsulates the approach to the past taken in much post-1970s speculative fiction of slavery. Alexander violates the realist protocols of history by incarnating Kitsimba in the present and thereby narrating a type of event—belonging to the order of the sacred or miraculous—that is typically excluded from the purview of historical evidence. In a similar move, recent novelists of slavery undo historical authority by exploiting an exorbitantly fictive imagination, the faculty that had to be devalued in order to shore up the disciplinary standing of history as “the custodian of realism.” Refusing to regard the past of slavery as history, speculative novels suggest that the truth of this past is more fully grasped by way of an antirealist literary imagination that can fluidly cross temporal boundaries and affectively immerse readers into the world of slavery.

The turn away from history, then, becomes an immensely generative occasion for antirealist novels of slavery in the late twentieth century.

The most common narrative device used by recent novelists of slavery to signal their distrust of history is a dramatic foreshortening of the temporal distance between slavery and the present. Authors as varied as Butler, Barnes, and Perry achieve a shift from historical to experiential knowledge of the past by means of fantastic narrative mechanisms that transport contemporary characters back to the antebellum era. For example, in her critically acclaimed novel *Kindred*, Butler utilizes the science-fictional device of time travel to remand her protagonist, Dana, to a slave plantation in antebellum Maryland. But time travel does not work in a science-fictional mode in this novel, in that it defies scientific or rational explanation. If anything, the inexplicable nature of Dana's time travel is underscored, but only to emphasize all the more strongly the veracity of Dana's experience of slavery. In other words, the break from narrative realism, apparent in the novel's refusal to explain Dana's access to the past, does not detract in any way from the reality effect of this past. Perry's *Stigmata* and Barnes's *Blood Brothers* make use of similarly extraordinary mechanisms to return to the past. Perry's central character, Lizzie, is able to travel backward in time and to literally become her slave ancestor, Ayo, in a manner that eludes rational understanding. While possessed by her ancestor, Lizzie relives experiences of slavery that have undoubtedly occurred but that she has no way of objectively verifying. Much of the novel deals with the futile efforts of her parents and of various psychiatrists to persuade Lizzie that she is hallucinating; like *Kindred*, Perry's book insists on the truth of Lizzie's experience. In *Blood Brothers*, a hybrid novel that yokes cyberfiction together with the fugitive slave narrative, Dahlia, a young girl living in the late twentieth century, becomes possessed by the spirit of a slave ancestor, so much so that she begins to speak in the ancestor's voice.

Common to all these works is the phenomenon of an actual rather than figurative return to slavery, and the fact that return always results in an involuntary but powerful identification—not connection, but identification—of the present-day African American subject with a slave. What the paranormal devices of return make possible is a visceral experience of slavery, and this is the sense in which these novels take a pointedly antihistorical approach to the past. If historical knowledge involves a distanced relation to a past that is no

longer available as direct experience, the devices of return to slavery in novels such as *Kindred*, *Stigmata*, and *Blood Brothers* make possible an unmediated relation to the past as something that has not quite passed into the realm of history. To really know slavery in the novels of Butler, Barnes, and Perry is to know it subjectively, to know it as something other than the characteristically remote object of historical knowledge. This is clearly illustrated by Dana's deepening process of immersion into the institution in *Kindred*. During her early visits to the antebellum plantation, Dana is just a visitor who feels secure in her late-twentieth-century distance from the past and who describes herself as an observer "watching history happen" around her.²¹ At this stage, Dana confidently relies on historical knowledge to navigate her way around the plantation, as is apparent from the fact that she takes along a history book containing information that might prove useful for escape. Her disengagement from history as a mode of knowing the past is initiated when she burns her book because it is likely to get her into trouble, given that slaves are not permitted to read or own books. Once the crutch of historical knowledge is gone, Dana finds it increasingly difficult to maintain her estranged stance and from here onward she begins to acquire an experiential knowledge of the brutal violence of slavery—knowledge that disfigures her body, as she loses an arm in her desperate and final escape from slavery back to the present.

In Perry's and Barnes's novels as well, real knowledge of slavery demands a shift from the mediated understanding provided by reading history books into direct bodily experience. In both cases, the literal seizure of present-day subjects by the past is prompted by their reading of first-person narratives written by slave ancestors. Significantly, these are unpublished narratives—a journal written by a female slave in *Blood Brothers* and a personal diary based on the oral testimony of a slave in *Stigmata*. That these accounts have never been published is crucial, in that it allows them to disclose aspects of slave experience that were deemed improper for public circulation. Published narratives of slavery in the antebellum period were written under the sponsorship of the abolitionist movement, which often demanded that ex-slave authors draw a veil over those terrible experiences that Morrison describes as "unspeakable things, unspoken." According to Morrison, the unique task of the late-twentieth-century novelist of slavery is to rip aside that veil and to offer access to the "unwritten life" of slaves.²² The journals and diaries in *Blood Brothers* and *Stigmata* give

voice to those experiences that were unspeakable in the fugitive slave narratives and, as such, exceed the limitations of the historical archive. This is why, for late-twentieth-century subjects such as Lizzy and Dahlia, true understanding of slavery dawns at the moment when reading strangely and suddenly morphs into supernatural possession. As these characters begin to live (rather than merely read) the contents of their ancestors' journals, they gain access to slavery through a mode of knowing that is "like remembering, but more."²³

Barnes's novel contains one of the most bizarre scenes of reading to be found in contemporary fiction. The descendants of Dahlia Childe (the slave ancestor) have recently discovered her journal and are sitting down in a circle to read it. The black letters begin to blur and then flow off the page to form a pool of blood on the floor that eventually coagulates into the actual body of the slave ancestor and author. Even more peculiar, instead of the now-resurrected Dahlia Childe recounting her experience, it is her descendants who are suddenly and "magically" transported to the world of slavery.²⁴ On other occasions, as mentioned earlier, Dahlia Childe literally takes possession of her great-granddaughter, who then begins to testify to as-yet-undisclosed elements of her story. Similarly, in *Stigmata*, Lizzie's reading of her slave ancestor's diary ultimately leads to bodily possession, and as Lizzie becomes her ancestor, she begins to experience aspects of slavery that are not written about in the diary. In all these narratives, real knowledge of slavery inflicts harm to the bodies of contemporary African American subjects. The proof of the authenticity of the characters' experience of slavery is found in the physical damage they suffer as a result: Lizzie retains welts and scars from her travels to the past even after she is restored to the present, bruises she ultimately describes as "stigmata,"²⁵ and in Barnes's novel, Dahlia's body painfully burns as it is invaded by her slave ancestor.

Even an abbreviated discussion of these novels should show that they rupture narrative realism in order to offer an immediate bodily experience of the trauma of slavery. In *Kindred*, when Dana's husband doubts the reality of her trips back to slavery, she retorts, "[I]t's real. It hurts too much not to be" (*K*, 46). To reckon with a "history that hurts," to take a phrase from Saidiya Hartman,²⁶ scholars such as Gordon and Young have seized on the term *haunting* to describe an emotional and corporeal mode of knowing the past. Both elaborate haunting as a "methodology" that repudiates not only the rational and

detached stance of modern historiography (*HC*, 46), but also its linear and progressive temporality. The time of haunting jams together the past and present, interrupting the teleological drive of what Édouard Glissant has famously called “History with a capital H,” or history conceived as a singular master narrative.²⁷ Within the temporality of haunting, the past breaks into the present like a ghostly intruder, and the distance between then and now dissolves into a disorienting sense of simultaneity. For both Gordon and Young, the discipline construes the past as dead and remote from the present, whereas haunting “pulls the past into view and refuses the lie of its completion” to show that what seems to have become a matter of history still remains alive in the present.²⁸

The trope of haunting resonates powerfully in speculative fictions of slavery, amplifying their antihistoriographic impulse. Some of these novels, such as *Blood Brothers* and *Stigmata*, feature haunting in the sense of supernatural possession so as to comprehend the past of slavery as something “more than history.”²⁹ Other novels, such as David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident*, literalize the trope of haunting in order to launch a scathing critique of the discipline. Bradley’s narrator, John Washington, is a professional historian seeking the cause of his father’s death, which is mysteriously connected to the buried story of twelve fugitive slaves who chose suicide over the risk of being taken back into bondage. John initially tries to reconstruct this story by conducting conventional historical research. He takes down all potentially pertinent information on color-coded index cards, which he then catalogs into a rigidly chronological order. As he realizes that his research methods are generating a mass of facts but little truth, he begins to disavow his disciplinary training as a historian. John gradually comes to believe that “modern” history is a “dinosaur,”³⁰ based on principles of seventeenth-century Newtonian science such as mechanistic laws of cause and effect, which have long since become outdated in the study of the natural sciences. Rooting around in his father’s attic, John becomes emotionally absorbed in the past, a process that leads him to repudiate another guiding premise of modern historiography—the assumption that the historian is a disinterested observer who remains “unaffected, unchanged, unharmed” in the course of delving into the past (*CI*, 140). Only after renouncing this neutral stance does John begin to piece together the story of the fugitive slaves.

In addition to affirming a subjective and affective approach to the past, John's induction into the methodology of haunting involves a reappraisal of the rational and realist premises of modern historiography as well as of its linear and progressive temporality. Not surprisingly for a historian who "specialize[s] in the study of atrocities" (*CI*, 186), this reappraisal revolves around the question of death. According to John, historians in the late twentieth century "know a great deal—perhaps too much—about the ins and outs of the Slave Trade" (*CI*, 206), but even the most knowledgeable fail to understand that slavery was fundamentally about death, in the sense that enslavement introduced Africans to a European concept of death as the "cold and final" end of life (*CI*, 213). From this rational perspective, the twelve fugitive slaves who took their own lives to avoid recapture belong to a past that is decisively dead and gone. But from within the slaves' Africanist belief system, death is a passing on of spirit and bygone forebears continue to inhabit the world of mundane reality. Once John opens his mind to the worldview of the slaves whose story he is trying to recreate, he begins to hear them running, breathing, and singing—a form of sensuous evidence from which he concludes that "the dead really are there" on the same plane of being as the living (*CI*, 389). To perceive the lingering presence of the fugitive slaves, John has to legitimize suprarational standards of belief that lie well beyond disciplinary bounds of historical evidence. His developing receptivity to the "haunting" paradigm of knowing the past culminates in his conviction that the horrific reality of slavery abides into the present: "[I]f the African belief is true, then somewhere here with us, in the very air we breathe, all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering—all of it—is still going on" (*CI*, 213).

Along with literal haunting, speculative novels employ a range of time-bending devices to reveal the long afterlife of slavery. Such devices, including time-travel in *Kindred* and Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*,³¹ rememory in Morrison's *Beloved*, and the outrageous anachronisms of Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, force the past and present into a relation of jarring simultaneity. Moments of temporal simultaneity are always attended by contortions of narrative voice and point of view, such as the peculiar shift from reading to possession, present to past, in *Blood Brothers*. Or, for example, when Lizzie in Perry's novel becomes her slave ancestor, she is always conscious

of the oddity of being in two time frames at once, and describes these scenes through disjointed shifts between first- and third-person narrative voices. Lizzie's identification with her ancestor feels awkward to her, more like a skewed superimposition than a merger. A similar sense of disorientation marks Dana's multiple transitions between two different time periods in *Kindred*. Thanks to the time-travel mechanism, Dana enters the era of antebellum slavery as a walking, talking anachronism, equipped with Excedrin and set apart from the slaves by her speech, dress, education, and knowledge of the future. Butler draws on the device of character doubling to chart a growing process of identification between Dana and her enslaved ancestor Alice and to suggest numerous parallels between the antebellum past and the late-twentieth-century present. But this logic of identification is abruptly terminated when the slaveowner Rufus Weylin tries to rape Dana as he had raped Alice; in response, Dana kills him and escapes back into the twentieth century, an option that was obviously not available to Alice or any other antebellum slave.

The temporal doublings of these novels, their gestures of simultaneous identification and dislocation, are obviously intended to reveal the persistence of the past in the present and to ensure that their readers as well as characters feel the discomfort of straddling two time zones, of keeping one foot squarely in the present while traveling to the past. Paranormal devices of time travel are designed to convey certain truths about slavery that are inaccessible through the discipline of history, but they are also and more importantly calculated to make their readers as well as characters feel ill at ease in the present. The vital question, then, becomes: from which aspects of the present are these novels disaffiliating themselves?

In *Stigmata*, Lizzie's obsession with the past is presented as a corrective to her parents' amnesia about slavery, a stance of willed repression necessary to prop up their hard-won middle-class status. Committed to a narrative of racial advancement in the post-Civil Rights period, Lizzie's mother insists that life moves forward "like a line" and "the past is past." To this, Lizzie responds, "Life is non-linear," echoing the recursive time-sense of her ancestor Ayo, who describes slaves as living "in the circle. We back and gone and back again" (S, 93). The circular and vacillating sense of time associated with slavery is meant to belie the widespread belief, shared by Lizzie's parents, that expansion of the African American middle class follow-

ing Civil Rights legislation should be taken as proof of the decline of systemic racism. A similar skepticism about racial progress permeates other speculative fictions of slavery as well. Just as Lizzie initially tries to fend off the intrusion of the past by declaring “I am free” (S, 46), Dana confidently asserts at the beginning of *Kindred* that she is “‘free, born free, intending to stay free’” (K, 38). One reason *Kindred* is so disquieting to contemporary readers is surely the sadistic impetus of its plot, which subjects a fiercely independent woman to a barrage of bodily and psychological assaults that diminish her sense of herself as a free-willed agent. Butler is leery of the implication that the post-Civil Rights generation is more liberated than its slave predecessors, as becomes clear from Dana’s growing complicity in the reproduction of slavery when, for example, she abets Rufus Weylin’s rape of her slave ancestor Alice. During her travels to the antebellum period, Dana witnesses firsthand the violence of miscegenation, a knowledge that comes back to haunt her own interracial marriage to a white man. Through many small details—such as a coworker’s taunting reference to Dana and Kevin as “‘chocolate and vanilla porn’” (K, 56)—the novel exposes the lingering power of racial divisions in everyday social life, notwithstanding the state’s formal commitment to racial integration in the post-Civil Rights period.

Much like *Kindred*, Barnes’s *Blood Brothers* recalls the origins of coerced miscegenation in slavery as a way of negotiating de facto barriers to racial integration in the post-Civil Rights present. Of all the speculative fictions of slavery, *Blood Brothers* is most explicit in its depiction of the present-day threat that demands a confrontation with the past: the resurgence of white supremacist ideology, embodied in the Aryan Brotherhood, which recycles racist stereotypes of African Americans as animalistic savages that derive from the era of slavery. In response to this threat, Barnes reaches back to the nineteenth-century trope “of one blood”: the novel refutes biological claims of racial difference by revealing that the family trees of the African American protagonist and of his initial antagonist, a member of the Aryan Brotherhood, are entwined as a result of miscegenation dating back to slavery.

The very fact that Barnes has to resuscitate the trope of one blood as a way of combating old-fashioned racism in the late twentieth century undercuts progressive narratives about U.S. race relations. Such narratives, which became the national common sense during the late

1970s and 1980s, told a triumphal tale of racial advancement, beginning with abolition and culminating in the Civil Rights movement. With the legal termination of Jim Crow and the formal achievement of equal rights for African Americans, the nation supposedly passed into a postracial era, and in this sense the Civil Rights movement was believed to mark the end of a very long period of racial inequality spanning from slavery to the 1960s. The suspicion of history in speculative novels of slavery bespeaks a sharp sense of incredulity toward this historical narrative of racial emancipation. In the preface to his *Darkness at Ingraham's Crest* (1979), Frank Yerby writes: "American slavery lasted from 1619 to 1865, two hundred forty-six years. It was further extended under various shabby subterfuges until well into the 1960s, that is, if one concedes that it has even ended yet."³² Some variant of this pessimistic sentiment lies behind all speculative fictions of slavery.

In saying that American slavery extended into the 1960s, Yerby suggests that the period from slavery to the 1960s should be grasped as a single and continuous historical stretch—what might be viewed as the era of state-sanctioned racism. Political struggles against this kind of racism, ranging from abolitionism to the Civil Rights movement, were driven by deep faith in the promise of racial equality and inclusion. In the post-Civil Rights period, disillusionment with this "politics of fulfillment," as Paul Gilroy labels it,³³ impels the antirealist turn in literature about slavery—a link between literary form and political aspiration that is directly drawn in Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*. In the early sections of the novel, John Washington's faith in realist historical narrative is complemented by his optimistic vision of U.S. racial history. But John's belief that "'things have changed'" since the days of Jim Crow is eroded by his surrogate father Old Jack's insistent mockery of the idea that the Civil Rights movement was a watershed moment in U.S. racial history, that "'the whole world changes on account of somebody . . . passes a law'" (*CI*, 64, 67). John's eventual agreement with Old Jack's bleak view of U.S. racial history—whereby "a little overt segregation was almost a relief" compared to the "dormant racism or well-meaning liberalism" of the post-Civil Rights decades (*CI*, 66)—culminates in his claim that slavery is "still going on." As discussed earlier, this assertion clinches John's conversion from the discipline of historiography to the paradigm of haunting.

Going beyond the particular instance of Washington, the novel

establishes a more generalized causal connection between political disenchantment and “haunting,” which Bradley identifies as an Africanist mode of knowing. In the pre-Civil Rights era, when political hopes for racial integration ran high, African Americans tended to suppress all traces of an African past, but when these political hopes failed and “it became apparent that there was no chance for them to be Europeans,” they began to revive the “Africanisms” they had purposefully lost, such as belief in the temporal continuum of the living and the dead (*CI*, 212). The novel itself validates these belief systems through its pointed departure from realist historical fiction, as it reanimates enslaved ancestors from the past and affirms their status as material evidence of slavery’s continuation into the late-twentieth-century present.

Extrapolating from Bradley’s novel, the realism driving African American literature at its moment of inception in the fugitive slave narratives can be seen as a perfect vehicle for the politics of fulfillment, which, according to Gilroy’s definition, presses its reformist demands by working within the rational premises of modern political discourse (*BA*, 37). In his 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass took pains to add a footnote discrediting the rootwork practiced by some fellow slaves as “ignorant superstition,”³⁴ because commitment to rationality was essential not only to validate Douglass’s own entry into the public sphere of modern politics but also to prove the slave’s fitness for freedom and the rights of modern citizenship. But for novelists such as Bradley writing in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, disappointment with the politics of fulfillment—now seen to have delivered formal but not actual racial equality—fuels a strong reaction against the rational and realist principles that guided fugitive slave narratives. Phenomena that confound rationality abound in speculative fictions of slavery, notable examples being the “miraculous resurrection” of a murdered daughter in *Beloved* or the African god carried to the New World on a slave ship in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, who “possesses a hundred ways to relieve men of their reason.”³⁵ Often overtly identified as African-derived forms of knowledge, suprarational belief systems, such as vodun in Reed’s *Flight to Canada* and Yerby’s *A Darkness at Ingraham’s Crest* or magic in Butler’s *Wild Seed* and Barnes’s *Blood Brothers*, contribute to the development of what Gilroy calls a “black counter-culture of modernity” (*BA*, 36).

This countermodern impulse energizes a literary politics of “trans-

figuration” rather than of fulfillment, to return to Gilroy’s terminology, one that disavows or exceeds the rational and discursive terms of the modern public sphere so as to communicate its “unsayable claims to truth” (*BA*, 37).³⁶ The politics of transfiguration gains momentum in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, and its “unsayable” political desires and truth claims are symptomatic of the crisis of legitimation confronting racial politics in this period. Following the attainment of formal citizenship rights, race remains a significant factor in the distribution of inequality, yet antiracist projects must contend with new constraints, such as the state’s avowed commitment to multiracial inclusion, widespread public exhaustion with talk of lingering racism, demobilization of the political movements of the 1960s, and lack of broad consensus about the proper directions of future racial politics. Seen in this context, speculative fictions of slavery attest to the disorientation of the literary-political imagination in the post-Civil Rights decades.

One response to this sense of political impasse is to turn back to an era in which the reality of racial injury can be incontrovertibly established and to insist on the essential continuity of that past with the present. This is the move Yerby makes in the passage quoted earlier, when he contends that slavery extended into the 1960s and may not have ended yet. In her essay “The Time of Slavery,” Hartman suggests that the contemporary preoccupation with ghosts and haunting, grief and mourning, calls into question celebratory national narratives of racial redemption (“TS,” 763). She notes in passing present-day forms of racial terror that seem invisible because they are couched in the coded rhetoric of social pathology or law and order (“TS,” 772). Because current manifestations of racism take more insidious forms than they did in the past, often going by names other than racism, the memory of slavery becomes a way of making them legible in terms of the familiar scripts of the past. Hartman is careful to clarify that her point is not to assert that racism has remained unchanged from slavery to the present, but to call attention to the black political aspirations that remain unrealized in the post-Civil Rights period (“TS,” 758).

But recourse to the time of slavery may not offer the best way of trying to realize or even name these aspirations. As I argued earlier, the will to remember gains momentum just as slavery is assumed to have passed into history, and the need to assert continuity between

the past and present signals as much as it denies their increasing distance, in particular the distance between the racial orders of slavery and the present. What is striking about the temporal doublings of recent novels of slavery is that they reach for an unmediated identification of the present with the past but can only manage to bring this about through extravagantly fictive—paranormal or supernatural—devices. The sense of dissonance provoked by these devices implicitly registers the very discontinuities between present and past that these devices are designed to override. An even clearer index of the distance between past and present is the fact that so many contemporary novelists loop back to the antebellum slave narratives, but only in order to muddy the political vision of these narratives. Not one speculative novel offers the assurance that returning to the past will help resurrect the strong forms of political agency that seem so difficult to summon in the present. All the novels I have discussed here portray forms of slave agency that are deeply compromised,³⁷ and in this way depart from the realist novels, written during an earlier period of political mobilization, which found in slavery heroic forms of resistance that could inspire the political movements of the present.

Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (written during the late 1960s) drew a straight line from Emancipation to the 1960s, positioning the Civil Rights movement as the culmination of the fight for freedom launched during the era of slavery. McBride's *Song Yet Sung*, published in 2008, appears to trace a similar historical trajectory. The novel's protagonist, Liz Spocott, is an enslaved woman who sees dreams and visions of the future. In one such vision, she sees Martin Luther King Jr. reaching into the past for inspiration and pulling up "a song from our own time [the time of slavery]! A song not yet sung."³⁸ The slaves themselves did not know all the words to their song, but in her vision Liz hears King utter the unsung words: "Free at last" (SYS, 281). This image of King completing a slave song sketches an unbroken historical arc from slavery to the 1960s, as did Gaines, showing the political agency of the Civil Rights movement to be directly derived from the antebellum struggle for freedom. Liz's vision of King as a figure whose "words changed the whole world" also affirms the fulfilled promise of the Civil Rights movement as a force of far-reaching political transformation (SYS, 281).

However, this progressive trajectory of racial emancipation is derailed by Liz's flash-forwards into the decades following the Civil

Rights movement, a future from which she as a slave feels profoundly alienated. Overwhelmed by visions of African American unfreedom in the post-Civil Rights era (including images of widespread illiteracy and intraracial violence), Liz ends up surrendering not only the future—"I just thank God I ain't born tomorrow Ain't no freedom in it" (SYS, 159)—but also the very idea of a credible politics of fulfillment, as she now feels that freedom is to be found "nowhere in this country. Ever" (SYS, 156). The most disconcerting effect of Liz's pessimism about the future is that it retrospectively undermines the politics of the past. Once she has seen that tomorrow will not bring freedom, she can no longer wholeheartedly endorse the immediate political aims (of abolition) or strategies (such as escaping north on the Underground Railroad) of her fellow slaves. The novel multiplies examples of other slaves whose political will is weakened when confronted by Liz's grimly hopeless view of tomorrow. In *Song Yet Sung*, political doubt and confusion are the consequences of looking backward at slavery from the vantage point of the post-Civil Rights future.

Among the barrage of images in McBride's novel evoking the betrayal of slavery's legacy by the end of the twentieth century, one is especially telling: white schoolchildren gathered around television sets weeping at "sorrowful stories of the colored man's past enslavement" (SYS, 87). This detail suggests that speculative fictions of slavery are impelled not by the absence of slavery from public memory but by the problem of what to make of this memory in the post-Civil Rights decades. The narrative device of a slave subject flashing forward to the future and feeling utterly baffled by this future forces the question of the relation between "past enslavement" and racial oppression in the present. Butler directly engages this question in a much-misinterpreted scene in *Kindred*, when Dana carelessly uses the term "slave market" to describe the casual labor agency through which she seeks employment. Critics have read this passage as evidence of historical continuity between slavery and the late twentieth century, although Dana immediately corrects herself: "Actually it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn't have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway" (K, 52). Showing that the problem in Dana's present is not coerced labor, as it was during slavery, but the threat of unemployment faced by a large pool of surplus labor, this passage highlights the critical shifts in the dynamics

of exploitation that get obscured when the present is seen to be essentially continuous with the past.

Although most contemporary African American writers envision slavery as “an injury that has yet to cease happening” (*TS*, 772), a few have taken the unusual approach of inventing futures that defamiliarize the racial legacy of antebellum U.S. slavery. Novels such as Butler’s *Wild Seed* (1985) and *Parable of the Sower* (1992) or Samuel Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984) depict various forms of enslavement, but to even label such texts *novels of slavery* is misleading, in that they do not centrally deal with what readers are likely to expect from novels about slavery written by African American authors, that is, recognizable portrayals of the historically specific institution of U.S. chattel slavery. The term *slavery* in these novels mutates to refer to a range of abusive socioeconomic arrangements, including unpaid manual labor, sexual trafficking, reproductive exploitation, indentured servitude, and debt bondage. Although these novels may seem ahistorical insofar as they dissociate the term *slavery* from its most familiar historical referent, they actually exemplify a historical imagination that can apprehend ruptures as well as continuities over time.

Butler’s *Wild Seed* is the only one of these novels to contain a realist representation of antebellum U.S. slavery, but this forms the background against which the novel delineates the very different kind of slavery that constitutes its main subject—the enslavement of Anyanwu, a woman of West African origin, by Doro, an immortal and vampirical male who is also of African descent. Butler goes out of her way to mark the distinctions between Doro’s practice of slavery and the historical type most familiar to her readers. Doro owns several reproductive colonies intended to breed and preserve those who are different (in their possession of paranormal abilities), and his slaves belong to various races and nationalities. In contrast to the ideology of immutable biological difference between African and Caucasian races institutionalized in antebellum U.S. slavery, Doro’s reproductive program aims to “mix and stir” different ethnic stocks, so much so that he takes pride in his slave colony as an enclave of “diversity” within a starkly racialized society.³⁹ Although set in the nineteenth century, *Wild Seed* can be read as a cautionary tale about the profitability of racial differences in late-twentieth-century capitalist society. By juxtaposing Doro’s propagation of racial difference with U.S. chattel slavery,

the novel demands a historicizing approach, prompting readers to distinguish the pluralist racial dynamics of our present from the binary racial logic of antebellum slavery.⁴⁰

A similar kind of historicizing method, one that registers disjunctions as much as equivalences between past and present, is at work in Butler's later novel *Parable of the Sower*. Many of the characters in this dystopian novel set in the mid-twenty-first century are termed "slaves," and readers might be tempted to take this to refer to U.S. chattel slavery since the novel is sprinkled with references to the peculiar institution. The dominant form of enslavement in *Parable*—debt bondage to multinational corporations—is insistently likened to U.S. chattel slavery. For example, the novel's protagonist observes that the corporate takeover of entire towns seems "half antebellum revival and half science fiction."⁴¹ Butler activates memory traces of the historical past in order to make legible the strange new lineaments of an emerging political-economic order. Continually shuttling between past and present, the novel throws into bold relief the devolutionary trajectory of global capitalism and thereby discredits triumphal claims that the worldwide spread of capitalism marks the end of history.⁴²

What distinguishes Butler's novel from the other works discussed in this essay is that it presents slavery not primarily as a historical reference point but rather as an actually existing reality in the present. In keeping with the peculiar realism of science fiction, *Parable* extrapolates and magnifies current trends that are fostering novel practices of enslavement, such as the suspension of "overly restrictive" labor laws as nation-states vie to attract an increasingly mobile capital (*PS*, 24). Butler's focus on debt bondage as the predominant system of enslavement accords with social-science scholarship on slavery at the turn of the twenty-first century. In his study of the new global slavery, sociologist Kevin Bales notes that the vast majority of contemporary slaves are bonded laborers who differ from chattel slaves in that they are "disposable" workers rather than permanently owned property.⁴³ Butler's novel repeatedly draws exactly this distinction between historical and emergent forms of servitude: "'The workers are more throwaways than slaves. . . . They're easy to replace—thousands of jobless for every job'" (*PS*, 291).

The neoslavery depicted in *Parable* is most markedly discontinuous from the past in that it is differently racialized than antebellum U.S. slavery. The disposable people in Butler's novel are of Asian and

Latino as well as African descent, and the second most prominent form of enslavement in the book—sexual trafficking—targets economically vulnerable women irrespective of race. The runaway slaves form “a heterogeneous mass—black and white, Asian and Latin” (*PS*, 158), and as Peter Stillman has pointed out, their journey north calls to mind immigrants illegally crossing the border from Mexico into the United States as much as it does the fugitive slaves of the antebellum era.⁴⁴ Adapting tropes from antebellum slave narratives to apply to migrant and sex workers from across the racial spectrum, the novel prompts readers to identify the distinguishing features of the current order of inequality. Here race plays a continuing role in the uneven development of global capitalism: the town of Robledo is “too poor, too black, and too Hispanic” to be an attractive site of multinational capital investment (*PS*, 106). But the racialized order of Butler’s dystopian world (which is, of course, a portrayal of the present time of the novel’s publication thinly disguised as a plausible future) exceeds the binary black-and-white logic institutionalized by antebellum U.S. slavery.

Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket* similarly revives familiar motifs from the antebellum slave narratives, such as imagery comparing human beings to animals, which evoke only to displace the racial logic of U.S. chattel slavery. In Delany’s work, as in *Parable*, the term *slavery* functions more centrally as a literal descriptor of the present than as a historical allusion. The novel opens with the making of a man into a slave by way of neurological intervention: Korga, an impoverished human male who has long been viewed as a burden to his society, is subjected to Radical Anxiety Termination, a synapse-jamming procedure that programs him to be a contented and docile slave. Colloquially known as “rats” (an acronym for the neurological procedure), slaves in Korga’s society are sold from one labor project to another, consigned to hard manual work, kept confined in cages, fed from troughs, and subjected to violent beatings and sexual abuse. References to skin color appear sporadically in the novel, but are not clearly linked to racial classifications or axes of socioeconomic power: Korga is described as having thirty percent “white” ancestry and “red-brown skin,” while one of his owners has skin that is “brown with little red at all.”⁴⁵ Height and gender are more reliable indicators of inequality than is race, as most of the slaves in the dystopian world of Rhyonon are tall and female. But the main distinguishing trait of slaves in

Rhyonon is that the medical procedure that converts them into “rats” also makes it impossible for them to process data—a form of illiteracy that proves to be severely disabling in the fictive universe of Delany’s novel, founded on the globalized exchange of information.

Because forced illiteracy serves to consolidate slave status in the invented worlds of *Parable* and *Stars*, both novels contain scenes of reading that deliberately recall antebellum slave narratives. Whereas much speculative fiction about slavery evinces strong reservations about reading, Butler and Delany closely follow ex-slave authors such as Douglass in emphasizing the vital importance of literacy to the formation of oppositional agency. The only moment of reprieve in the grim narrative of Korga’s life as a slave occurs when one of his owners provides him an opportunity to read, which, in Delany’s futuristic universe, involves direct neural access to information. Reading gives Rat Korga a newfound ability to make “a contestatory statement about his world.”⁴⁶ If literacy instills critical consciousness about existing social reality in *Stars*, Butler imbues it with the power to imagine alternate social realities. In *Parable*, the activity of reading aloud helps bind the group of fugitive slaves into a purposive, future-oriented community. In fact, the novel’s fugitive community regards universal literacy as a prerequisite for their imagined utopian society—not surprising, given the many prior references to debt slaves (who are predominantly Asian and Latino) violently punished for their illicit pursuit of literacy. As the familiar trope of the slave’s quest for literacy is transposed to futuristic systems of enslavement that are differently or ambiguously racialized, readers must stretch their imaginations to grasp the reconfiguration of inequality in the era of global capitalism.

Parable and *Stars* are rare contemporary novels about slavery that strive to identify models of political agency suited to changing dynamics of injustice and inequality. This effort often entails selective appropriation of the emancipatory strategies of nineteenth-century fugitive slave narratives, as is apparent in the ways both novels recalibrate the trope of literacy. Another striking example is the journey north in *Parable*, which is redirected in response to the ecological politics of the turn of the twenty-first century: the novel’s group of runaway slaves, described as the “crew of a modern underground railroad” (*PS*, 262), escapes north along the freeway, away from a Los Angeles in ruins and toward an agrarian commune in Canada, an urban-to-rural trajectory to freedom that reverses the plantation-to-city movement typical

of antebellum slave narratives. Regardless of whether or not we can endorse the specific contents of the emancipatory political visions of these novels,⁴⁷ they remain unique in their effort to meet the challenge Mosley poses to African American writers of speculative and science fiction—the challenge of imagining possible futures unbound by the racial scripts of the past.

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Notes

- 1 Walter Mosley, “Black to the Future,” *New York Times Magazine*, 1 November 1998, 32.
- 2 The term *neoslave narrative* was coined by Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1987) to refer to “modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (289). In the first book-length study of the genre, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy used the term in a more restricted sense to cover those post-1970s novels of slavery that adapt the conventions of the nineteenth-century fugitive slave narratives; see *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 3.
- 3 Although speculative fictions of slavery are proliferating most visibly in the United States, African, black British, and Caribbean authors are also contributing to the genre; prominent examples include Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana* (London: New Beacon, 1994), Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), and Zakes Mda’s *Cion* (New York: Picador, 2007).
- 4 The defining feature of speculative fiction is that it does not necessarily invoke scientific rationality to make sense of its departures from mundane reality. This feature is crucial to speculative fictions about slavery, as I will show later in the essay.
- 5 Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 302.
- 6 Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, 31–42, 91–92.
- 7 Ernest Gaines, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (New York: Bantam, 1971), vi.
- 8 Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Berkeley, 1986), x; Angela Davis, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” *Black Scholar* 3 (December 1971): 2–15.
- 9 Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Sally Hemings* (New York: Avon, 1979), n.p.
- 10 Jewell Parker Rhodes, *Douglass’ Women* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002), n.p.
- 11 For example, see Arlene R. Keizer, *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in*

- the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2004); and Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2002).
- 12 A. Timothy Spaulding, *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 2005), 2–3.
 - 13 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 105–23.
 - 14 Caroline Rody, *The Daughter's Return: African-American and Caribbean Women's Fictions of History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 9.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 21; Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past*, 4.
 - 16 Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (September 1982): 117.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 118, 122–23.
 - 18 Hershini Bhana Young, *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body* (Hanover, N.H.: Univ. Press of New England, 2006), 25. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *HC*.
 - 19 *HC*, 6; Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1997), 25.
 - 20 M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2005), 294. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *PC*.
 - 21 Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon, 1979), 98. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *K*.
 - 22 Morrison, “Site of Memory,” 302. The suspicion of reading shared by these novels applies only to historical documents and does not extend to the extratextual reader of these novels because the fictional imagination, unlike historical texts, can offer “total access” to slavery by way of affective immersion.
 - 23 Phyllis Alesia Perry, *Stigmata* (New York: Random House, 1998), 82. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *S*. Historian Ira Berlin notes that whereas history entails detached reconstruction of a past presumed to be distant from the present, memory offers an emotively charged understanding of the past in more proximate relation to the present (“American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice,” *Journal of American History* [March 2004]: 1264–65). As suggested by the quoted phrase from *Stigmata*—“like remembering, but more”—speculative fictions of slavery distinguish themselves even further from history by breaching whatever distance between past and present still inheres in the concept of memory, reaching for experience rather than remembrance of the past of slavery.
 - 24 Steven Barnes, *Blood Brothers* (New York: Tor Books, 1996), 233.

- 25 In contrast to the scientific worldview of the psychiatrist who dismisses Lizzie's experience of slavery as a "delusion" (S, 3), the term *stigmata*, suggested by her priest, appeals to Lizzie because it allows her to validate the suffering associated with her travels back to slavery as "an authentic experience" (S, 213).
- 26 Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (fall 2002): 773. Further references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text as "TS."
- 27 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1989), 76.
- 28 *HC*, 42; Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 168.
- 29 Barnes, *Blood Brothers*, 205.
- 30 David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 262. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CI*.
- 31 In Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1991), a fugitive slave girl becomes a vampire and time-travels through various periods stretching from the antebellum era to the mid-twenty-first century; any progressive possibilities that might be implicit in Gilda's movement forward through time are undermined by her perception of human history as marked by the recurrence of slavery.
- 32 Frank Yerby, *A Darkness at Ingraham's Crest: A Tale of the Slaveholding South* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 9.
- 33 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993), 37. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *BA*.
- 34 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, ed. Houston A. Baker Jr. (1845; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1986), 119.
- 35 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987), 105; Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Plume, 1991), 102.
- 36 Gilroy also uses the phrase "slave sublime" in relation to the politics of transfiguration (*BA*, 37)—a phrase that resonates powerfully in several speculative novels of slavery, notably *Beloved* and *Middle Passage*. On the workings of the sublime in Morrison's novel, see Madhu Dubey, "The Politics of Genre in *Beloved*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 32 (spring 1999): 200–203. In *Middle Passage*, Johnson evokes the sublime through the African deity that is unrepresentable and barely even perceptible (although tangible enough to be classified as cargo). However, even as Johnson builds up a polar opposition between Western rationality and African mysticism, he ultimately undermines it, exposing it as a by-product of Africans' violent induction into Western modernity through enslavement, a phantasmatic projection of desire on the part of slaves and ex-slaves. On the centrality of the sublime to postmodern novels about

- history, see Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001).
- 37 As mentioned previously, in *Kindred*, Dana kills the slaveowner Rufus Weylin only after she has ensured her own survival through her complicity in his rape of Alice. Dahlia in *Blood Brothers* also actively colludes in the exploitation of other slaves and gains a degree of agency (as well as guilty pleasure) from her sexual liaison with her master.
- 38 James McBride, *Song Yet Sung* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 280. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *SYS*.
- 39 Octavia E. Butler, *Wild Seed* (New York: Warner, 1988), 102, 105.
- 40 Another speculative novel of slavery, Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood: A Novel of Slavery and Freedom in an Alternate America* (New York: Aspect, 2002), draws on the device of historical inversion to defamiliarize the dualistic concept of racial difference instituted by American chattel slavery. The novel narrates an alternative history in which Africans colonized the Americas and enslaved people of European descent.
- 41 Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Warner, 1993), 109. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as *PS*.
- 42 For the most influential version of this claim, see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- 43 Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999), 4.
- 44 Peter G. Stillman, "Dystopian Critiques, Utopian Possibilities, and Human Purposes in Octavia Butler's *Parables*," *Utopian Studies* 14, no. 1 (2003): 23.
- 45 Samuel R. Delany, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (New York: Bantam, 1984), 56, 29.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 47 The political endpoint of *Parable of the Sower* is agrarian communalism, a utopian model that the sequel, *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), reveals to be untenable in the twenty-first-century context. The utopian society in *Stars in My Pocket* is organized around a socialist mode of production that is periodically allowed to revert to capitalism.