RE-MEMBERING THE NORMATIVE BLACK FEMALE BODY: 
A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF RACE, GENDER AND DISABILITY 
IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S KINDRED 
AND TONI MORRISON’S SULA

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By

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Her genitalia
will float inside a labeled
picking jar in the Musee
de l'Homme on a shelf
above Broca's brain:
"The Venus Hottentot."

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Since my own genitals are public
I have made other parts private.
   In my silence I possess
mouth, larynx, brain, in a single
gesture. I rub my hair
with lanolin, and pose in profile
like a painted Nubian

archer, imagining gold leaf
woven through my hair, and diamonds.
Observe the wordless Odalisque.¹

¹ Excerpted from Elizabeth Alexander’s “The Venus Hottentot”
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Introduction

In both Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, two seminal texts in the 20th century canon of African American women’s literature, the reader is confronted by a plethora of disjunctured black female bodies, segmented by whip lacerations, limb amputation and other forms of mutilation. These images command our attention through their difference, standing in stark contrast to our preconceived notions of corporeal normativity. But where physical disability is usually imagined to symbolize an interior defect, in neither *Kindred* nor *Sula* does bodily fragmentation correspond to inherent inferiority.\(^2\) What’s more, these novels do not limit dislocation to bodies: textual time and space is likewise segmented by the authors. As used by Butler and Morrison, dismemberment is not an easily interpreted metaphor—rather, it takes our understanding of the black female bodies portrayed in their texts in unpredictable directions. But how these authors accomplish this cannot be comprehended without investigating the culture that created our expectations of black femininity. We must extend our scope beyond the literary world before we can begin this critical inquiry to locate a point of entry to these novels, a touchstone that bridges the gap between fiction and cultural theory.

Let us consider Sara “Saartje” Baartman, also known as The Venus Hottentot, as our framing device for this critical endeavor. The Hottentot, a 19th century Khoisan slave cum European sideshow attraction, was perceived to be a body of excess for what was

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\(^2\) In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder argue that “disability has undergone a dual negation—it has been attributed to all ‘deviant’ biologies as a discrediting feature, while also serving as the material marker of inferiority itself.” Disability is made “the master trope of human disqualification” in culture as in literature (3).
deemed an overabundance of flesh in her buttocks and genitalia. Displayed for profit throughout Europe, she was at once an anomaly and yet also the quintessential black woman. According to anthropologist Sander Gilman, “in the course of the nineteenth century, the female Hottentot comes to represent the black female *in nuce* . . . . The antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty is embodied in the black, and the essential black, the lowest rung on the great chain of being, is the Hottentot” (206, 212). As the prototype of “normative” black femininity, the Venus Hottentot will serve as a template for the unfragmented black female body in this project, physically able yet disabled as a subject in a culture that posits her very race and gender as social defects. The Hottentot exemplifies two modes of cultural disability in Butler and Morrison’s respective works: first, representation by the disfiguring gaze of the dominant discourse, which sculpts black female bodies into figures of sexual deviance; and second, (re)production, implicating black women in an eternal cycle of forced labor. The Hottentot will act as a basis of comparison that will allow this project to examine the effects of amputation on black women’s representative and reproductive functions in *Kindred* and *Sula*. An analysis of the 19th-century “oddity” may help us to trace an alternative genealogy for black women’s representation—one that tells an altogether different story from the “history” produced by the dominant discourse.

The Hottentot drew crowds far and wide for a glimpse of her purportedly enormous posterior, while her elongated labia were famous in their own right. Hidden from the public eye, her genitalia were equally visible in the Western imagination as a
“deformity,” corporeally insufficient according to the norms established by the dominant discourse. As such, the Hottentot’s “excess” paradoxically constituted a lack. Among the various names for her Khoikoi genitalia, perhaps “curtain of shame” best describes the Western perception of her supposed overdevelopment—that it, and therefore she too, was a monstrosity. Baartman’s perception as irretrievably different from “normative” (white) femininity constructed her as the “essential” black woman, the “antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty” standing in polar opposition to white womanhood (Gilman 212). Following Gilman’s logic, if the Hottentot was the “essential” black woman, and the Hottentot was perceived to be disfigured, then all “able-bodied” black women were disfigured by the Western imagination. Baartman’s “oversized” sex characteristics provided so-called empirical evidence backing the Western insistence that the black female body was inherently deformed and innately hypersexual.

French anatomist Georges Cuvier’s “research” helped discursively construct the overdetermined Hottentot, providing “evidence” linking black femininity to hypersexuality. “Abnormally large” genitalia were cited as evidence of an inherent aggressive sexuality considered not only unfeminine but also dangerously masculine, with protruding labia that encroached upon the primacy of the phallus. Cuvier’s work speaks to the predominance of 19th century physiognomy, the belief that external anatomy both dictated and evidenced one’s internal essence and behavior. The Hottentot

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3 The field of disability studies identifies “disability” as a socially-constructed identity category like gender or race. Within the dominant discourse, a “deformity” is not a “property of bodies” but rather a “product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (Garland-Thomson qtd. in Jeffreys 32).
became the central image for the black female: their “primitive” genitalia were taken as external signs of their “primitive” sexual appetites, used as proof of their position at the lowest rung on the scale of human development. The confusion of the Hottentot’s physiology with her physiognomy made her physical appearance became “the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the black” (Gilman 212). Bartman’s supposedly monstrous fleshly excess was perceived to attest to her animalistic, excess sexual appetite, suggesting that the unbroken black female body is always already a deformed incarnation of womanhood in the Western imagination. While Cuvier’s “scientific” work has since been discredited, Western ideology has not entirely cast off these embedded notions. Black femininity’s conflation with inappropriate sexuality has become deeply ingrained in Western ideology. While the mythos of black women’s excess carnality has perpetuated the dominant discourse well into the 20th century and beyond, this “normative” black woman is not, in fact, essential; instead, she is an image constructed by the dominant discourse’s stare.4

Central to the Western cultural proscription of black female normativity is a mandate of productivity, requiring the body to operate in the service of the dominant discourse. The notion that a black female body existed for the use of the dominant

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4 Evelyn M. Hammonds cites Paula Giddings in her discussion of the Venus Hottentot in “Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence.” Giddings points out that the negative construction of the Hottentot’s sexuality coincided with a time period in which questions of non-enslaved blacks’ citizenship rights arose. This contradiction was “resolved” in the Western imagination by ascribing certain inherent characteristics to people of color. The belief in black peoples’, specifically black women’s, unbridled sexuality had particularly long legs, arguably extending into the present day. Thus, in the effort to maintain white male supremacy, racial difference became inextricably linked to sexual difference (Hammonds 95).
discourse was engendered by the economic system of slavery; her corpus was introduced
into the Western imagination as a slave, a being born to produce and to reproduce. The
image of the normative black female body did not, however, confine itself to the sphere
of slavery; ideology perpetually reproduced this representational fiction, enabling it to
spread far beyond slavery’s temporal and spatial limits. So while the childless Hottentot
was neither a slave nor a reproducer in the traditional sense, her gender and skin color
nonetheless also imbricated in a matrix of mandatory production. Bartman was not only
a visual commodity, she was herself a mode of production; continually reinvested each
time she mounted the sideshow stage, the Hottentot was a profit-making machine for her
captors. As a being deemed to exist solely for her handlers’ use, Bartman’s subjectivity
was entirely obliterated, transforming her from Sara the woman to the “subhuman”
Hottentot, her supposed species “difference” used to tacitly justify her economic
exploitation. Though Bartman has long been a popular subject of study precisely for her
“exceptional” nature, her use and abuse in a Western Eurocentric culture was in fact
exemplary of black women’s quotidian oppression.

Assuming the Hottentot as the embodiment of black female normativity will
allow us to see how the trope of amputation might extricate a subject from her cultural
disability. Admittedly, this hypothesis clearly does not apply to the Hottentot’s physical
person; her treatment post-mortem graphically illustrates how literal dismemberment
disintegrates the subject outside the world of the text. After her death, Bartman was
carved into pieces, her brain, genitals and skeleton displayed in Paris’ Musée de
l’Homme for public consumption. In this case, dismemberment reduced Bartman’s
humanity still further than when corporeally intact, her subjectivity disintegrated in the
transformation from body to specimen. Physical reality is an unforgiving medium,
permitting the body’s dislocation but disallowing its re-memberment.

The written word is, however, infinitely more pliable. While literal amputation
would not appear to catalyze the normative black female body’s cultural re-membrance,
literary amputation can yet have quite potent social effects. Dismemberment is a
powerful metaphor within Butler’s and Morrison’s literary texts, pictorially mapping out
an alternative to black female normativity. In order to shatter the established bounds of
black female normativity these authors must intervene in a socially-sanctioned canon of
literature and written history, disrupting the textual body of the dominant discourse.

As scribed by the dominant discourse, the past renders the black female body
doubly-servile—her producing and reproducing body is not only fiscally indispensable,
but her very existence also serves an equally important psychological function for the
cultural imagination. Morrison articulates this ideological function of skin color in

*Playing in the Dark*, arguing that:

Black slavery enriched the country’s creative possibilities. For in that
construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the
not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the
projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination.
What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to
rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a
fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely
American (38).
In this scenario, black individuals are blurred, breaking down the boundaries between persons to form a dark, murky background against which whiteness shines in sharp relief. This “fabricated brew” of “American Africanism” annihilates subjectivities, offering only stereotypes for people of color. Within this ideological schema, black women have in particular been relegated to the sidelines in minor, interchangeable roles in life and literature: while Scarlett O’Hara scandalizes Southern society they dwell in the margins, “birthin’ babies” and lacing corsets; or they are relegated offstage altogether as the “madwoman in the attic,” who exists solely as dramatic foil to Jane Eyre’s happily-ever-after.

In Saints, Sinners and Saviors Trudier Harris argues that literary representations of black women have typically been created for a white audience’s consumption, and are therefore drawn as supporting, one-dimensional characters. As such, they fall into one of three essential categories, succinctly identified in Harris’ book title. In life as in literature, “appropriate,” normative black femininity always functions for a white

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5 In Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks Donald Bogle identifies some of the prevailing cinematic stereotypes of blacks, identified in the title of his text. Among the characters Bogle explicates are Gone With the Wind’s minor characters Mammy (played by Hattie McDaniel) and Prissy (Butterfly McQueen), the latter of which uttered the infamous quote “Miz Scarlett, I don’t know nothin’ about birthin’ babies.” While both Mammy and Prissy embody typecasts as “mammy” and “pickanniny” the actors who play them simultaneously subvert these roles through their nuanced performances (xxii).

6 Madwoman in the Attic, the title of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s feminist exploration of Victorian literature, refers to Jane Eyre’s obscure character of Bertha Mason, first wife of Mr. Rochester. Gilbert and Gubar posit Mason as a “maddened double” for Jane Eyre, a “social surrogate” housing Bronte’s anxiety over her own authority as a writer in a male literary tradition (xi). Gilbert and Gubar’s in-depth analysis makes productive use of gender theory, but it fails to address how ideologies of race and imperialism inform Bronte’s novel. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls our attention to Bertha Mason’s construction as a “Third World Woman,” a figure of alterity who “renders the human/animal frontier . . . acceptably indeterminate so that a good greater than the letter of the Law can be broached” (254, 247). Mason’s “not-yet-human” Otherness (made apparent to the reader through her “madness”) weakens her marital claim on her husband “under the spirit if not the letter of the Law;” this, in turn, effectively conceals from the reader the illegality and immorality of Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre’s polygamous relationship (249).
population, embodied in the following typecasts: the disciplinarian, keeping “black men in line” for whites; the mammy, “specifically conceived to provide broad bosoms of comfort for whites;” or the Jezebel, lusty figures of “sexuality and animalism . . . considered to lead upstanding, Christian white men astray during and after slavery” (Harris 2).

While these stereotypes took their recognizable shapes centuries ago, they have persisted far beyond the antebellum American South. Diane Roberts articulates these ideologies’ spatiotemporal spread in *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*:

> It is over thirty-five years since Authurine Lucy walked a gauntlet of students screaming “Kill her!” to enter a classroom at the University of Alabama; over thirty-five years since Rosa Parks sparked the Montgomery bus boycott by refusing to give her seat to a white man; thirty years since Fannie Lou Hamer was shot at by Mississippi night riders for registering to vote. We in the United States have had at least three decades of powerful, passionate images of black women (and men) to complicate and challenge three hundred years of stereotypes, and yet the best-known black woman’s face in the land looks out from a box of pancake mix (iii).

History, as recorded and remembered by the dominant discourse, has permanently engraved indelible stereotypes of black femininity onto the collective unconscious. So despite valiant efforts to redeem black womanhood from misperception, individual subjectivities comprising the minoritized group remain hidden, cloaked by constructed categories as mammies or harlots.

As Roberts points out, protest successfully altered segregation laws, but had little effect on the public’s perceptions of black female normativity. Recuperating black womanhood from the dominant discourse’s grasp would therefore appear to necessitate
unconventional methodology, requiring alternative means to enact change. Because their contemporary moment rendered it all but impossible to alter the black female script through conventional means, many black women writers used fiction as a tool to rewrite past and future history. Fiction is a fluid, permissible space, and can be used to stage racial and gender politics in unconventional ways, for fantasy can reject unilateral history and manipulate time, space and bodies to alter them from their normative states. In so doing, fiction can ferret out and make visible the fissures in a monochrome past, the places and spaces where minority subjectivities have traditionally been hidden. When the novel is usurped from the exclusive domain of the white male, the genre become a site of subversion for the black female body. 7

Because Kindred and Sula are two literary exemplars of the novel form’s subversive potential, this project elects to examine them in conjunction with one another; for as Diana R. Paulin has suggested in her own criticism of Kindred, “collisions between texts provide a complex view of opposing, interrelated representations,” as “layered representations challenge static meanings, leave ambivalent space for alternative definitions” (189). The multiple breaks in time, space and bodies that recur in both of these works of fiction suggest to us that the trope of disability informs both novels at the level of form and content, signifying quite differently from its normative cultural

7 From the latter half of the 18th century into the 20th century, novelists have favored the format of the Bildungsroman, tracing a central character’s trajectory of personal growth. But critic Christy Rishoi observes that non-white, non-male characters rarely chart the solitary, linear path of development dictated by the Bildungsroman. Furthermore, by ascribing to Hegelian ideas of selfhood, privileging the individual over the social, the Bildungsroman “fails to reflect the lived realities of individuals who are not of white male European background” (Rishoi 60).
meaning. Textual dismemberment ties these fictional works to a common project: Butler and Morrison are bound by a shared methodology, employing amputation, literal and metaphorical, as a means of exposing the construction of black women’s bodies as culturally disabled. Both authors use disfigurement as a mode of subversion, employing it to rupture the boundaries of black female normativity.

Read in conjunction with one another, *Kindred* and *Sula* form two halves of a longer narrative, one that spans from the enslaved past onward to an eventual future; together, these novels articulate an alternative trajectory for the black female body. Returning to a past temporality dismembers the representations of this body that have historically disfigured it, allowing this corpus to defy the spatial limitations of normativity constructed by the dominant discourse.

My intervention in the existing body of criticism on *Kindred* and *Sula* examines the reconstruction of the past in conjunction with the reconstruction of the black female body, locating instances where time, body and space rupture to reveal corporeality’s intersection with history. This project is not the first critical investigation into *Kindred* and *Sula*’s dislocation and manipulation of time and space, as I address in later sections. However, previous scholarly works have tended to elide the black female body’s material conditions as irrelevant to a critical investigation. In so doing, these works have sacrificed the material black female body in the service of immaterial theory, unwittingly

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8 As posited by Mitchell and Snyder in *Narrative Prosthesis*, disability is a cultural signifier for internal deviance or defect.
mimicking the white masculinist discourse they purport to challenge.⁹ In fact, the cultural condition of black womanhood cannot be unentwined from its bodily condition, as evidenced in the construction of the Hottentot. The imposition of disability upon the Hottentot by way of her corporeal representation as disfigured suggests that the cultural condition of black womanhood is irrevocably bound to the condition of the body. The body has for centuries served to define black femininity in the Western imagination—corporeal misrepresentation constructed the normative black woman as an emblem of grotesque sexuality, while the supposed superior physical capability of the black female body has been used to justify her ensnarement in an exploitative web of production. Her body is her self within an ideology that attempts to erase racialized and gendered subjectivities, and cannot be separated from her past.

A critical inquiry into black women’s cultural histories must acknowledge their physical existence, for these histories are written onto the black female body, in the corporeal language of whip marks, or the scars of the dominant discourse’s disfiguring stare. This investigation examines spatio-temporal fragmentation in conjunction with bodily breakage in order to locate the fissures in black womanhood’s construction, the places where normativity refuses to hold. Charting these loci of rupture helps this critical endeavor to forge an understanding of how these novels remove the cultural prosthesis

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⁹ Dominant discourses from classical philosophy onward have held that history and the body occupy two separate realms; while the former recounts the disembodied accomplishments of its white male heroes, the latter is irrevocably grounded in the material.
that perpetually disables the black female body. Butler and Morrison dismember both the past and the black female body in order to rewrite the future.

By explicating *Kindred* and *Sula* through a trifocal lens that intersects theories of race, gender and disability, this project uncovers the cultural disability that is always already a condition of the black female body. Amputation is shown to have a re-membering effect on the textual worlds and characters explored in this project: a dislocation of time, space and bodies makes visible black femininity’s construction as a representation, a product of the dominant discourse’s (mis)perceptions.

For the purposes of this project, disability theory’s engagement with how the physically “impaired” person navigates a cultural landscape must be reconceptualized to include race and gender. In a cultural vacuum rendering race and gender non-existent, the able body would always enjoy normativity as a privilege. Because flexibility is a post-Industrial capitalist measure of success, physical mobility is equated with cultural mobility; the higher one climbs the social ladder, it is said, the more options become available for the fit and free body’s enjoyment (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 5). While this may indeed be true for the cultural baseline of the white male body, the statement refuses to hold when race and gender become visible. Close readings of *Kindred* and *Sula* reveal that able-bodiedness is not always an indicator of cultural freedom for the black female body, but is instead a form of cultural disability. The gaze of the dominant discourse imagines the normative black woman as hyper-capable, a superior physical specimen for sexual, productive and reproductive labor, rendering her body a being that
exists not for itself, but in the service of the dominant discourse. The same gaze that constructs the black female body’s physical capability simultaneously disfigures her within the cultural landscape by projecting onto that body invented mythologies of her innate servitude and sexual lasciviousness. These fictions are made “fact” by ideology, continually reproduced and over time cemented in the cultural imagination. But as seen in Butler and Morrison’s novels, text can be employed to fragment a history of cultural disability and unravel artificially-imposed ideas of black female normativity, for dismemberment, acted upon time, space and textual bodies, can potentially re-member the discursive body comprising the cultural imagination.

In the pages that follow, this project will examine moments of fragmentation in both *Kindred* and *Sula*, exploring the fissures in time, space and bodies that reveal black women’s cultural disability in a society constructed by a white male gaze. These sites of dislocation attest to both authors’ subversive use of the novel form. Text serves as a means to rupture the ideological strictures enforcing mandates of productivity and reproductivity upon the black female body. In this critical inquiry, we will see how fiction can work to shatter a white male lens and ultimately refigure black female normativity.
Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

A number of critics have been quick to devalue the political impact of Butler’s *Kindred*, perhaps because it defies easy classification: partly science fiction, partly black feminist, it falls squarely into neither category. But this analysis is inclined to agree with Roger Luckhurst’s assertion that, to the contrary, “Butler’s signifying upon both historical texts of the black tradition and the sly rewriting of science fiction tropes” is “the perfect instance of black double-voicedness” (30). It is precisely this amalgamation of genre that allows Butler to create a dialogue between two disparate moments in time. *Kindred* textually facilitates its protagonist’s passage between an antebellum Maryland plantation and 1976 Los Angeles, insisting that the present is only alterable by way of the past. Butler’s text vivisects spatiotemporality in order to dismember history; in turn, the construction of normative black femininity is illuminated, revealing the dominant discourse’s mandate of compulsory production and reproduction.

Critic Angelyn Mitchell has addressed Butler’s manipulation of time in her work, opining that “using the bicentennial in conversation with slavery” not only “reveals inherent contradictions in American history,” but also “force[s] the reader to consider the relation of the past in constructing the future” (53). Mitchell’s argument that Butler challenges history in order to revise the 19th century female emancipatory narrative is a convincing one. Mitchell defines Kindred as a “liberatory narrative,” as a text that

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10 Charles Johnson accuses Butler’s work of “plung[ing] so deeply into fantasy that revelation of everyday life . . . disappears” (qtd. in Luckhurst 30).
11 Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* exemplifies the sort of 19th century emancipatory narrative Mitchell refers to. The prefatory note of legitimacy that opens the narrative may cause the astute
“seeks to eclipse the racialized and deterministic condition of enslavement by revealing empowering volitional strategies,” thus implying that the antebellum slave period and the late 20th century are perfect parallels whereby liberation from slavery equals contemporary freedom from oppression (A. Mitchell 53). While this project does not deny the strong connection between the disparate temporalities, it elects to takes a different direction in its intervention, arguing instead a link between the past and the present created by textual dismemberment. The dislocation of spatio-temporality makes possible the re-appropriation of black female subjectivities by black female bodies.

Ashraf Rushdy’s discussion of temporality in Kindred is also useful to this particular project’s intervention. According to Rushdy, the science-fictional convention of time travel signifies memory as a mode of temporal transportation; memory is not, then, a scrapbook of still images, but instead a process of piecing together a fragmented past with transformative powers for the remembering subject (136). Rushdy’s assertion that the novel intercedes in cultural histories in order to alter them establishes two components essential to my own argument: first, he challenges the idea of a singular, monolithic past, suggesting that histories are both multiple and subjective; and second, Rushdy posits time as fluid, rendering past, present and future subject to change. Assuming these two postulates, we can argue that time is productively dislocated in Kindred: Butler’s temporal manipulations reveal both how the black woman’s
proscription to laboring roles is born out of an enslaved past, and how the assumption of 
the black woman’s bodily capability culturally disables her person in the present 
historical moment.

The disability a black female body experiences manifests itself somewhat 
differently from how it imposes itself upon other races and genders. A central tenet of 
disability studies holds that the cultural imagination perceives the able body to be a site 
of jouissance, a playground for pleasure that is unruly and free\textsuperscript{12}. Its nightmare is, then, 
the body that is deformed, maimed, mutilated or diseased (Davis, \textit{Enforcing Normalcy} 5). 
But for a marginalized minority group like African American women, the physically 
capable body is anything but free, for historically, able-bodiedness has only consigned 
black women to perpetual exploitation. Suppose, however, that the ideological schema 
entwining physical ability with cultural disability were reversed; would physical 
disability confer cultural capability? Octavia Butler textually stages this scenario in 
\textit{Kindred}, using the trope of disability to hypothesize an alternative for black women 
outside a web of economic and sexual enslavement.

\textit{Kindred} uses text to deconstruct the body of the female slave, revealing that body 
to be a canvas upon which beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality are marked. Of the 
many mythologies ascribed to black women, one of the most persistent declares their

\textsuperscript{12} In his seminar \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis}, Jacques Lacan explicates the concept of jouissance in 
conjunction with pleasure. The pleasure principle compels the subject to limit enjoyment, setting a 
threshold for pleasure that cannot be crossed. Nevertheless, the subject continues his attempts to surpass 
the pleasure principle, in order to achieve still greater pleasure. But beyond the threshold is not more 
pleasure, because there is only so much pleasure a subject can endure, but pain; this painful pleasure is 
what Lacan labels \textit{jouissance}. 

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superior physical capacity for labor. As imagined by racist discourse, skin color inscribes both the exterior and interior of the black body with extraordinary physical capabilities, compelling that body to work in the service of white masculinity. But capability is tinged with irony for the black female body, as this purportedly extraordinary physical agility is simultaneously a mode by which he or she is culturally disabled: bodily strength also implies excessive, animalistic passions and suitability for slave labor (Smith 316). Following this line of reasoning, racist logic dictates that blackness is therefore also indicative of inferiority, a somatic marker of subhumanity that stands in stark contrast to “civilized” white skin.

Scientific attempts to “prove” this circular logic collapse when confronted with our contemporary understanding of evolution, which declares all human races to be of the same taxonomic species. So if blacks are not literally born to be servile, then the notion that they are must be a deliberate construction. A racial hierarchy positing the black body as biologically-programmed to produce is not spontaneously generated—it is, rather, a strategic construction, ideologically implanted by a slave economy’s owners of production. White masculinity stabilizes and solidifies its own elevated position by naturalizing the cultural pecking order, constructing blacks as interchangeable producers and reproducers for their social superiors.

Since black female bodies first arrived into captivity in the antebellum United States they have been ensnared in an ongoing cycle of production and reproduction, toiling in fields and kitchens or harvesting new worker bodies. These bodies have been
constructed as monetary and sexual capital by the white male gaze, ascribed substantial
use value in both economies as perpetual producers. But the black female body’s greatest
contribution to the dominant discourse has been through its cultural performance: the
mere fact of this body’s visibility not only illustrates but reproduces the very ideologies
that render black femininity intrinsically disabled.

Though herself childless, the Venus Hottentot, this project’s framing device, was
also nevertheless imbricated within matrices of forced (re)production. A closer look at
how her body functioned to produce reveals the inextricable link between compulsory
black female reproduction and cultural disability. The “normative” black woman’s ability
to manually produce and sexually reproduce has historically fixed her disadvantaged
place within a capitalist economy, eternally beholden to the white male owners of
production. Likewise, Baartman’s capability of accruing money as a visual commodity
enslaved her body within that same economic system. The Hottentot’s body acted not
only as a mode of monetary production, continually reinvested in an exploitative
economic relationship with her handlers each time she mounted a freak show platform;
hers hypervisible cultural performance as the “essential” black woman also reproduced
and perpetuated stereotypes of “bestial” black femininity, even after her death. Images of
the Hottentot’s “disfigured” corpus were reproduced in print journals as irrefutable
scientific evidence of the sexual aggressiveness and suitability that gendered and
racialized physical traits assigned to her body. As the symbol of normative black
femininity the Hottentot’s body was also a reproducer of the very ideology that constructed her cultural disability.

Such ideological propaganda has capably concealed the black female body’s construction, ascribing to it an innate capacity for labor and using that body as propaganda to perpetuate this mythology. This act of willful cultural amnesia has allowed the creators of the normative black female body to deny any involvement in its genesis. Once set in motion by an invisible white hand, black women’s disability is self-propagating, as their visible cultural performances as laborers are used to evidence an innate suitability to production. Long after the initial act of enslavement, physically able black female bodies continued to exist within the cultural imagination as beings existing for the dominant discourse, harlots brimming with sexual passions or mammies with capable arms to coddle and nurture. This cultural relationship between master (owner of the means of production) and slave (the means) has been mimicked in many literary representations of black women from the slave era into the present. When they appear in both fiction and non-fiction texts black women are often depicted as servile to society’s owners of the means of production.\textsuperscript{13}

Butler’s \textit{Kindred}, however, breaks from that established literary tradition positing black women in service of the dominant discourse. In Butler’s novel, amputation acts as

\textsuperscript{13} In “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the ‘Other’” Valerie Smith supports a convincing claim that even in oppositional discourse, “when black women operate . . . as a sign for the author’s awareness of materialist concerns, then they seem to be fetishized in much the same way as they are in mass culture;” they are “employed, if not sacrificed, to humanize their white superordinates, to teach them something about the content of their own subject positions” (317). In other words, black women’s very textual existence is contingent on their ability to help define white subjectivities.
a mechanism by which a linear history of oppression is dislocated, through both temporal and bodily breakage. In this text, the link between time and the fleshly body is made apparent; marked with physical and psychic losses, the black female body becomes a site of historical re-membrance. By means of temporal manipulation, amputating chunks of time to join non-linear moments, Kindred makes bodily fissures and absences legible to the contemporary reader’s eye. In turn, these corporeal loci reveal the lie of a “natural” affinity to servitude, narrating the production of the black female body as a (re)producer.

Lisa A. Long’s reading of Kindred as “a pedagogy of African American history grounded in physical wounds and psychological violations” in “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s Kindred and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s Stigmata” is particularly useful to this critical endeavor (461). Long imagines history as a living corporeal entity, asserting that “the past courses through our veins . . . vital markers of an increasingly distant, and then impotent, history” (462). Within the critic’s interpretive framework, a 20th century body of flesh still carries the very real wounds and scars that slavery has inflicted.

Through the plot mechanism of time travel, Dana’s body relives the trauma as it is remade into the body of a female slave. Kindred systematically corrupts normative black femininity as Dana travels back and forth through time, ultimately bringing back to 1976 Los Angeles a dismembered body marred with wounds and scars. The amputation enacted on Dana’s body makes visible the discourse that inscribes and disables the “normative” black female body, effectively rupturing the cultural body of memory. Her
dismembered body sheds the cultural prosthesis that normalizes the woman of color’s eternal servitude. When this constructed skeleton is dismantled, a mutilated corpus remains in its wake, visible evidence of the infliction of cultural disability. Her ability to traverse time periods renders Dana the corporeal juncture where history converges with the contemporary moment— *she* is a phantom limb, a living reminder of a slave past that is always already present.

Each of Dana’s scarred body parts narrates one of the many stories comprising a cultural history. Her back, for instance, is inscribed with the suppression of female literacy and enforcement of production. Punishment for Dana’s transgression comes in the form of the whip, an instrument of discipline that excises chunks of corporeal flesh. The whip beats submission into her body, molding it into its role as a proper producer: “it came—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin” (107). The whip inscribes the body not only with flesh lacerations, but also with the marks of a cultural text. An imposition of external meanings robs the slave body of subjectivity, reducing him to an objectified, mute possession. African names, kin, linguistic and ritual connections are wiped clean in the Middle Passage, where he or she becomes a quantity rather than a qualitative being. As a fresh slate, the body becomes an imaginative surface upon which the master impresses his own needs and desires (Spillers 67).

Lost in the final confrontation between her slave body and Master Rufus, Dana’s amputated arm has drawn a good deal of critical attention, with scholars offering various
theories as to its symbolic significance. As Dana makes the final passage between spatio-temporal dimensions she frees herself from imminent rape, or forced sexual labor, by murdering her would-be attacker. According to Ashraf Rushdy, the process severs ties to Rufus, the loss of her arm enacting a metaphorical disrelation from her white master (146). Roger Luckhurst reads the loss as a “marker of the constant need to negotiate with a legacy that still scars the present” (32), while Steinberg makes a similar claim, that “Dana’s psychological dispossession is mirrored by the actual loss of a body part—an arm—relegated forever to another, irretrievable era” (469). All of these assertions are valid, and in fact support this project’s own hypothesis. But in concentrating solely on amputation’s theoretical significance, these critics ignore its material consequences. Amputation does not merely symbolize Dana’s extrication from a web of oppression, it literally opens up alternatives outside the productive and reproductive norms enslaving Dana in both the slave era and her own time.

It is important to note that Butler establishes Dana’s entrapment in not one, but two matrices of mandatory labor: that of antebellum slavery, and also of 1976 Los Angeles. Dana’s employment options in 1976 reveal slavery’s lasting legacy upon Butler’s contemporary moment. Eschewing both domestic and secretarial work, Dana attempts to free herself from the roles that black female normativity proscribes. But for a black woman, there are rarely viable employment alternatives that do not circumscribe her into a productive role. Dana therefore ekes out a means of subsistence by working out of a “casual labor agency,” nicknamed the “slave market,” for minimum wage (Butler
In the temporal space of 1976 Los Angeles, the job market was so bleak that even menial labor jobs were few and far between, such that “if you wanted them to think about using you, you went to their office around six in the morning, signed in, and sat down to wait” (Butler 52). While Dana remarks that the “slave market” “was just the opposite of slavery” (Butler 52), the two settings are more analogous than the character’s consciousness perceives. Technically speaking, the free worker is indeed the “opposite” of the slave laborer, but Butler raises doubts as to whether the worker is ever really “free” in a capitalist economy. The worker, like a slave, has no choice in what task he performs, for economic circumstances dictate that “you did whatever you were sent out to do” (Butler 52). Dana’s contention that work was “always mindless,” “and as far as most employers were concerned, it was done by mindless people” speaks to the cultural perception of the worker as body only, a mere physical producer (Butler 52). Like slaves, deemed but three-fifths human by official Census records, day laborers are “nonpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks” (Butler 52). In exchange for the minimum hourly wage, “free” workers sell their bodies as temporary property of their employers. They are therefore fungible, liquid commodities, both mutually interchangeable and easily traded—precisely the appeal of slave labor to a newborn United States’ burgeoning capitalist economy.

Slaves’ “fungibility” not only served a crucial economic purpose for their masters, but also performed an ideological objective, according to Saidiya H. Hartman. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Hartman
claims that the interchangeability of the slave “makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values” (21). In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” Hortense Spillers explicates in minute detail the ideological process of extracting a slave’s subjectivity, specifically focusing her attention on how a female slave is produced. Prior to captivity, the body “focuses a private and particular space, at which point of convergence biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join” (Spillers 67). But enslavement disrupts this organism by imposing artificial uses:

1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor; 3) in this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of “otherness”; 4) as a category of “otherness,” the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general “powerlessness,” resonating through various centers of human and social meaning (Spillers 67).

This process enslaves black bodies even as it exonerates white masculinity; people of color, women in particular, were transformed into beings of sexual excess while simultaneously divorced from their own sexual subjectivities. Ideology spins a web of oppression that justifies sexual brutality toward black women, rendering their bodies usable, violable spaces. Nowhere is this more evident in Kindred than in the sexual and psychological abuse inflicted upon Dana’s ancestor, Alice.14

14 Of note, Alice is also Dana’s doppelganger. This visual doubling suggests that they are avatars of each other, bodies that could be identical save for geographic and temporal differences. Bound by blood, the
As postulated by Spillers, a slave economy legalizes corporeal theft, constructing the black female body as property when money is exchanged between white male hands. Payment confers ownership in a capitalist economy, rendering Alice’s body “not mine, his” (Butler 167), and therefore obliged to perform sexual labor for Master Rufus upon command. The reader witnesses her transformation from free woman to slave as Alice’s body stages the systematic process of its bestialization, making visible a procedure typically concealed by the dominant discourse. The attempt to exercise free will and extricate herself from a sexual servitude turns her into literal animal food: caught running away with a slave husband, her captors “just let the dogs chew on her,” leaving a gaping hole in her thigh “where a dog had literally torn away a mouthful” (Butler 148, 153).

Assumed to be brimming with animal passions, Alice’s body is constructed as a rapable space, an always-already open vessel that simultaneously contains white male culpability for sexual violence. As a black woman, she makes the perfect victim: posited as the predator, Alice engulfs any blame or guilt that her rapist may have. She is constructed to be an opening whose sole purpose is her master’s sexual satisfaction.

The brutal amputation of Alice’s flesh scars both mind and psyche, but also brings to light this web of legalized sexual oppression. Admonishments that “you think you’re white!” and “‘you don’t know your place any better than a wild animal’” (Butler 164) are speech acts that verbally construct Alice’s perceived bestiality. Long after her violent sexual violence inflicted upon Alice also marks her great-great granddaughter; we therefore may read her trauma as part of Dana’s corporeal narrative.
punishment for attempting an escape, “a big ugly scar” would remain, staying with her “for the rest of her life,” making the production of her animal “nature” visible (Butler 154). Sexual brutality is inscribed upon her body as a decipherable marker for the modern reader to interpret, a print that makes legible the history that justifies the sexual use and abuse of the black female body.

In addition to its use-value as a penetrable sexual space, the “dispossessed” slave body also became a “surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantee[d] his disembodied universality and act[ed] as the sign of his power and dominion” (Hartman 21). One of corporeal dispossessing’s greatest advantages for the dominant discourse was its allowance for white masculinity to disconnect from its own bodily presence, liberating the mind from material limits. While slave bodies performed the labor necessary to sustain his plantation, a master could capitalize on their work from a distance, freeing his own body to cross the pleasure threshold into the realm of jouissance.

This ideology that freed white male bodies was used to enslave all African Americans, but it doubly enslaved the female slave; her body was not only expected to produce, it was also compelled to reproduce. In Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery Jennifer L. Morgan claims that within the antebellum slave system, the black female provided free labor not only as a field hand and domestic servant, but also as producer of new slaves, a function that exponentially increased the use-value of the female body (77). As a tradable commodity, the body of a slave was a
mathematical equation, a numerical sum of its use-values. Where a male might have been quantified according to his manual labor output, a female’s worth was derived by a more complex equation: she was calculated by both her productivity and \textit{re}productivity, for her breeding capacity was a potential goldmine. A female slave’s reproductive capability equaled earnings for the master, multiplying the number of bodies over whom he had ownership.

Reproduction, particularly as it pertains to black women, is a highly overdetermined concept, laden with multiple and often contradictory meanings dependent on racial and gendered perspective. The predominant mythology of our contemporary cultural imagination paints a pretty picture of black women’s reproductive history. Jennifer L. Morgan argues that “‘Motherhood’ occupies mythic proportions in the African American historical narrative. The imaginary past is peopled with selfless women working endless hours to support their children—mamas with expansive hearts and bosoms and a ferocious protectiveness, warriors who shouldered weapons while nursing babies” (113). This image supports several stereotypes. For one, it speaks to the normative black woman’s innate mothering skills, a body constructed to attend to the needs of others. It also posits this body as physically superior in strength, built to breed and to work. Imagined to be biologically-programmed thus, this reproducing mother would consider it not a duty but a privilege to devote her life to the care of others. However, the lived reality of the reproducer is quite different from the ideological fantasy. A reproductive mandate keeps the black woman’s subjectivity enslaved, forcing
her into a subservient role. Childbirth has traditionally confined the laboring body to a limited domestic sphere, denying her alternative possibilities beyond motherhood.

*Kindred* disrupts the cultural fantasy of African American motherhood, calling attention to the ways in which reproduction polices the boundaries of black female normativity.\(^\text{15}\) Master Weylin’s treatment of an anonymous reproductive slave woman explodes the dominant discourse’s maternal mythologies of black femininity. Weylin rewards this woman’s body of flesh by sparing the whip, but in turn inflicts a far more heinous trauma upon her, “selling off her children . . . one by one” (Butler 192). Slave motherhood’s reality, as depicted in *Kindred*, speaks to Jennifer L. Morgan’s contention that a female slave may have greeted pregnancy with fear rather than elation—every birth is another slave, belonging not to her but to her master. In stark contradiction to the ideologically-imagined slave mother, an actual slave woman may in fact have taken measures to avoid childbirth. Morgan theorizes that “an unwanted but unstoppable pregnancy might have illustrated one’s powerlessness” rather than her agency, supporting the critic’s claim that “low birth rates among enslaved women can be traced to their refusal to bear children whose future could only hold enslavement” (J. L. Morgan 113).

\(^{15}\) Jo-Ann Morgan’s “Mammy the Huckster: Selling the Old South for the New Century” argues that he dominant discourse’s fantasy of black motherhood is realized in the figure of the mammy a caretaker for white children depicted in iconography as “a presence both nurturing and well-nourished” (98-99). Imagined as “large, able, and dressed for work” (100), the perpetual black mother and servant “up[held] family values by serving as a surrogate parent” “in the wake of war, Reconstruction, and a period of unprecedented government and corporate corruption” during the Grant administration (98-99). This mythology extended far beyond Reconstruction, however, persisting into the 20th century and beyond, pigeon-holing black women into maternal, domestic roles.
All things considered, black women’s reproductive capacity made them decidedly more valuable than black men to their owners. As a result, efforts to contain female slaves within servile roles as breeders and producers would have been redoubled. Maintaining black, especially black female, illiteracy was therefore a crucial aspect of enslavement, as it allowed literate masters to contain slaves within culturally-constructed boundaries. White masculinity’s most obvious argument against slave literacy was an economic one: time spent away from work results in an immediate loss of profit. Pursuits engaging the mind rather than the body, such as reading or writing, would have been seen as a misappropriation of time. Labor time is money for the slave owner; everything else that the slave does is merely a drain on the master’s pocket. Mr. Weylin’s angry charge to Dana that “I treated you good . . . and you pay me back by stealing from me! Stealing my books! Reading!” (Butler 107) conflates reading with “stealing,” as unproductive time costs the master money; the black body’s capacity for knowledge would have posed a direct threat to productivity.

As higher-order skills preoccupying the mind rather than body, reading and writing were privileges reserved for whites only in the early American colonies. While literacy certainly facilitated personal communication for slave owners, its main purpose was utilitarian, used primarily as a means of accounting, taking inventory, keeping plantation records, and drafting wills. Through these records, colonial slaveholders enacted a “moral grammar” establishing a language of slave ownership (J. L. Morgan 69). The act of writing transformed enslaved persons into numerical values and
inheritable property, effectively obliterating their qualitative individuality and subjectivity.

When wielded by a white master, literacy acted as a weapon, inscribing slavery onto the cultural landscape as surely as the whip wrote slavery onto a body of flesh. But the ability to read and write could also open up alternative possibilities for slaves beyond manual labor or reproduction, closing the gap between master and slave. Literacy would have given slaves the ability to forge free papers, conferring liberation of the flesh, read the Bible, freeing the religious spirit, and record the births of children, allowing slaves to assert domestic control, self-defining the family. Slave literacy, then, imposed a multiplicity of threats upon a system of slave ownership, of which literacy’s representative worth was perhaps most dangerous. For enslaved peoples, the ability to read and write symbolically equaled bodily freedom—the desire for one necessarily translated into the desire for the other. Equally troublesome was the potential contagion of slave literacy; one slave could pass his skills onto another, thereby spreading reading and writing like a communicable disease.

With the supremacy of the white man at stake, slave literacy was actively and often cruelly suppressed. The anonymous mother discussed earlier in this section, whose children were sold into captivity, also happens to be literate. When her former master discovers this woman’s forbidden capabilities, he subjects her to brutal corporeal punishment. Butler takes a literal approach in illustrating the cultural construction of the female slave, calling attention to the extreme measures taken to discipline and construct
the body as inferior: “her former master had cut three fingers from her right hand when he caught her writing” (Butler 191). Despite the threat of severe punishment, the slave woman has acquired the uniquely human ability to communicate through the written word. The very fact of this woman’s literacy proves the lie of black femininity’s biological subhumanity.

The narrative train flows uninterrupted from the subject of literacy to reproduction, as the text continues that “She had a baby nearly every year, that woman. Nine so far, seven surviving” (Butler 191). The proximity of literacy to childbirth within the text links these seemingly unrelated topics, suggesting an inversely proportional relationship between them: literacy signals an effort to extend one’s role beyond animal servitude while proper reproduction keeps the female slave within acceptable boundaries. Dana’s musing that “Weylin called her a good breeder, and he never whipped her” (Butler 192) insinuates that reproduction protects the physical body, a logical conclusion given the laboring vessel’s economic value. A shrewd businessman would take pains to maintain the physical integrity of a prized cash-cow. But even as it protects, reproduction clearly confers its own form of punishment upon the black female body.

The master graphically and symbolically demonstrates his absolute power by chopping off fingers as he wrenches newborn babies away from their black slave mother, or by denying her the capacity to write, effectively annihilating any alternative possibilities for her person besides reproduction. But even as amputation is used as a means of constructing the female slave’s body as a reproducer, conferring cultural
disability, at the level of the text it works to de-construct, for the bodily fissure makes visible to the modern reader the process by which a slave is produced. In *Kindred*, remembering history does not merely plug up the absences, it rearranges and revises the dominant discourse’s existing narrative, assigning the black female body as its scribe. Traditionally, the privilege of writing, and the power that it wields, has belonged to the master and never the slave. While the black female body was always inscribable, the woman herself was always denied the opportunity to write her own script. Because history exists primarily in the form of written text, it is always already spoken in the voice of white masculinity, eliding the lived reality of the marginalized.

Amputation reveals a hidden history of black womanhood, a past that must be recovered if black women are to reclaim the subjectivities captured in slavery. Barbara Christian compellingly argues that “we must recall the past, those parts that we want to remember, those parts that we want to forget,” in order to attain psychic wholeness (qtd. in Rushdy 139). While Christian’s emphasis on recovering the past is key to this project, I must question her assertion that a return to “wholeness” is ever truly possible. Christian holds “wholeness” up as the ideal to which black femininity must strive, unwittingly calling for a continued prostheticization of the black female body. In “Inverting History in Octavia Butler’s Postmodern Slave Narrative,” Marc Steinberg follows Christian’s line of reasoning, asserting that Butler “fills in” the gaps of classic slave narratives (467). Like Christian, Steinberg understands “wholeness” as the ultimate goal for black feminity. This notion is, however, potentially counterproductive, falling into the
essentializing pattern set by the dominant discourse. The myth of wholeness establishes a singular ideal that in turn, disables all people who fall below (Davis, “Constructing Normalcy” 25).

In Scenes of Subjection, Hartman offers a theory that productively complicates Christian’s argument, suggesting instead that “the very consciousness of disconnectedness acts of mode of testimony and memory” (74). Hartman posits that a “recognition of loss” can begin to “redress the breach introduced by slavery” by “re-membering the pained body, not by way of a simulated wholeness but precisely through the recognition of the amputated body in its amputatedness, in the insistent recognition of the violated body as human flesh” (74). Amputation does not restore the body to its pre-slave condition; rather, it exposes completeness as the fantasy of the dominant discourse. Instead of “filling in,” or prostheticizing, historical gaps, Butler’s text calls for an acknowledgement of the absence embedded in a black female history. This can only be accomplished through a complete historical rewrite, rather than an amendment of the past according to the dominant discourse.

The suppression of slave voices whitewashed the past as remembered by the dominant discourse, allowing for a romantic notion of antebellum America based on slaveowners’ egalitarian ideals to persist. Kindred suggests that the unsightly blemishes of slavery have been covered over so as not to disrupt this invented history. This prostheticization is literalized in the text when Dana revisits the former site of the Weylin plantation to find all evidence of slavery vanished: “Rufus’ house was gone. As nearly as
we could tell, its site was now covered by a broad field of corn. The house was dust, like Rufus” (Butler 262). The only existing records of slave lives are found in newspapers, where they “were listed by their first names with their approximate ages and their skills given” (Butler 262-63). Actual pain and loss is forgotten as time covers the inconvenient holes in white male history, just as it hides the physical site of the plantation.

As slaves earned their freedom, slave narratives began to emerge, written in an effort to counter objectification and dehumanization through first-hand accounts. But the efficacy of a verbal text in relating the slave experience is questionable. Traditionally, the written word is placed at a remove from the body, concentrating its attention on sensations of the mind unbound to the material corpus. On the other hand, the bodily experience of a slave is inextricable from the psychical, for slave existence is governed by bodily labor and discipline. So while verbal narratives are laudable efforts to translate the slave experience into text, traditional forms of text are resistant media to bodily experience, and arguably fail to convey the “incontestable reality of the body” (Scarry qtd. in Barrett 62).

Because written texts lack the capacity to relate the experience of the body, Dana’s black female body becomes a text in *Kindred*. Restored to 1976, Dana returns a re-figured body, psychologically re-membered and physically dis-membered. Less one arm, Dana is no longer able to perform the physical labor demanded by the “slave market,” nor can she type husband Kevin’s manuscript, thus averting his expectation that she should work for him; and even her domestic abilities to cook and clean are
compromised by her missing arm. Because Dana’s physical capability is marred, she no longer fits into the mold of black female normativity, a constructed body brimming with animal passions and born to labor. Amputation thus reclaims Dana’s stolen subjectivity, making impossible these forms of labor and making visible her historical scars. Given *Kindred*’s first-person narration, the text opens up the speculative possibility that it is itself Dana’s masterpiece, the book she always planned to write. Told in the voice of a black woman who has traversed the boundaries of time and space, *Kindred* rewrites the history books, addressing and re-dressing the normative black female body in the process.

Critic Michelle Erica Green supports our hypothesis that Dana’s body is her magnum opus, asserting that “Butler literally engraves the past onto the present by engraving Dana’s body as a readable text” (qtd. in Steinberg 472). Through the authorial act of temporal amputation, “the novel retrieves the past through a collision between the two dimensions” of 1976 Los Angeles and antebellum Maryland, bringing the visceral pain of the black female body into the living present (Green qtd. in Steinberg 473). This dislocation of time disrupts the oppressive matrices that construct black female normativity in both the past and the present. Time is usually ideology’s greatest ally, mechanizing the permanent inscription of the black female body as producer and reproducer. But *Kindred*’s literal excision and rearrangement of time reveals exactly how 20th century black women’s bodies are scripted by their slave past.

Because a real history of acute pain and physical dismemberment can only be recovered through a reenactment of bodily experience, the black female body represented
in *Kindred* acts as a corporeal text that makes the past legible. Dana’s ability to traverse time renders her body a living history, telling the stories of black womanhood’s slave past and present. Amputation creates permanent marks on Dana’s slave body that time cannot heal, leaving a living historical record of discipline, enforcing conformity to a model of normativity. Her scarred and wounded body is a slave narrative in its own right, re-membering history rather than “filling in” the gaps of the dominant discourse’s memory. Dana’s corpus resurrects a forgotten past, seizing control of its re-membering.

Dana’s time-traveling body is a reminder of the generative act of slave creation, all but vanquished from the cultural memory. Bodily wounds are visual narratives, giving voice to the stories that must be told. Whip scars tell of forced monetary productivity, while other wounds speak to the black woman’s justifiable violation in a sexual economy. By telling the story of the enslaved female body’s genesis, *Kindred* catalyzes the lengthy process of extricating that body from forced production. Time’s dislocation dismantles the normative black female body, exposing the remnants of slavery that remain embedded even within Butler’s contemporary moment. The clash of two disparate spatio-temporal moments, the antebellum plantation and 1976 Los Angeles, creates a dialectic between them, “forc[ing] the reader to consider how integral the past is in understanding the present and constructing the future” (A. Mitchell 53). Missy Dehn Kubitschek makes a similar claim in her argument that “the country itself must re-examine its history in order to have any hope of resolving contemporary racial conflicts” (28). Both critics recognize that slavery is always already embedded within the black
female body’s present; this project accepts their postulate, but only after dissecting it to understand why the past refuses to remain locked away in its own temporal moment.

Slavery is not merely a condition that the black female body experienced, but an organic component of that body, comprising its skeletal structure. An economic system legalizing black women’s perpetual servitude dictated that their bodies produce and reproduce for their owners. Over time, the artificiality of the black female body’s (re)productive capacity was concealed, its imposition prostheticized by explanatory ideology. An inherent aptitude for (re)production attached itself to the black female body as perceived by the dominant discourse, rationalizing black femininity’s social inferiority by naturalizing it. But by returning to the antebellum slave moment of this representations’ genesis, Butler is able to remove the prosthetic ideology that renders the black female body culturally disabled in a Western, late-20th-century setting. Through textual dislocation, Butler shaves away the temporal layers that built the black female body in order to recuperate it from the corporeal confines of normativity.
Toni Morrison’s Sula

This project’s exploration of Kindred demonstrates how Butler compels the reader to revisit capital-H History, that familiar narrative scripted by the dominant discourse. Butler’s textual disjunction of time in Kindred exposes the lie of History’s so-called neutrality, making visible the gendered and racialized bias with which it is always already colored. Kindred acts as History’s counternarrative, challenging the notion of a singular, unilateral past and consequently casting doubt on History’s claims that black women are natural (re)producers, built to work and programmed with an insatiable sexual appetite. Revisiting the past allows the reader to bear witness to the construction of these stereotypes and to understand the black female body as the product of its cultural representation.

Some Sula critics argue that Morrison also uses the novel form to intervene in history, revisiting specific temporal instances in order to “situate the narrative’s engagement with history at a moment of historical crisis” (Novak 187). Indeed, while Morrison foregoes the obvious plot device of time travel, she nevertheless also rejects linear temporality in her text, opening in what Philip Novak designates “mythic time,” the pre-historical moment of the Bottom’s genesis. History does not “emerge” until 1919 splinters this mythic time, and the subsequent history that follows reveals itself to be “shattered,” a “form of dislocation, fragmentation and incoherence” (Novak 187). But while I concur with Novak’s assertion that Morrison productively manipulates the
historical past in her novel, this project is more concerned with *Sula’s* leap into hypothetical futures, for it is in these time-spaces that normativity comes undone.

Patricia McKee’s “Spacing and Placing in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” helps us locate these sites of subversion, drawing our attention to past-perfect temporalities that texts usually ignore. The critic asserts that “Morrison identifies both failed possessions of places and failed actions: various connections between occupants and their places that never took place”; Morrison writes not only of what characters did, but what people did not do, things that were lost or broken apart are never forgotten in *Sula* (McKee 3-4). As hypothesized by McKee, memory is grief for not only what was but for what *never* was, the irretrievably lost opportunities denied to the constructed body. Remembering is not melancholia, a refusal to let go of the past, but mourning, an *acceptance* of loss that both “attend[s] to history” and “resist[s] the historical trajectory leading to the extinction of African American cultural identity” (Novak 191). Morrison does not aim to fill in the gaping holes in the dominant discourse’s narrative, where black female subjectivities should be found.\(^\text{16}\) Instead, Morrison acknowledges and embraces historical fragmentation, forcing the reader to recognize that which the imposition of disabling normativity has rendered impossible for the black female body.

\(^\text{16}\) A reparation of white male history using a black female text might look something like Frances E.W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, a novel discussed in depth by Deborah McDowell in *The Changing Same*. Its protagonist typifies the early black literary heroine, written as “sexually pure, invariably exemplary, characterized by their self-sacrifice and by their tireless labor for the collective good” (McDowell 38). As such, Harper’s heroine is posited as the antithesis of the stereotypical black woman, constructed in the cultural imagination as sexually wanton. But in order to play against the constructed model of black femininity, Harper’s protagonist is molded to the expectations of white femininity. Barbara Christian observes that “since positive female qualities were all attributed to the white lady,” 19th century black female writers “based their counterimage on her ideal qualities, more than on [those] of any real black women” (Christian qtd. in McDowell 38).
In a sense, *Sula* picks up the narrative thread where *Kindred* leaves off, pursuing the possibilities for the re-membered body that Butler’s text only hints at. *Kindred* dislocates black female pasts, suggesting how historical rupture may lead to the re-membrance of the normative black female body. Butler’s novel does not, however, illustrate this refigured present for the reader; we can only surmise what may come after dismemberment, as the text only vaguely gestures towards this alternative space and time. *Sula*, on the other hand, focuses less on lived histories and more in the potentialities of black womanhood, usurping the deformeative white male gaze in order to offer a glimpse of the refigured black female body. By wresting ocular power away from the white male gaze, Morrison makes possible new narratives, written in the black woman’s own script—Morrison’s text traces the path of the white male stare, isolating its role in constituting the black female body in order to then remove this disfiguring lens. *Sula* conceives of the body as a manipulable space, deconstructing the culturally-constructed body in order for it to be reconstructed in an alternative shape. While “deformities” may qualify the text’s black female bodies as physically disabled, refigurement outside normativity’s bounds also catalyzes their cultural capability: these characters are exemplary of the possibilities that exist when black female bodies wrest control of their own representation.

To comprehend how *Sula* disrupts normative black womanhood, we must first understand how “normativity” is produced through representation. This project began by hearkening back to the antebellum slave era to trace the genesis of the hypersexual black
female image, following Deborah McDowell’s contention that the dominant discourse produced a myth of black female lasciviousness by way of Freudian projection. As my explication of *Sula* will reveal, traits of sexual aggressiveness or maternal proclivity supposedly inherent to black femininity are in fact constructed, produced by a white male lens. The capabilities ascribed to the black female body are, paradoxically, modes of disability. Representation through the dominant discourse’s gaze is therefore a disfiguring process, imposing a legacy of cultural disability through a dictate of physical ability.

The process that constructs “normative” black femininity is obscured by “objective” history, a mapping of the Western passage through time and space that would deny its own positionality. Western history is always already *his*-story, gendered and racialized as a reflection of a specifically male and white consciousness. In Western European cultures the printed word, the preferred medium of historical record, has itself been a typically white and male domain; as such, subjectivities so categorized as “other” than the dominant race and gender have been either marginalized or victimized in both fiction and non-fiction writing in minor, interchangeable roles, figures of alterity form a murky background that allows white masculinity to stand in sharp, bright relief. Valerie Smith supports this contention, arguing that black women are “employed, if not sacrificed, to humanize their white superordinates, to teach them something about the

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17 In “The Changing Same,” from the eponymous collection of McDowell’s essays, the author hypothesizes that “during slavery the white master helped to construct an image of black female sexuality that shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves” (37). The black female body thus became a receptacle for the discarded sexual impulses that white men refused to claim as their own.
content of their own subject positions (317). Black female characters are, with rare exception, denied their own subjectivities. When these characters do appear, they exist as textual bodies, corporeal shells designed to embody concepts in the abstract (Smith 316). This association of black women with embodiment resembles the association in Western ideologies of women of color with the body, and therefore also with animal passions and slave labor. However, black feminist criticism cannot deny the physical basis of black womanhood; for if “feminists and Afro-Americanists now relinquish too easily the material conditions of the lives of blacks and women, they may well relinquish the very grounds on which their respective disciplines were established” (Smith 315).

Smith’s reconciliation of this paradox drives this project’s methodology: in order to destabilize narrative relations that inscribe stereotypes into the cultural consciousness, we must establish a politics of experience that mediates essentialism with a discourse of deconstruction (Smith 313). Dissecting the formation of black women’s representations allows us to bear witness to the creation of these bodies as always already subservient and subsequently allows us to see how they are challenged in Sula, Morrison’s oppositional discourse. The ideological process that produced and produces the black female body is typically obscured by a cultural prosthesis, a wall of constructed

18 In Playing in the Dark, Toni Morrison questions the unquestioned conviction that the canon of American literature is entirely uninformed by the presence of black men and women. She cites a lack of critical attention to an African and African American literary presence, positing that, “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (Morrison 9). This “habit of ignoring race” is considered to be a “graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” within the dominant discourse, for “to notice is to recognize an already discredited difference”; the active process of overlooking race enforces race’s “invisibility through silence,” allowing only the black body a “shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (10).
stereotypes that naturalizes its representation by the dominant discourse. Discourse perpetuates ideological mythologies through pseudo-science and sheer linguistic repetition, via written text or word-of-mouth, which solidify in the cultural imagination as fact. Morrison removes this discursive prosthesis, exposing the black female body as a construction of the white male gaze.  

Sula first insists that the reader recognize this body’s distortion through a raced and gendered lens, and proceeds to then remove the optical illusion. 

Sula begins with a detailed relief mapping of the Bottom, the neighborhood that stages the novel’s subsequent text. The author’s attention to the land is both a narrative device, contextualizing the novel’s story, and a metaphorical device, offering a cartographical reading of the black female body. Morrison focalizes this section of text through a “valley man” whose double vision conflates a “dark woman” with the neighborhood of the Bottom (4). Like the town, the race- and gender-marked body is a paradoxical space whose geography is carved out by the white male gaze. The textual overlap of these two seemingly distinct spaces reinforces a black feminist understanding of the constructed black female body as one that is always already colonizable. Like a body of land, she is perceived as a penetrable, conquerable geographical territory. As a

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19 David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder explicate the function of a “discursive prosthesis” in Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, explaining that, “while an actual prosthesis is always somewhat discomforting, a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view” (8). According to Mitchell and Snyder, disability is often “erased” with a narrative “quick fix,” allowing the reader to forget the intrusion of non-normativity into the world of the text. In their work, the critics seek to “make the [textual] prosthesis show, to flaunt its imperfect supplementation as an illusion” (8). My investigation reveals how Morrison does likewise in Sula, making visible the ideological prosthesis that “alleviates” Western culture’s “discomfort” with non-normative black femininity.
body marked for infiltration by a white male consciousness, its subjective sexuality is obliterated.\textsuperscript{20} Impregnated, so to speak, with perceptions projected by the white male gaze, the “black female body has so much sexual potential that it has none at all” (Hammonds 263).

Morrison’s text simultaneously brings to light and disrupts the colonization of the black woman’s body, offering a counter-narrative to the one produced by the white male gaze. Barbara Hooper’s radical post-modern understanding of corporeal geography suggests that the body is perhaps “the most critical site to watch the production and reproduction of power” (qtd. in Soja 7). Hooper posits a cartographical reading of bodies, inscribed by “a hierarchical differentiating of flesh” that “like geography, earth-writing, orders ambiguous substances of matter as political meanings and territories” (qtd. in Soja 7). Within a black feminist interpretation of Hooper’s argument, the white male gaze produces this arbitrary ordering. However, understanding the body as a locus of power production creates the possibility for a deconstruction of these power relations, establishing a “politics of difference” through a process Donna Haraway defines as “diffraction,” a “mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection or reproduction” that “does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear (qtd. in Soja 9). Morrison charts these “effects of difference” in her novel by inviting the reader to navigate a multi-sensory matrix where ideologically-

\textsuperscript{20} Evelyn M. Hammonds comments that “black women’s sexuality is often described in metaphors of speechlessness, space, or vision, as a ‘void’ or empty space that is simultaneously ever visible (exposed) and invisible and where black women’s bodies are always already colonized.” (262)
produced perceptions are shattered. Casting off the white male monocle that carves the black female body’s geography, Morrison introduces the reader to a cultural politics that refuses an easy mapping.

When the spying man sees the little town, he sees a black woman, “doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively notes of a mouth organ” (Morrison 4). A white male gaze would read the dark woman’s gyrating bottom as an indicator of both her agility and sexuality. Her vigorous, fertile body signifies a healthy Bottom, content in its productive and reproductive output. But a closer look at the Black Bottom dance challenges this snapshot analysis.

According to the printed dance instructions, the Black Bottom dancer performed the following steps:

- Hop down front then Doodle back.
- Mooch to your left then Mooch to the right.
- Hands on your hips and do the Mess Around.
- Break a Leg until you’re near the ground.
- Now that’s the Old Black Bottom Dance.

The Black Bottom mimics physical disability, calling for the dancer to shuffle about and hop on one leg. The dance performance of impairment by an able body suggests the presence of a cultural disability that is generally ignored by the dominant discourse.

The white man’s perception does not recognize the suffering of both the dark woman and the townspeople. For the outsider, Morrison claims, “it would be easy . . . to

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21 From “Bradford and Jeanette” sheet music.
22 Slide.
23 Shuffle forward with both feet; hips first, then feet.
24 Hobbling step.
hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain” (4). This cognitive lack owes to a sensory limitation to two dimensions, sight and sound: the observer can see the Bottom filtered through the dominant discourse’s lens and can hear the laughter from a distance. But tactility is also crucially important to sensory perception, for it tells the tale of the community’s pain and loss. As Morrison opines, perhaps if this observer had grasped “the hands of the spoon carvers (who had not worked in eight years) and let the fingers that danced on wood kiss his skin,” he might sense a pain specific to an othered race, and possibly an othered gender (Morrison 4). In order to communicate this pain to the reader, Morrison establishes a “politics of touch,” stressing the necessity of a multisensory knowledge of bodies other than one’s own. After all, bodies are not static, one-dimensional images. Rather, they operate along “relational vectors” “in dialogue” with all five senses as they move through space and time in conjunction with other bodies” (Manning xiii). The dominant discourse’s perception produces an image rather than a relationship with the subject of its gaze, disallowing each from an intimate knowledge of the other. Without the involvement of the other bodily senses, an insurmountable distance will always exist between the eye and object of the beholder.

If the dark woman’s geography informs the generic white man’s perception of the Bottom, then the converse is also true: the textual depiction of the town also maps the cultural landscape of the black female body. Physically located in the hills, the all-black

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25 In Politics of Touch, Erin Manning challenges the assumption of a static body existing in a stable space-time, instead “positioning the senses relationally as expressions of moving bodies” (xiii). This body-in-motion can potentially influence “the ways in which we articulate and live the political” (xiii).
Bottom earns its ironic designation from a white man’s deception. According to the legend, it was granted to a former slave by his white master along with freedom, in the stead of valley land. Coercion, not force, prompted the slave himself to ask his master for hilly “Bottom” land; the gullible slave takes his master at his word that “it’s the bottom of heaven—best land there is” (Morrison 5). The story of the Bottom’s genesis is a cosmic joke, for in fact, the “bottom of heaven” is an agricultural hell. The slave has traded servitude to the white master for enslavement to a contemptuous land, where the “planting was backbreaking . . . the soil slid down and washed away the seeds” and “the wind lingered all through the winter” (Morrison 5). Post-emancipation, a legacy of servitude lives on. For all practical purposes, freedom and slavery appear to be very much the same thing, enslaving “free” black women as productive machines, subservient to the white, masculine consciousness.

We might also understand the black female body, textually associated with the Bottom land, as a “bodily grave for new birth” (Bakhtin 24); she is at once a perpetual producer and also a final repository for “colliding ideological systems” (Mitchell and Snyder 158).26 The Bottom is a product of contradictions, at once high and low, populated by free slaves, out from under the literal master’s yoke yet always controlled by the will of the white man. Similarly, the black woman “accumulate[s] an expansive series of references and meanings” within her body (Mitchell and Snyder 158). A

26 In Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin likens the function of the literary grotesque to the material earth, which serves two seemingly conflicted purposes: soil fertilizes and conceives new life, but also encrypts the dead (Bakhtin 24).
caricature of exaggerated, excessive alterity, she is constructed as a space of otherness. If
the black female body is perceived to be monstrous and alluring, captive yet captivating
then it consequently becomes a void; it is nothing because it is no single thing, instead a
process of eternal negation. The white and male social order casts out the traits it wants
to disassociate itself from, embodying them in a black female body and positing her as
the epitome of alterity. She serves a dual societal purpose, producing and existing for a
world that will not have her as one of its own.

Morrison posits Helene Wright, mother of Nel, as such a representational
production, when viewed within a white social space. Transposed from the all-black
Medallion to a train car en route to New Orleans, her body is constructed before the
reader’s eyes, becoming whatever the dominant discourse dictates. Juxtaposing dual
representations of her person, formulated in vastly different geographical spaces, the
transformation is made that much more apparent. As seen from the Bottom, Helene
Wright is a pillar of the community and a force to be reckoned with, “a woman who won
all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority”
(Morrison 18). A closer look at Morrison’s grammatical choices reveals a resistance to
objectification even at the level of sentence structure. Morrison writes the character as an
active object in this paratactical description: “It was Helene who never turned her head in
church when latecomers arrived; Helene who established the practice of seasonal altar
flowers; Helene who introduced the giving of banquets of welcome to returning Negro
veterans” (Morrison 18). Helene transcends the syntax that introduces her as “it,” rather
than by name, resisting passivity and stasis. Although Helene is first described in this sentence as an “it”—an object rather than a being—she nevertheless exercises autonomy within the black community.

But within the train car, this Helene is deconstructed by a white male gaze and reassembled as an altogether different body. Her body is focalized through the conductor, who “let his eyes travel over the pale yellow woman” (Morrison 20). In this social space, Helene is stripped of her subjectivity, rendered a passive, immobile object relegated to the end of a prepositional phrase. Addressed as “gal,” Helene is denied the dignity of a proper name, her individual identity obscured within a generalizing pronoun.

Morrison allows the reader to see not only what the conductor perceives, but also how he perceives it. Through his gaze, the reader sees only a body, imagined to be both “pale” and “yellow,” and yet paradoxically also a black woman. If we follow the trajectory of his line of sight, we see that the conductor does not look “into” or even “at” Helene, but rather “over” her person. His gaze follows the contours of her body, creating the black woman before him as an empty shell. Immediately thereafter, his visual attention is transferred to “the bit of wax his fingernail had retrieved” from his ear (Morrison 20-21), suggesting not only a lack of interest in the female object, but also intimating the miniscule amount of time he has taken to study her. His perception is formed less by visual intake than cultural discourse, which informs him that this “pale yellow woman” is indeed a black woman, and hence out of place in a whites-only car.
When the conductor directs his gaze back to Helene, it is to intimidate her by “staring at her until she realized that he wanted her to move aside” (Morrison 21).

The stare, like the gaze, is a mode of construction, creating the object before it out of its visual perception. Implicit in the conductor’s staring, however, is an additional element of brutality, a violent enforcement of preconceived notions upon the beholder. The stare imposes abnormality upon the culturally-disabled subject, sculpting it as a grotesque spectacle (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 11). In order to deny the subject’s similarities to himself, the conductor-spectator acknowledges only its otherness. In this manner, Helene’s construction parallels that of sideshow “freaks” like the Venus Hottentot.

Freak shows enjoyed a period of popularity coinciding with the rise of industrialization in the United States and United Kingdom. This “golden age” inducted an era of strict regulation, which “put bodies on arbitrary schedules instead of allowing natural rhythms to govern activity” (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 11)—industrial capitalism demanded productivity, which was critically dependent on “normalcy.” Just as each assembly piece that passes over the conveyor belt must be unblemished, each worker must perfectly inhabit his functional role. Playing the part means putting sleep, food, and work on a strict schedule, with specific amounts of time allotted to each; while hardly an ideal life for a “free” and “able” body, this was preferable to the alternative of unemployment in a money economy. Likewise, as a black woman in a white and male
dominated society, Helene is forced to play the role proscribed to her black female body, or else face potentially violent consequences.

The freak show not only satisfied voyeuristic cravings for human oddity, it also served to “assuage viewers’ uneasiness” by functioning “as an assurance of [their] own regularized normalcy” (Garland-Thomson, *Freakery* 11). It would appear that Helene’s presence performs the same ideological function for the conductor, reassuring him of his cultural dominance. Staring yields no new insights for the spectator who sees before him a discursive product rather than an individual. Rather, the stare acts as a weapon, bearing down upon Helene until she physically removes herself from its path. Her body has permeated the boundaries of an all-white space that must exclude alterity in order to maintain the binaries that order the Western European world. Helene’s accidental entrée into a white train car troubles the boundaries of alterity—uncaged, her yellow skin worries the line demarcated by a “colored only” sign. The “other” must be removed to a safe distance if it is to maintain its “otherness,” but Helene’s “custard” colored body threatens to enter into a multisensory relationship with “white” ones, closing the spatial gap the stare erects between them. However, Helene ultimately upholds, rather than challenges, the cultural rules that define her radius of movement. As Patricia McKee notes in “Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison’s *Sula,*” Helene remains within the boundaries of black female normativity as constructed by the white male gaze. According to the critic, Helene’s fears are driven not by what she sees but what others, particularly men, see in her. Feeling herself watched by men who perceive her body as
“custard,” and therefore morally “loose,” Helene is compelled to contain both her own slippage and “the way she spreads into someone else”—namely, her mother the whore (McKee 9). In this manner Helene denies her personal history by representing herself with the appearance of wholeness: in her “good form,” her polished beauty and bearing, she places the past “out of bounds” (McKee 12). Helene prostheticizes a personal history marked by absence and loss, “filling in” these spaces in order to provide “definite forms of and limits to meaning” (McKee 12).

By seizing the gaze from the dominant discourse, Morrison not only reveals the presence of Helene’s prosthesis, but also compels us to see how that prosthesis acts as a mode of disfigurement. When the train conductor reprimands Helene for permeating the colored train car’s boundaries, Helene responds by flashing the conductor a “dazzling” and “coquettish” smile “for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand” (Morrison 21). Given that black femininity is marked by sexual lasciviousness in the Western imagination, we can deduce that this seductive smile is not merely an attempt at appeasement, but also serves to reinforce Helene’s normativity. Helene is a willing abettor in her construction as a passive yet sexually aggressive creature, maintaining the shape that a white male gaze has constructed for her. But focalized through Morrison’s lens, Helene’s “good form” is revealed as artifice: if anything, the cultural prosthesis she wears is de-formative, a byproduct of the stare that turns her person into “jelly” (Morrison 22).
Mandatory adherence to a set of constructed norms circumscribes for the black female body a life without alternative possibilities. Amputation, both figurative and literal, can both dismember the black female body’s normative past and re-member it in an alternative form. We see this in *Sula’s* Eva Peace, a character for whom cultural ability is recuperated through physical disability. McKee gestures toward a historical reading of Eva’s dismemberment, identifying the space Eva’s leg once occupied, “the empty place on [Eva’s] left side” (Morrison 31), as a marker of absent persons once present (McKee 2). If, as McKee argues, the “experience of missing is a particular historical experience” (2) then we can imagine Eva’s missing leg as a space for memory, a site where the past makes its present known.

Read against the backdrop of slavery, the amputation of Eva’s leg is shown to perform a counterinvestment in an oppressive economic system, allowing the character to resist cultural typecast as a (re)productive black woman. Though the details of the physical dismemberment are left ambiguous, the reader can surmise that Eva put her leg under a train in order to collect insurance money. The character uses her materiality to gain agency, able, as an amputee, to work the system that has worked her body, essentially selling her own limb in order to relieve the pains of hunger and poverty. In a textual mimicry of the slave trade, Eva brokers her own sale, disrupting traditionally imbalanced roles of master subject and slave object by paradoxically inhabiting both. The amputation of her limb allows Eva to subvert roles as object of exchange (between
both white *and* black men) and as a mode of production, perpetually in labor for others.\textsuperscript{27} Through self-amputation, she becomes a beneficiary of capitalism’s rewards, an owner of production, as opposed to the perpetually producing role that normativity ascribes to her.

This project argues that amputation opens up the potential for liberation from enslavement, be it the antebellum slave trade or from any economic system that values bodies only for their productive output. We see this enacted in the character of Eva as she reclaims a subjectivity stolen and sexuality captured in the Middle Passage, the originary voyage that turned persons into slaves.\textsuperscript{28} Post-amputation, the character redefines sexual attractiveness: “Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers” (Morrison 41). Eva’s sexuality does not, however, render her a prototypical penetrable vessel brimming with animal passions, for although “there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter” Eva “did not participate in the act of love” (41). While she offers her suitors nothing in the way of physical satisfaction, “somehow, in her presence, it was [her callers] who had won something” (41), since Eva’s sexuality is not confined to her body. In essence, the act of amputation disembodies the character’s sexual subjectivity in order for her to reclaim it.

\textsuperscript{27} In asserting her economic independence, Eva at once casts off the yoke of slavery, which keeps the black female body in perpetual servitude to a white master, and frees herself from the bondage of marriage, another type of relationship that posits the black female body as subservient to its husband-master. Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” succinctly posits that culture constructed woman as an object of trade between father and husband, a relationship that inherently obliterates her subjectivity: “If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the women being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it” (Rubin 779). This system’s relations “are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation,” making men the “beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization” (779).

\textsuperscript{28} A concept explicated in Spillers’ “Mama’s Babies, Papa’s Maybes” (67).
Like her grandmother Eva, town pariah Sula refuses to wear a prosthesis, rejecting the boundaries imposed upon her by the dominant discourse and reveling in her shapelessness. In her criticism of *Sula*, Maggie Galehouse argues that Morrison breaks a cycle of reproductive enslavement by disrupting linear time, gesturing toward an alternative reality embodied in Sula; the critic posits the childless, husbandless Sula as a figure of futurity, the embodiment of an alternative world without race and gender rules (358). This project is inclined to agree with Galehouse’s assessment of the Sula character as a figure that writes her own non-normative script, breaking the mold of normativity as constructed by the white male gaze.

Sula, “an artist with no art form,” (Morrison 121) spreads outside the constructed mold of black female normativity. Symbolically self-amputating her flesh, she repels the white male gaze, refusing its attempt to construct her. Sula accepts, rather than prostheticizes, absences both figurative and literal, realizing the “capacity of absence” to provide meaning (McKee 13). As a child, young Sula deflects her would-be attackers, a quartet of white teenaged boys, by creating a physical absence in her body, amputating the tip of her finger. Blackness and femaleness make her a prime target for these Irish Catholic youths; victimized themselves as a *religious* other, they in play the part of their oppressors upon an even more marginalized minority. Their stare is a prelude to further brutality, as surely as fists or knives constructing Sula as “their prey” (Morrison 54). But Sula defies the expectations dictated by the marks of race and gender by marking her own body. The teenagers’ gaze is immediately redirected to the wound and the discarded
flesh, disrupting the discursively-produced representation of a black female body. Freed from their paralyzing gaze, Sula “raise[s] her eyes to them,” (54) staring right back and usurping the subjective power of the gaze.

By inflicting violence upon her person in order to liberate herself from the white male stare, Sula rejects the dominant discourse, which would hold that only the whole, “able” body can ever be truly free. The unmarked body is typically perceived to be a site of jouissance while the deformed or mutilated body is the body’s “nightmare” (Davis, Enforcing Normalcy 5). But within the world of the text, bodily breakage realizes a subjective potential that the “whole” black female body cannot. As written by Morrison, Sula’s formless body breaks out of the normative mold:

She had no center, no speck around which to grow. . . . She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself—be consistent with herself (118-19).

Sula is an irreconcilable mass of negatives, a body of absences that produce subjectivity without producing comprehensible meaning. Her fragmented body refuses to retain the shape of stereotypical black femininity, spreading beyond the confines of the construct.

Sula’s self-formulated subjectivity renders her a pariah within her own community, alienated from the black female bodies produced by white male representation. Segregated from the white population, the Bottom is itself an island of otherness, but its constituents unwittingly mimic their own oppressors, constructing Sula as their own externalized body of alterity. By positing Sula as their personal beast of
burden, the community considers itself changed “in accountable yet mysterious ways” (Morrison 117). Sula embodies that which the Bottom cannot acknowledge as characteristic of itself. Identified as “the source of their personal misfortune” (Morrison 117), Sula acts the scapegoat, a Derridean pharmakon for the community; like the pharmakon, “Sula” as signifier refuses any single signified, and as such, becomes a body of paradox. 29 Her incompatible, anti-normative body recaptures the sexuality “stolen” from her black female body at the moment of its enslavement, 30 becoming a playground for pleasure: Sula enjoys sex for its own sake, reveling in libidinal jouissance with her lovers Jude and Ajax.

Unlike the pharmakon, however, Sula is not expelled from the Bottom but is, rather, deeply embedded in its geographical body. Sula serves to fill the empty spaces within the community, thus inscribing presence with absence. According to Philip Novak, this inscription “highlights the value of the present, precious because it is fragile, always already marked by and for loss” (189), a critical function that goes unnoticed until Sula’s death. While Sula’s passing is initially unmourned, the Bottom quickly feels the repercussions of her loss, as “mothers who had defended their children from Sula’s malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula’s scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against” (Morrison 153). After Sula’s death, “the tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery,

29 In Dissemination, Jacques Derrida explicates the Greek pharmakon, identifying it as a process of negation, signifying a host of contradictory meanings that thereby disallow a single essential identity. At once remedy and poison, cure and illness, the pharmakon houses the body politic’s irreconcilable polarities (127).
30 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.”
affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair” (153). Sans Sula, “a falling away, a dislocation was taking place” (153) that eventually culminates in the physical collapse of the Bottom. Celebrants of the final National Suicide Day fall into an abyss, “slipping to their deaths, on ‘ground’ that no longer holds together” and at last “realize Sula’s absence” (McKee 25). Without Sula, the Bottom’s receptacle for a rage stemming from centuries of injustices, the center cannot hold: they are forced to recognize both the material and nonmaterial losses punctuating their history. From the perspective of the dominant discourse this breakdown looks like a tragedy, but this projects submits a counter-reading to the landslide: in its collapse, the Bottom effectively rewrites the geography initially carved out by a white man’s deception, wiping clean the discursive slate. This geological shift does not, however, erase the past, but instead transfers history’s possession. The Bottom’s dismemberment deconstructs layers upon layers of discourse that have enforced normativity upon its inhabitants, making it at last possible to re-member the cultural body of the town.
Conclusion

A reading of *Kindred* and *Sula* that examines disability in conjunction with race and gender has revealed how text can systematically dismantle the normative black female body constructed by the Western imagination. In the worlds created in Butler and Morrison’s texts, metaphorical amputation dislocates: time, allowing the reader to witness the slave-era genesis of normative black femininity; bodies, illustrating how normativity is not natural, but instead violently inflicted; and space, as we trace the white male gaze’s disfiguring construction of black women’s corporeal geography.

By fracturing linear history, Butler exposes the absences in the dominant discourse’s version of history, sites where black female subjectivities have been relegated to obscurity. *Kindred* returns us to an antebellum slave moment in order to witness the normative black female body’s genesis, compelling us to acknowledge this body as a discursive construction. Traits purportedly inherent to black femininity, such as aggressive sexual instincts and innate aptitude for (re)production, are revealed to be ideological smokescreens, concealing the violent imposition of normativity upon the body. As Butler graphically illustrates, normativity is corporeally inscribed by physical and psychological threat, enforcing subservience upon the black female body. A rupture of time breaks normativity apart, exposing how the dominant discourse has rendered this body culturally disabled.

Like *Kindred*, *Sula* exposes black female normativity as a construction, a creation sculpted by the dominant discourse’s gaze. But where *Kindred* ends its textual journey at
the removal of cultural prosthesis, *Sula* breaks and then refigures the black female body. Rather than prostheticize the loss and absence that punctuates a black female cultural history, Morrison’s narrative embraces the experience of missing as a critical aspect of subjectivity.31 *Sula* cultivates mourning “to attend to history and resist the historical trajectory leading to the extinction of an African American cultural identity” (Novak 191), more specifically, an African American *female* cultural identity. As written by Morrison, *Sula* exemplifies the potential for the black female body to slip out of its normative constraints, subverting the white male gaze and rewriting history.

Isolating moments of breakage where normativity will not hold allows us to see how *Kindred* and *Sula* break down ideologically-implanted notions of black femininity, alerting us to what is absent from our own body of historical knowledge. In changing the way we read the black female body, Butler and Morrison chip away at a culturally-disabling prosthesis, dismembering that which we think we know about black femininity and priming us to imagine the normative body’s refigurement.

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31 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis.*
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