‘THERE WAS TROUBLE LONG BEFORE I WAS AWARE OF IT’: CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS, DISCURSIVE REDEFINITION, AND THE SPECULATIVE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter I: Beloved, Slavery, and the Black Feminist Self ............................................. 12

Chapter II: Kindred, Embodied Discourse, and Memorial Ethnic Time ....................... 34

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 53

Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 57
Introduction

The period of years between 1975 and 1990 has been well documented as a particularly productive era of African American women’s writing. Madhu Dubey, in her essay “Even some fiction might be useful: African American women novelists,” refers to this period as “a second renaissance of African American women’s fiction,” because it is the most prolific period of production for African American women writers since the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s (159). African American women writers of this time were responding to a second wave feminist movement that only peripherally acknowledged them, and more often than not, conflated African American female experience with a universal (i.e. white, middle class) woman’s experience. Contemporaneously, African American women also found themselves on the margins of African American discourses as well, specifically following “the nationalist Black Aesthetic [movement, which] discouraged literary explorations of... gender, sexuality, and other differences that might threaten a unitary conception of racial solidarity” (160). As a means of protest against the various canons, movements, and traditions that deprivileged and decentered the African American female subject, black women writers began to fight discourse on two levels. First, through the use of post-modern and experimental forms of writing that resisted and commingled genres, African American Women writers effectively created new kinds of discursive spaces from which to aesthetically center the African American woman as subject and privilege the telling of her stories from her own varied perspectives. In fact, Angelyn Mitchell, in her book *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (2002), argues that “the presentation of the self as
central rather than marginal is one the defining traits of contemporary Black women’s writing” (9). Secondly, in both creative and critical texts, African American women writers, in great numbers, begin to unpack the discursive and metaphysical weight of being legible as both black and female, and therefore devalued, in an American context. This second task often required an acknowledgement of and engagement with the violences suffered by the historical African American female body. In terms of the aesthetics of this time period, unpacking the embodied and sexualized nature of racialized and gendered discourses, particularly as they pertain to this ancestral African American female body, became an important component in rendering more veracious and realistic forms of African American femininity in creative mediums, like the novel.

Simultaneously resisting and recreating the discursive position of the African American female body in text, was a project that, for African American women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, often exceeded the aesthetic and discursive boundaries of realism. Mitchell argues that because of nineteenth century “constructs of womanhood and literary conventions,” nineteenth century texts, “could not... accommodate, for racist, sexist, and political reasons, the Black woman’s story” (9). I would argue that the same was true of many twentieth century literary forms that overlooked the capacity of genres like science fiction and fantasy to communicate that which is unspeakable and/or traumatic. In this particular period of African American Women’s writing it became important to use any form, genre, or device that would aid in the most complete representation of black femininity on the page, and ironically, fantastical themes and characters were very useful tools in excavating and representing the inner lives of African American women in text. The
use of speculative themes and characters across the genres of mainstream fiction and science fiction by African American Women writers in the 1970s and 1980s becomes part of a debate already brewing from within the science fiction genre about the limits of the genre and the lack of “science” in science fiction subgenres such as fantasy and the speculative. From its genesis, the field of science fiction privileged rational, scientific thought stemming from the Enlightenment. Additionally, Dubey argues that “science fiction itself has been traditionally perceived as a masculine genre dealing with ‘hard’ science and valorized over the ‘soft’ feminine genre of fantasy, driven by the suprarational and putatively antiscientific principles of magic” (32). In this time period, feminist and African American writers alike began to reclaim the field of science fiction through privileging the anti-scientific in their writing, and critiquing science as one more racist and patriarchal institution involved in the subjugation of the African American and/or female body. Dubey argues that “the critique of scientific rationality forms such a strong, impelling force in the fledgling field of black-authored science fiction as to almost warrant the term ‘black anti-science fiction’” (34). This impetus of African American writers to disidentify with ‘hard’ science fiction in form and content while using fantasy-like components to depict experiential life is neither fantasy nor realism in the strictest sense. The culturally specific forays into the science fiction genre by African American writers creates the need for an umbrella term that is capacious enough to include both mainstream and science fiction texts, and for me, that term is the speculative. In its most contemporary manifestation, the speculative is a science fiction subgenre that through its very existence
deprivileges the science in science fiction, while also including texts that are still invested in portraying a more realistic version of human experience than hardcore fantasy.

The aim of this project is to situate the speculative as an important component of the African American female aesthetic as redefined by African American women writers in the years between 1975 and 1990. Novels such as, *Beloved* (1979) by Toni Morrison, *Wild Seed* (1980) by Octavia Butler, *Corregidora* (1987) by Gayle Jones, *Kindred* (1987) by Octavia Butler, *Mama Day* (1988) by Gloria Naylor, *Family* (1991) by J. California Cooper, and *The Gilda Stories* (1991) by Jewelle Gomez are representative of the use of the speculative by African American women authors of this time period. In this paper I will focus specifically on *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. I want to continue the work done by Dubey and other critics of African American science fiction writing by continuing to refine the conception of the speculative genre as more than just a fantasy-driven subgenre of science fiction. In this project I discuss the ways that a critical engagement with the speculative creates discursive spaces for the expression of the experiential in ways that other genres cannot. Furthermore, the way that memory, the past, and the present interact with each other in these literary texts also speaks to the possibilities of engaging lost time in the contemporary era. From a specifically African American frame of reference, lost time often refers to the people and histories lost in the era of African American enslavement. Thus, an important component of the contemporary engagement with the past that African American women writers undertook in this time period was a critical engagement with the institution of African American enslavement. Often African American women writers examined the ways the legacies of slavery
continued to shape, through language, discourse, and various institutional praxes, the experiences of contemporary African American women. Most notably, Hortense Spillers in her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987)\(^1\), considers the destructive discursivity of raced subjectivity and the processes of racialization, saying:

> Before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies-some of them female- out of West African communities, we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh. If we think of “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness. (5)

Spillers’ essay is particularly helpful in articulating the ways that the practices and discourses necessitated by the institution of African American enslavement have become imbedded in American society, even into that contemporary moment of the 1970s and 1980s, because she creates a language that engages African American subjection at the primary level. This critical engagement with the physical and discursive violence of African American enslavement mirrors the aesthetic engagement of many African American women writers. Also, the idea of a wounded collective flesh could help explain both the necessity and the utility of using the speculative to depict internalized forms of trauma that have persisted since the creation of blackness as a racial other.

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\(^1\) In ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Spillers responds to Patrick W. Moynihan’s report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (1965), which discusses the state of black families, particularly in terms of African American men and women in relation to the property relations necessitated by the conditions of slavery
The idea that African American enslavement might still be institutionally and psychically operative in contemporary life is a popular topic within the field of trauma studies. Like Spillers, Jennifer L. Griffiths, in her book *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance*, “focuses on the black female body as a site of inscription for cultural values and the body as a source of the memories in the production of testimony” (5). In the 1970s and 1980s, African American women writers began to textually and discursively take issue with what Griffiths would call “an incomplete memory, [the] ‘official story,’ [as] filtered through racist and sexist discourse” (9). Griffiths goes on to say that

The official story does not account for the crisis of survival. This history making privileges a dominant declarative memory, the facts and figures of those members in the position to record them, and violently erases the experience of implicit memory, the bodily memory of trauma, which gets buried in the frightened fastness of the individual soul. (9)

Like Griffiths, contemporary black women writers are not content to blithely accept the history of African American women as the dominant historical narrative might relate it. In both *Kindred* and *Beloved* there are female characters that, though enslaved, are the complete antitheses to the popularized discourses of the lazy, hypersexual, violent, yet contented black female slave. Griffiths also argues that “perhaps the best place to begin a reinvention of the construction of black woman, through representations of the black female body, is in recuperating and reinterpreting the history of slavery,” because the discourses that continue to be marked on African American women’s bodies originate from
that period and that institution (11). Due to the proliferation of contemporary narratives
that engage the institution of American slavery, it would seem many African American
women writers would agree with her. In the 1970s and 1980s it becomes imperative to
make subject the enslaved black woman who is most often recorded in laws and ledgers,
and even outside of a ‘black cosmology,’ the speculative is what makes this retrospective
subjection textually feasible. Griffiths agrees that it is these “experimental narrative
strategies,” like the speculative, that “explore the challenges in representing the complex
connections between the memory, language and the body,” and which “build new forms
including fantasy, temporal and spatial shifts, repetitions and [a] radical revisioning of the
body’s place in narrative” (12). The speculative, as my umbrella term for texts by African
American women writers that use supernatural beings, haunting, time travel, conjuring,
etc, is the form that allows for the most complex representation of culturally specific
traumas, and the way these traumas become marked on the memories and bodies of
African Americans.

Trauma studies is also useful because of the distinction in the field between trauma
and post-trauma, which allows for an engagement with temporality. In an effort to try and
bring enslaved African American female characters into being it is important to understand
the way trauma affects the individuals who experience the trauma. Yet, in trying to
understand the way the psychic legacy of slavery affects contemporary African American
women, grappling with post-traumatic experiences is equally important and challenging.
Griffiths says, “the challenge of articulating post-traumatic experience, particularly as it
moves across generational and geographical borders, suggests an effort to address the
‘phantom,’ the residue of ancestral experience lingering in our presence, the truth that has acquired the weight of several lifetimes yet remains ungraspable” (11). In Kindred, Octavia Butler completely disrupts the distinction between the traumatic and post-traumatic subject by allowing her protagonist Dana to come in contact with her ancestors and experience many of the same traumas that they experience. Even in Beloved where the only contemporary figures are the readers and the author, there is still this dichotomy between those who experience a trauma and those who come after. I think of Denver in particular as a post-traumatic subject, and there is an argument for Beloved’s position as post-traumatic, because even though her death is a traumatic experience for her family, she can only truly know this trauma in retrospect and through other people, even as it marked on her body. In terms of representing post-traumatic subjectivity, haunting has become a popular mode of critically engaging the atemporality of memory and trauma. In Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture, Marisa Parham explains that “by giving name to the dreams and nightmares that come to us through each other’s stories, haunting conceptualizes what it means for a person to have his or her own experience of another person’s experience in the world” (2). One of the reasons I chose Beloved and Kindred as the primary texts for this project, is the way that Butler and Morrison both expand the conception of what it means to be haunted by allowing the ‘haint’ to be human, even as these characters transgress time and space. For the purposes of this project, “haunting is not [only] compelling because it resonates with the supernatural, but rather because it is appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things -- in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces – to live with various kinds of doubled
consciousness” (Parham 3). What better way to explain the experiences of African American women in any era than through the idea of living between and doubled consciousness? It is my contention that when readers, writers, and critics, change the ways we know and make knowledge, the way we relate and express this knowledge must change as well. The speculative becomes an invaluable tool in allowing African American women writers to fully express the whole of African American experiential life.

In the first section of this project, I will focus on Beloved by Toni Morrison. In this section I want to think about Sethe as the embodiment of several impetuses of African American women’s writing in the 1970s and 1980s, as she is fiercely independent and is willing to fight to the death for her freedom. Sethe’s characterization is based on the belated subjectification of the enslaved African American woman Margaret Garner. Morrison, by reclaiming the humanity of Garner through Sethe, and veraciously representing the trauma of American enslavement, shatters what Griffith calls the “official narrative” that created African American women as something other than human. It is Morrison’s use of the speculative, particularly in her portrayal of Beloved, which allows this novel so veraciously to depict the experiential lives of enslaved, and newly freed, African Americans. For Sethe, the past comes to devour and claim the present (and perhaps the future as well), and only through the use of the speculative is this intimate encounter between the past and the present possible.

The second section of this project will focus on Kindred by Octavia Butler. In this part of the paper I will investigate how the speculative effect of time travel might allegorize contemporary engagements with past trauma, specifically in terms of the trauma of African
American enslavement. Even without the speculative device of time travel, Dana is a very interesting feminist protagonist. She is the prototypical independent woman, and she is adamant about living her life on her own terms. She is the kind of modern woman that can take care of herself, and even when she is transported to the antebellum South we expect her to fare better than her enslaved counterparts. The fact that this is not the case is Butler’s way of communicating the insidious nature of the institution of slavery, and the inability of any human being to be in some way unaffected by it.

Finally, I will conclude by discussing wider instances of the use of the speculative by black women writers, and investigating the proliferation of liberatory narratives through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century as well. Angelyn Mitchell coins this particular term for contemporary novels that engage enslavement, and she defines them as “contemporary communications about ways contemporary readers can free themselves from the pain and shame that are a residual of the legacy of slavery in the United States” (Mitchell 3). I am interested in the fact that these kinds of novels often make use of speculative themes and characters, and that they continue to be a popular form for both African American women writers and their readerships across genre. In my conclusion I will engage the term liberatory narrative, and discuss whether the speculative enables a kind of freedom. I want to consider the utility of the liberatory narrative in the twenty first century, and whether these novels might continue to tell us something new about the inner lives of enslaved African Americans.

In this project I am investigating how the speculative functions in the work of African American writers of the 1970s and 1980s, specifically, why do contemporary
African American women writers engage the speculative, and what kind of cultural, social, and historical work does this engagement lend itself to? What is the relationship between the realized experiences of African American women in the 1970s and 1980s and the speculative work by African American women authors of the same time period? What historical, political, and aesthetic labor does this relationship do? In this particular time period of African American letters between 1975 and 1990, African American women authors seem exceptionally attuned to the ways that the speculative allows them to grapple with the atemporality of memory. Using Kindred by Octavia Butler and Beloved by Toni Morrison, I will investigate how these particular authors use the speculative to engage memory and the legacy of African American enslavement, using speculative characters and themes as a medium through which to do a kind of memory work that functions on the level of the flesh and not just on the level of the physical body as one means of creating a contemporary African American female aesthetic.
Chapter I: Beloved, Slavery, and The Black Feminist Self

Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel Beloved (1987) exemplifies the ways in which speculative themes and characters were a useful tool for African American women writers in the 1970s and 1980s. This novel is primarily concerned with (re)creating black female subjectivity on the page, and engaging the kinds of cultural and gender specific traumas that were devastating enough to strip the black female self of agency and power. Beloved is also indicative of the second renaissance\(^2\) of African American women’s letters, as Madhu Dubey would say, because the protagonist Sethe through enslavement, abandonment, and imprisonment, continued to be an agent of her own liberation (and the liberation of those around her). Just as important as all the trials Sethe overcomes is that, in the end, she is reminded that “[she is her] own best thing” (Beloved 322). As Angelyn Mitchell, in her book The Freedom To Remember: Narrative Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction, writes, “If there exists a quintessential black feminist theme, it is the self. Because of this, contemporary Black women writers are acutely aware of the need to right master narratives so that African Americans in general and African American women specifically are represented more authentically as agents, as subjects” (5). Thus, in Beloved, it is important that Morrison separates Sethe’s worth from progeny, sexuality, and slavery, while illustrating the damning physical and metaphysical affects of

\(^2\) “Second renaissance” is Madhu Dubey’s term for the artistic period of African American women’s writing immediately following, and perhaps even overlapping, the Black Arts Movement and continuing until the rise of black women’s fiction in the 1990s. See her essay, “Even Some Fiction Might be Useful: African American Women Writers” in The Cambridge Companion to African American Women’s Literature, edited by Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor.
each on her character. It is particularly through the characterization of Beloved and this character’s interactions with other members of their household that Sethe begins to acknowledge and reckon with the ways that the enslaved and mutilated past is perpetually besieging the present. Moreover, it is the way in which Morrison constructs and develops Beloved as a speculative character that allows for an engagement with the metaphysical affects of enslavement, embodied and gendered ethnicity, the atemporality of trauma, the demands of patriarchy, and the necessity for black feminist community among African American women.

In Morrison’s oft quoted section of her essay, “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” she writes, “the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other... is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world” (61). It is partially due to this African cosmology, which critics such as Teresa N. Washington³ and Barbara Christian⁴ examine in depth, that the speculative is such a useful tool in African American culturally specific forms of representation. Speculative themes and characters allow for the combination of the supernatural and the realistic, which according to both Morrison and Christian is a very important part having an African American frame of reference. Much of this blending of the supernatural and the mundane is highlighted in

³ See Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our texts: Manifestations of Ajé in Africana Literature by Teresa N. Washington. Washington investigates the presence of African gods, particularly the Yoruba deity Aje, in the spiritual power black men and women wield in works of literature from the African Diaspora.
⁴ See Barbara Christian’s essay, “Fixing Methodologies: Beloved” for a more in depth analysis of an African cosmology, defined as African American cultural practices and beliefs derived from African religious and cultural practices.
Beloved as the novel directly engages the institution of American slavery as the origin of much of what is both ghostly and ghastly about the African American past. As Jennifer Griffith argues in Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance, “the text seems to acknowledge the problems with using either pure fantasy or narrative realism to express the experience of survival. Instead it moves between these forms, highlighting their distinctness while also allowing them to blend into each other” (80-81). Morrison, in writing Beloved, depicts culturally specific traumas and the perpetual presence of these same traumas in the lives of African Americans. Because of the long buried, but still discursively relevant nature of the trauma of enslavement and its attendant discourses, neither fantasy nor realism are able to completely represent the complex nature of African American female life. To engage the African American past on all levels, not just physically and mentally, but spiritually and emotionally as well, requires characters and themes that are abstract in ways that only the speculative can sustain.

In Beloved, Morrison returns to the institution of slavery in flashbacks, usually about the Sweet Home Plantation and the many different people who lived and worked there. Because of the way the novel toggles back and forth between time periods and perspectives, Beloved is a book of beginnings and endings, of fits and starts, of stories that were begun, but finished later by someone other than the person who started them. This meta-narrativization of the plot becomes heightened once Beloved becomes corporeal. Morrison writes,
It became a way to feed [Beloved]. Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because everything in her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost... But as soon as she began to tell [Beloved] about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it— in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (69)

It is Beloved’s physical presence that creates the space and necessity for Sethe’s testimony; a testimony that, until the point of Beloved’s arrival, had been subjugated and kept hidden from everyone. In reference to revisiting the stories of Sethe’s past, Sethe says that “she and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver’s inquiries she gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who shared some of it and to whom she could talk with a measure of calm, the hurt was always there” (69). It is through the voracious appetite of Beloved that Sethe is able to find some pleasure in the (re)memory\(^5\) and the telling of her story. In other words, her story and her feelings about her story only come to the forefront as a result of Beloved’s physical presence, and is something that didn’t occur when Beloved was only an immaterial presence that cohabitated in the house on Bluestone Road. It was also partly Sethe’s refusal to speak about the past and the emotions that would help contextualize that past that necessitates Beloved’s arrival. As Griffith notes via an interview with Robbie McCauley, “when the material of our pasts turns into shame and guilt, we stop talking about it and it gets bigger

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5 I read Morrison’s use of rememory in Beloved as gesturing toward the perpetual atemporal potency of certain memories, particularly in terms of traumatic memory, and the ability of these kinds of memories to live eternally in both physical and metaphysical spaces. See Beloved, pages 43-44, 112.
and bigger and more distorted” (64). Though according to many of the characters in the book, it is Sethe’s pride that is her biggest crime, the “unspeakable” nature of her past can only be explained through shame and grief. I don’t read Sethe’s shame solely in relation to the situation surrounding Beloved’s death, but as more related to being owned and enslaved, and therefore to being necessarily involved in the kinds of violences to which enslaved bodies were subjected. Everything about Beloved is suggestive of an inevitably speculative rendering of these distorted emotions, particularly guilt and shame, but also grief and longing. For Sethe, it is only the acknowledgement of these emotions and the purging of them from her present that will allow for her personal recovery and the reconciliation of the entire community.

Beloved is a novel in which racialized trauma operates on multiple levels, first through a depiction of slavery, then through the resurrection and corporealization of the character Beloved. Using Hortense Spillers’ essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” I want to use the flesh/body binary she delineates to analyze Morrison’s speculative characterization of Beloved. In her essay, Spillers argues that “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography” (67). In his reading of Spillers, Antonio Viego\(^6\) allows for “the possibility that language’s intersection with the organism of needs might already find an organism marked by a kind

\(^6\) Viego, in his book *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies*, discusses the racist underpinnings of ego psychology, and the presence of ego psychological discourse in contemporary mainstream culture. Toward that end, he reads and updates Spillers’ model of racialized subjection to gesture toward the utility of psychoanalysis in critical race studies.
of metaphoricity that yields from meanings associated with notions of racialized difference” (Viego 19). If we think of the body before subjection as the flesh, then Spillers is very clear about the way that discourses are still implicated in the visibility and legibility of this flesh. Therefore, for black women, there is no point in their existence, even in that pre-subject time-space, that is not affected by the discourses that surround the history of black women’s bodies. The question then, for Toni Morrison, and for African American women writers of this time period in general, becomes how does one get at the flesh? How does one write and illustrate the damage that this flesh has suffered due to the institution of slavery and the physical and discursive violences that this institution has perpetuated? How does one liberate this flesh in the particular creative medium of the novel? It is through the speculative characterization of Beloved that Morrison is also able to bring the protagonist Sethe, as subject, into very intimate contact with the flesh as more than memory and metaphysical figuration, as a corporeal being that is able to portray veraciously the racist and physically embodied nature of racialized gender construction as trauma, for African American women. The addition of Beloved as a literally physical, presently available part of the past represents the physical and embodied nature of culturally specific violence and its presence in the contemporary lives of African Americans.

Additionally, in Beloved, not only does Sethe, as subject, speak her testimony, but this pre-subjected body, represented by Beloved, is allowed a voice as well. Beloved is allowed a chance to offer her testimony of the traumas suffered, by not only her individual body, but by the African American female pre-subjected body as a construct. She is a corporeal representation of those violences, those traumas caused by being legible before
being subjected into language. And within this project of reclaiming the Black feminist self, it is imperative that the flesh or the psychically irretrievable parts of the African American female consciousness are not only recovered but given a chance to speak their truths as well. In this way, testimony becomes a way of not only acknowledging the trauma of the past, but of healing the rupture between the traumatic past and the post-traumatic present. As Griffiths writes, “The event becomes known through the process of telling the story to a listener, ‘who is... the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time.’ Testimony, therefore, depends on a relationship and a process between the survivor and the witness, as memory emerges and reunites a body and voice severed in trauma” (2). This reckoning between voice and body, between subject and other, between Sethe and Beloved, begins discursively, with each telling stories and trying to make the other understand the narratives of their lives after their separation. Sethe’s testimony is couched in grief and guilt. She tries to explain these emotions and others in discourse to Beloved, but Beloved is a body that cannot understand itself or the bodies around it as discursively legible; she is a being that is not subject to language and other institutions in ways that we understand. If we continue to think of Beloved as this pre-subject African American female body, then not only does this explain Beloved’s preoccupation with sensory information, but it also explains Sethe’s inability to bridge the trauma they share with words alone. Additionally, though they both share the traumas of enslavement and of Beloved’s death, Sethe is the character that bears the memory of these events, a memory she refuses to make into testimony until Beloved’s corporeal arrival. In the moment she becomes flesh, Beloved also becomes the witness to the trauma that Sethe needs in order to tell her story.
As witness, Beloved becomes the body that was separated from the voice, Sethe, in trauma. Furthermore, Beloved’s need to hear Sethe’s memories is an effort to reunite this voice and body, and to replace her own “vague, impressionistic or simply absent” traumatic memories, with something more legible (Griffiths 71). Morrison portrays Beloved’s inability to express her trauma in language through Beloved’s speech patterns that tend to be more evocative and symbolic than the speech of other characters. Morrison writes, “I am Beloved and she is mine... how can I say things that are pictures I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is” (248). Beloved is unable to verbally express the memory of their shared trauma, but it is the affect and the metaphysical impressions that she carries within her that allow Sethe to bring her testimony into being. Because of Beloved’s physical presence, Morrison can on the level of narrative, begin to “examine how culture traumatizes memory, leaving the memory in the body to be reenacted in each encounter while denying survivors an opportunity to express the phenomenon” (Griffiths 51). Beloved struggles with language’s inability to express her existence and to convey the affect associated with the traumas she has experienced. Because of the constricting nature of culturally specific discourses, many of which are responsible for her death, Beloved and Sethe are forced to relive the trauma they have experienced through a bodily confrontation of memory and voice. The difficulties these characters have in expressing the perpetual, embodied trauma of the past is representative of the ways that certain violences perpetrated against black bodies become unspeakable not because of the inability to speak, but because of the inadequacy of language to express the physical and metaphysical weight of being legible as
racially and sexually devalued, and therefore vulnerable to specific kinds of bodily and psychic violences.

Both Spillers and Griffiths note the ways that the black female body has become legible in culturally specific ways. However, Griffith “focuses on the interactions between the black female body as a site of inscription for cultural values and the body as a source of the memories in the production of testimony,” and in this novel Beloved’s body is the locus where memory and cultural inscription meet (5). In Beloved, the body takes center stage, which is why feeding Beloved through discourse, through text, through memory is never enough. Regardless of the discursive redresses that Denver, Sethe, and Paul D take up with Beloved, it is necessary that she and Sethe work through their interrelated traumas through their bodies, because the discourses of racialized gender, the memories of past traumas are literally present on the bodies of these characters. This physicality is presented quite often in their relationship, even from the moment the family, consisting of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, sees Beloved sitting on “a stump not far from the steps of 124” (60). In that moment, Sethe has an “unmanageable emergency” which consisted of “voiding” a seemingly endless amount of water, which she likens to the unstoppable nature of “water breaking from a womb” (61). As their relationship continues, and becomes a more fractious test of wills, their bodies become increasingly involved. Though everyone is starving, as Sethe begins to devote all of her attention to Beloved, Beloved “was getting bigger, plumper by the day,” because “she took the best of everything- first” (281, 284). Morrison goes on to say that,
“The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away became slits of sleeplessness. Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled with up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur. (295)

Beloved, in true succubus form, is sucking the life out of Sethe, and Sethe, because of her own feelings of guilt and shame, is willing to trade a life for a life to appease Beloved. It is in these final pages that the seriousness of their confrontation becomes one of a more mortal nature for Sethe. It is clear throughout the novel that Sethe would have been if not content, at the very least able, to continue living her isolated life, even under the psychic and metaphysical weight of past traumas. However, because of the fact that the trauma that connects these two characters is a trauma that was enacted and recorded through the body, the body must also become the locus of their confrontation. It is this final physical, embodied confrontation between Sethe and Beloved, which demands the use and perhaps even the sacrifice of Sethe’s body, that is meant to fully represent the malignant nature of trauma, discourse, and even memory in its embodied state.

In the characterization of Beloved, Morrison is successful in conjoining the supernatural with the realistic effects of enslavement for African Americans in the late nineteenth century. The characterization of Beloved as that which haunts African
American subjects is indicative of the “discredited knowledge”\(^7\) of African American people that Morrison mentions in “Rootedness” (61). Marisa Parham argues that “haunting in its broadest sense is simultaneously a word for how knowledge comes together and also for how it breaks apart, a term for an experience that emerges at the crossroads between what we know well and what we do not know easily” (2). Beloved lies squarely within this intersection and through her physical presence inaugurates the consolidation of the knowledge, physicality, and memory of trauma. Yet, interrelated with what she represents is what or who has the power to call this being forth in her corporeal form. Though, as I argue above, Beloved’s physical presence is necessitated by the way Sethe buries her trauma and testimony as unspeakable, it is not Sethe, or any of the other female characters that bring Beloved into being, and not from lack of trying. Soon after Baby Suggs’ death, “Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help” (4). Yet, try as they might, Beloved’s ghostly pre-cursor remains just that: an uncommunicative, immaterial presence. Interestingly, it is the heteronormative interruption of Paul D’s entrance into this female space that brings about the

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\(^7\) In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison invokes superstition and magic in her explanation of other “ways of knowing things” or “discredited knowledge” as particular to an African American frame of reference (61). Morrison’s discredited knowledge differs from Foucault’s subjugated knowledge, in that subjugated knowledges rely on “the tools of scholarship to reveal their existence” (Foucault 7). In contrast, discredited knowledge eschews a reliance on discourse in favor of affect and connections to an African diasporic spirituality. This rejection of discourse is, in part, due to the inability of discourse to accommodate the exterior and interior lives of the African American subject. It is the use of speculative themes and characters that allow contemporary African American writers to represent affect, trauma, and an African diasporic spirituality in literature.
corporealization of Beloved, and in that moment transforms this novel from mundane or magical realism to completely and irrevocably speculative. Morrison writes,

   Whatever they were or might have been, Paul D messed them up for good. With a table and loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame. Denver had taught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped on them; the assumption that the haunting was done by an evil thing looking for more. None of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment, of not suspecting but knowing the things behind things. (45)

Ultimately, regardless of the intentions of Paul D and the familial relationships he tries to engender with the living residents of 124, he still occupies this all female space by force. It is only through “shouting,” “screaming,” and “wrecking everything about” that he cements his place as the dominant presence in the household (22). It is important that before he arrives, there is this acceptance of the supernatural, of “discredited knowledges,” of understanding the world from a culturally and gender specific perspective. Though each character deals with the presence of this spirit in different ways, they all espouse some kind of acceptance, even going as far as Denver’s obvious pleasure at the presence of this ghostly being. Then Paul D arrives and, for better or for worse, the situation at 124 is irrevocably altered. After the arrival of Paul D, and his expulsion of the ghost from the house, Beloved metamorphoses from a ghost that has some interaction with the world, to a powerful physical presence that can interact with the environment on all levels. She becomes a monster in ways that the contemporary reader might understand as having more in common with vampire or zombie tradition than any kind of “discredited
knowledge.” However, instead of figuratively or metaphorically representing embodied
aberrance like the monsters with whom readers are familiar, Morrison turns this tradition
on its head by embodying the metaphysical and the psychical in Beloved.

Though Morrison discusses the cosmology of a specifically African American
worldview, understanding that supernatural things like ghosts exist, and accepting their
presence in the hearth is where male and female cultural understanding diverges within
the novel. Therefore, it is Paul D’s masculinity, even as it is expressed through racialized
discourse, which refuses any obstacle to establishing domestic heteronormativity in 124
with his sexual relationship with Sethe at the center of this standardized familial
construction. Beloved is one such obstacle to his claims to normativity. Morrison writes,
“there was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place,
making room, shifting it, moving it over to some place else, then standing in the place he
had made” (47). Paul D is determined to make space for himself, but Beloved usurps this
position that he has cleared within this household, which is partially the root cause of their
contentious relationship. Kevin Quashie, in his book Black Women, Identity, and Cultural
Theory: Unbecoming the Subject, argues that

In Black cultural contexts, memory is a body- either a literal fleshy, self-contained
entity, or an attribute of a body… [and] that if memory is a body, then the process of
coming to a relationship with memory is ontological, a process of being and
becoming. This process of becoming at once constitutes and disturbs notions of
home and nation, two concepts that are important locations of Black collective

24
identity and which are therefore central to how a subject experiences and encounters her subjectivity. (13)

It is the traumas of enslavement that both constitutes and disturbs notions of nation, but it is Beloved’s presence as the embodiment of traumatic memory that disrupts Paul D’s notion of home and heteronormativity. Morrison writes, “Beloved was different. It bothered him. Maybe it was just the fact that he didn’t bother her. Or it could be the timing. She had appeared and been taken in on the very day Sethe and he had patched up their quarrel, gone out in public and had a right good time—like a family” (79). This backlash against that which is rational and heteronormative, and therefore cannot include Beloved as a ghost, is what causes Beloved to become animated. Through forcing patriarchy and heteronormativity into this female centered space, Paul D makes a bad situation worse, and gives the ghost pre-cursor of Beloved the impetus to make the transition from existing in “the dark” to inhabiting, as a physical being, the house where Paul D planned to both stake and secure his manhood through normative familial relationships.

Morrison is also careful to make clear that racialized gender violence was a factor for male bodies as well. She writes, “Was that it? Is that where manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? ... they were only men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race” (Morrison 148). Yet, for African American men, re-establishing male privilege and male dominance often takes place through the domination of African American women’s bodies. Aside from the portrayals of the horrifying and devastating rape enslaved black women by white male slave owners, in Beloved there is always as an engagement of the complicated sexual
politics that existed between African American men and women, specifically. One such
example is Paul D asking Sethe to have a baby with him after he is unable to tell Sethe about
sleeping with Beloved. Morrison writes, “And suddenly it was a solution: a way to hold on
to [Sethe], document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell- all in one” (151). Paul D
feels that it is his right to work out whatever issues or questions of his own manliness
through Sethe’s body, and he simultaneously feels disbelief and shame because Beloved is
doing something very similar to him. He thinks, “what? A grown man fixed by a girl? But
what if the girl was not a girl, but something in disguise? A lowdown something that looked
like a sweet young girl and fucking her or not was not the point, it was not being able to
stay or go where he wished in 124” (149). Paul D, as an African American man at this time,
accepts the dominion that institutions have over his body because it is raced, and
simultaneously accepts his own dominion over the bodies of African American women.
Beloved changes this. Because of her ability to “fix” and physically “move” him, to bar him
from Sethe’s boudoir and 124 more generally, Paul D begins to accept an understanding of
his domestic situation that is not rational. The fact that his masculinity fails to be the
determining factor in the power dynamics of his relationship with Beloved activates his
ability to read her as a unique being outside of his control, even given her presence within
the sexual politics of the household. Beloved, because she is “other,” has access to power
that is not subject to politics, sexual or otherwise. She is also representative of non-
normative female desire, of female sexuality that is disconnected from its use to patriarchy.
Because Beloved repeatedly commands Paul D, as the only male she comes in contact with
in this realm, to “touch me on the inside part and call me my name,” her sexuality functions
less as an apparatus for social control and more as a mechanism for self-determination (Beloved 137). Beloved uses her sexuality to try to recoup the life and some of the sensory experiences that were lost to her, and the fact she ignores the sexual politics of the hearth and engages in sex with Paul D jeopardizes Paul D's manhood in the one place where his male power would be unquestioned. The power of the trauma that Beloved carries within her body is disruptive of all institutions, but seems particularly so in terms of the heteronormative relationships within the house on Bluestone Road. Because of the embodied nature of Beloved’s trauma and memory, she is only able to physically connect Paul D to the trauma of her death through her sexuality.

Beloved might have been brought into being by the masculine disruption of the feminine space of 124, but it is only the communal feminine intervention of the African American women in Sethe’s community that restores Beloved to her appropriate and original state as immaterial, or at least as untethered to Sethe in such an intimate and draining way. In Beloved it is not only important that Sethe make peace with the dead through the character Beloved, but she must also make peace with the living members of her community from whom she has been estranged for years. It is through testimony that the breach between Sethe and the rest of the community is repaired. After Paul D leaves and the female community of 124 is restored anew, it becomes apparent that trading testimonies among each other is not only dangerous, but ineffective as well. Sethe cannot explain enough and Beloved cannot rage enough to reconcile the trauma that lies between them. It is only through Denver’s willingness to speak, and to share her story with the women of the community that there could be any resolution. Denver realizes that, “nobody
was going to help her unless she told it- told all of it” (298). And of course as soon as Denver gives her testimony, “[the news] spread among the other coloredwomen. It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation” (300). For the African American women of the community, it is the existence of this traumatic past in the present, and particularly in corporeal form, that inspires them to take Sethe and her family back into the fold. Morrison writes,  

Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present... As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place- shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such- Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn’t mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion. (302)

Like Quashie notes, the hearth and the nation are “two concepts that are important locations of Black collective identity” and Beloved’s physical presence is more of a threat to the collective identity of this community than her death was (13). Therefore, due to the trespass and entrenchment of this being from another world, the women in this community prepare to go war with the past, understanding in cultural and gender specific ways the power of traumatic memory. Beloved is a real threat to Sethe’s well-being, and given Sethe’s inclination toward killing to protect her, Beloved is a threat to the community at large. However, unlike Paul D’s dispersal of feminine and other worldly power, the African American women in the community exorcise Beloved through the consolidation of female community and through spiritual and metaphysical communion with Sethe and with each other. In order to bring about the departure of Beloved and invoke the power of their
community, they bring with them any scrap of knowledge, discredited or not, that they can access. Morrison writes, “some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Others brought Christian faith- as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both” (303). Again, unlike the male exorcism of Beloved from 124, the women community doesn’t underestimate the power of Beloved. Though these women bring pieces of many different traditions, it is almost as if they are trying to achieve a deeper path into the metaphysical than any one faith or set of knowledge might allow. They are searching for access to the originary in ways that might release Sethe as well as Beloved. Morrison writes,

> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (310)

It is this spiritual communion and the physical presence of Beloved that places Sethe both physically and spiritually in the rememory of the original trauma. As such, it is this female community and the sheer physicality of this reckoning that allows the original trauma to be experienced again. However, this time, as Sethe comes into contact with the desperation that originally prompted her to take Beloved’s life, her family and her community prevent her from killing Mr. Bodwin, a stand-in for Schoolteacher. In this re-experience of memory, the community is at long last able to atone for their role in Sethe’s trauma, which was a communal trauma as well. As the community steps in and changes the outcome of this rememory, Beloved is dissipated. Morrison writes, “some say [she] disappeared, exploded
right before their eyes. Ella is not so sure... Could be hiding in the trees waiting for another chance” (310). In other words, Beloved returns to a less corporeal being and takes leave of Sethe, but she will never be exorcised completely. Beloved, as representative of the trauma experienced by enslaved individuals, can never be reconciled or forgotten, and as I will argue in the next chapter which focuses on Kindred by Octavia Butler, much of this trauma, as it becomes perpetually tied to black bodies, persists into the contemporary era of the twentieth century.

It is the speculativity of Beloved’s character that allows Morrison to end this novel with the consolidation of community and the strengthening of heterosexual affective relationships without having to explain in detail exactly what happened to Beloved. Beloved was corporeal, because making the psychical and metaphysical into flesh is one way to represent the contentious nature of embodying traumatic memory. As an answer to how one gets at the flesh, in the way Hortense Spillers defines it, it becomes necessary to think about the ways that in reality discourse operates similarly to the way the character Beloved functions in this text. Racialized gender discourses irrevocably imprint culturally specific trauma on African American female bodies before they are even able to understand themselves as legible. The static and indelible nature of this marking is itself a trauma that is re-enacted both individually and collectively, and marks certain bodies as other, and consequently, as acceptable loci for institutionalized violence. The fact that raced and gendered bodies internalize this violence has been a popular subject of literature in the contemporary era. In her essay, “The Site of Memory,” Morrison writes,
For me- a writer of the last quarter of the twentieth century, a writer who is black and a woman- the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings to terrible to relate.’ The exercise is critical for anyone who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.

Moving the veil aside requires certain things. First of all, I must trust my own recollections. I must also depend on the recollections of others... But memories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten interior life of [enslaved African Americans]. Only the act of imagination can help me” (Denard 71).

This pulling back of the veil requires a different kind of relationship between narrative and memory. In *The Freedom to Remember*, Mitchell defines liberatory narratives as novels by black women that “bear witness to the ‘unspeakable,’ correct the enduring misrepresentations of Black Americans forged in slavery, and present history from a racialized perspective” (5). That is the function of the novel *Beloved* generally, and I think this purpose is achieved particularly through the speculative characterization of the character Beloved. Within this novel, every plot device and every character is in some way related to expressing the inexpressible and representing in text that which is immaterial, metaphysical, and supernatural, but not any less experientially viable for contemporary African Americans. There is nothing more immaterial and ghostly than the ways that racism and misogyny have become folded into and buried beneath discourse in our supposedly post-racial society.
For Mitchell, the category of libera
tory narratives includes texts regardless of genre that revisit slavery in the contemporary era and do some version of Black feminist reclaiming of the self. However, it is my contention that liberatory narratives, like \textit{Beloved}, that utilize the speculative are able to extend the atemporality of trauma in interesting, and more experientially veracious, ways. In the liberatory narratives that don’t engage the speculative as a major function of the plot, it becomes impossible to bring the past and the present into such close proximal relation with each other. The non-speculative liberatory narrative is only able to achieve the first level of connection, in terms of a contemporary text with characters from past eras, but there are still very strict temporal bounds that disallow certain intimacies between the past and the present. The movement of time is only allowed to move in one direction. In other words, the reader can see the past, but the characters do not take part in this movement; they remain in some ways captive of the period in which the author places them. In her essay, “Close Encounters between Traditional and Nontraditional Science Fiction,” Jennifer E. Henton argues that “science fiction reveals where it is possible to expose the ego; it circumvents our desire to organize and orchestrate our disjointed selves, histories and beliefs into an identifiable framework. Blurring generic boundaries provides ‘time’ and ‘space’ for subjugated voices, that is time and space via a different sense of order” (102). What becomes clear in \textit{Kindred}, and will become even clearer in \textit{Kindred} by Octavia Butler, is that allowing a present and a past to physically interact with each other necessitates the use of the speculative. Moreover, it is often this meeting or reckoning between two time referents that allows for any presently accessible relief from past traumas. In both \textit{Beloved} and \textit{Kindred}, trauma transcends
temporal boundaries within the bodies of African American women, and in both novels it is particularly due to discourses of African American enslavement that this bodily transgression of atemporality is possible. Furthermore, it is only by utilizing the speculative that this movement between the past and present can be fully represented in text.
Chapter II: *Kindred*, Embodied Discourse, and Memorial Ethnic Time

In the novel *Kindred* (1979), Octavia Butler uses the speculative device of time travel to bring the present, through the body of the protagonist Dana, into sudden and sustained contact with the past. The past, as Dana experiences it, is important to her individually as it is rather murkyly attributed to her relationship with her ancestor Rufus Weylin that she is transported through time and space back to nineteenth-century Maryland whenever his life is in danger. In fact, Dana realizes toward the beginning of the novel that "[Rufus] would have to survive to father [his daughter] Hagar, or [Dana] could not exist," and that "[she] didn’t want to test the paradox" (29). However, Dana’s visits to the past are more than individual trips down memory lane; ultimately, they allow Butler the space to re-imagine the enslaved past of African Americans and to grapple with the ways that “while all modern subjects are post-slavery subjects fully constituted by the discursive codes of slavery and post-slavery, post-slavery subjectivity is largely borne by and readable on the black subject” (Sharpe 3). It is indicative of this era, the beginning of a more discursively critical black feminist movement that Butler, like Morrison and many other African American women authors of the 1970s and 1980s, finds it necessary to make the trauma of enslavement presently accessible through (re)creating the people underneath the discourses. Additionally, in *Kindred*, Butler is concerned with faithfully and veraciously representing the post-traumatic legacy of slavery and the ties that bind the past and the present together within the bodies of black women specifically. Through the juxtaposition of these two time periods, and particularly through the fact that the same black female and white male bodies move through both, Butler constructs a shocking critique of the sexual
politics of slavery and of the psychic and discursive manifestations of these same politics in the contemporary time period of the late 1970s. To that end the use of the speculative becomes necessary to render movement between these two time periods feasible in a way that allows for contact between the characters of these two eras, and that is representative of the discursive experiences of contemporary African Americans. The issue of temporality is central to the plot of *Kindred*, and it is specifically the speculative device of time travel that allows Butler to illustrate the atemporality of discourse, of physical and metaphysical trauma, and of memory, and to engage the ways that all of these things have become tethered to the African American female body.

It is particularly the atemporality of discourse, through its ceaseless adherence to specific forms of embodiment, which is responsible for much of the trauma experienced by both past and contemporary raced and gendered subjects. Therefore, aside from using the speculative to represent this atemporality on the page, *Kindred* also utilizes the speculative device of time travel to debunk and demystify these same racialized gender discourses that have found a perpetual locus in African American women's bodies. In her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers critically analyzes the processes that have created the black body as the embodiment of racialized gender discourses. Spillers' essay is helpful in understanding how ethnicity became stagnant, and why the immovability of ethnicity became problematic for black bodies in ways that continue to affect their access to power and power's access to them. Spillers argues that

Ethnicity in this case freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the affects of the Eternal. We could say, then, that in its powerful stillness, 'ethnicity,'
embodies nothing more than a mode of memorial time. As a signifier that has no
movement in the field of signification, the use of 'ethnicity' for the living becomes
purely appreciative, although one would be unwise not to concede its dangerous
affects. (66)

Thus, it was not only the institution(s) of slavery that irreparably damaged the flesh\textsuperscript{8} of
African Americans, but it was the changeless nature of "ethnic" discourse, as tied to gender,
that became frozen in time and marked interminably on black bodies, and for the purposes
of this paper, black female bodies, specifically. Spillers' idea of "memorial time" is an
interesting one, particularly in the context of a novel like \textit{Kindred}, which employs time
travel to engage the ways that the past is always shaping, and often even jeopardizing, the
African American body in the present. In \textit{Kindred}, Butler unpacks the way that black bodies
are made legible in an American context through discourses of enslavement which have
become the archetypal basis of blackness, and which are always lurking beneath whatever
contemporary nomenclature is popular at the time. Many critics such as Because Butler
takes the contemporary African American woman and moves her back in time, the novel is
able to create the space for an aesthetic working through of the ways that ethnicity is
"appreciative" like Spillers notes in her essay. In other words, underneath the terms black
or African American woman, and all the terms that predate those in a particularly American
context, the term "nigger wench," and all the discourses (gendered or otherwise) this term

\textsuperscript{8} The term "flesh" is from Spillers' essay, "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American
Grammar Book." In my first chapter I read this term as the pre-subject raced and gendered
body, and though that reading stands, in this section I would like to gesture toward a
reading of the "flesh" as a more metaphysical part of the raced and gendered human being;
a part that is operative in the transmission of trauma related affect to subsequent
generations as a means of testimony, cultural identity, and cultural memory.
alludes to, are always already there aiding in the legibility of the black gendered body. Even in the contemporary era, Dana’s body is marked only by terms that relate to her black female corporeality, as it has been created in an American context. In *Kindred*, it becomes painfully clear to Dana, that it does not matter how she names herself, or the way her modern sensibilities chafe at being named and therefore treated as an enslaved black woman; in the confines of the antebellum south she is what white men say she is, and her feelings on the matter are irrelevant. Dana tells Rufus, "about niggers... I don’t like that word, remember? Try calling me black or Negro or even colored" (61). To which Rufus replies, "What’s the use of saying all that?" (61). Dana, through the movement from her present to a distant past, is forced to confront not only the foundation of ethnic discourse as it affects black female bodies, but she also has to reckon with the fact that the hierarchical underpinnings of these past discourses are much more powerful than the contemporary window dressings with which she covers them. Ultimately, no matter what Dana wants Rufus to call her, the way he reads her in terms of the hierarchical power relations of a Southern plantation in the 1850s never changes.

Generally, Dana is characterized as a fairly realistic protagonist. She is often very aware of the physical dangers she faces when she goes back in time, even as she sometimes naively overlooks the power of the racial-ethnic discourses that surrounds her to shape the people and power relations with which she comes in contact in serious and permanent ways. Butler situates Dana in a contemporary setting as an African American woman who is in an interracial marriage, and who, due to the fact that she is from California, is as spatially removed from American slavery as she is temporally, particularly if slavery is understood
as a primarily southern institution. It is partly because of her spatial and temporal bearings that Dana believes she can overcome discourse; that she can change, shift, and outlast it, even if only through the friendship and tutelage of her ancestor Rufus Weylin. At one point Dana thinks about the future of their relationship,

The boy was literally growing up as I watched- growing up because I watched and because I helped to keep him safe. I was the worst possible guardian for him- a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children... But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. (68)

Throughout the novel she continues to refer to Rufus as "insurance," continuing to hope and believe that through building a relationship with him, hopefully she would be safe(r) when she returned to his time period (83). Because Dana knows what the distant future will be, she thinks she can change the immediate future of Rufus' time period, even if only in small ways. Lisa Woolfork, in her book *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture,* argues that it is a common motif in science fiction to “make history as flexible as time. Events that are considered fixed, in the present, are represented as entities capable of change,” yet, Butler disallows the shifting of history (23). According to Woolfork, “Butler could have chosen to make the past as flexible and fluid as her depiction of space in time. However, such a malleable history would not permit *Kindred* to stage a return to the traumatic past” (23). Therefore, no amount of care will keep Rufus from being a product of
his environment and living within the discourses of the day. Toward the end of the novel, his relationships with both Alice and Dana prove that he believes his power over the bodies and lives of the black women around him is paramount; even superseding the affective ties he shares with both women. Both Dana and Alice appeal to Rufus’ supposed feelings of love or friendship when he is either mentally or physically abusive of them, and their appeals go unheard. In one scene, Dana tries to save an enslaved man named Sam, who Rufus is selling because Sam tried to court Dana. Butler writes, “I caught Rufus by the hand and spoke low to him, ‘Please Rufe. If you do this, you’ll destroy what you mean to preserve. Please don’t...’” (238). Immediately following this plea Rufus hits Dana, escalating the level of violence he feels comfortable subjecting her body to with no mediation through his father or the current slave-driver. His comfort is directly related to the fact that, now as white man, he has finally completely bought into the discourses that allow him to visit specific kinds of violences onto black bodies, and that justify his behavior through a belief that there are no exceptions to the discourses of racialized gender. By the end of the novel, the power of racialized discourse even overcomes Rufus’ belief that Dana is an "other" that transcends race, that she is otherworldly, and that his mortality is wrapped up in her presence in his time period. Because his savior comes in the form of a black woman, even the threat of his own death is not enough to change his behavior enough that they might sustain some kind of relationship.

Dana’s inability to shift discourse is mirrored in the sections of the novel that take place in the 1970s, as well, but in the present she seems much more accepting of racial hierarchy and racist discourse. As she and Kevin inform their relatives of their marriage,
they are caught in memorial time when the racist and race-based objections to their marriage seem to mirror Rufus's own disbelief at their marriage centuries before. When Kevin tries to explain to Rufus that Dana is his wife, Rufus charges incredulously that "Niggers can't marry white people!" (60). And in the contemporary era of the novel, Dana's and Kevin's respective families seem to feel the same way. Kevin's sister Carol says, “that she didn't want to meet [Dana], wouldn't have [Dana] in the house- or [Kevin] either if he married [Dana]" (110). Dana's uncle takes the marriage as a rejection of him and his blackness, even as her aunt "accepts the idea of [Dana] marrying [Kevin] because any children [they] have will be light" (111). Marisa Parham argues that “the image of Kevin and Dana together, channels for some onlookers thoughts of previous crimes and victimizations, of structures of relation that shaped the lives of their ancestors,” and for their immediate family members this collective and individual rememory is more than they can handle (Parham 86). The hierarchies inherent in the reactions of Kevin and Dana's family are indicative of the power of racial discourse and the fact that racial tensions are always heightened when they turn on the axis of sexual politics. Interestingly, in the present of the book, Dana is well aware of the ways that racialization and antiquated discourse are presently available players in their modern environment. She tells Kevin to “brace [himself]” for the talk with his sister, because she knows that the discourses of race are extant, even if they are unspoken or elided under other discourses in the contemporary era. Kevin, however, doesn’t believe that racism even still exists, because he never experiences it. He doesn't have race as 'other' marked onto his body, so he doesn’t believe in the atemporality of discourse, just as he doesn’t believe that the past intrudes on Dana’s
present the first few times she disappears to Rufus’ time period right in front of him. Yet, the presence of the past in the contemporary time period of Dana’s life is evident even in the “other things” his sister says about Dana that he can’t bring himself to repeat. Dana’s raced and gendered body is only legible through discourses that have not changed much since the period of African American enslavement, and the time travel highlights the fact that this racialized origin of sorts continues to perpetuate itself in myriad ways, but particularly in ways tied to power and sexual relationships.

Spillers’ memorial ethnic time theorizes the idea that the foundation of race in America are the discourses that were popularized during the period of African American enslavement, and that a working through of race and its connections to gender, class, and geography require an engagement with the past. However, due to the way that ethnicity and therefore "ethnic memorial time" has been marked on black (female) bodies, this engagement with the past must be a physical one. In other words, there must be a confrontation between the past and the present that is as embodied as the discourses are. In terms of the trauma and the travel between time periods, Dana’s body takes center stage. The first time Rufus calls Dana to him in the past, Dana "began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around [her]. [She] stayed on her feet for a moment… then finally, [she] collapsed to her knees" (13). Her body is literally transported to the antebellum south and the only way she is able to return is through believing she is in mortal danger. On this first trip, Dana’s return is provoked by the intervention of an angry man holding, "the longest rifle [she] had ever seen" to her head and preparing to shoot it (14). Dana’s body is constantly being threatened, and it is her body that the Weylins use to
mark her as a slave, usually through physical punishment of some sort. In one scene, to "punish [Dana] for letting the old man die," Rufus sends her to work in the fields, and gives the overseer, Fowler, direct access to her body (210). Dana says, "I raised the knife and chopped at the first stalk. It bent over, partially cut. At the same moment, Fowler lashed me hard across the back. I screamed, stumbled and spun to face him, still holding my knife. Unimpressed he hit me across the breasts" (211). In this scene, and in many of the scenes that take place in the antebellum south, the Weylins try to mark Dana’s body to illustrate their power and to brand her as a slave beyond even her blackness. They use physical trauma as that which can force her to embody the discourses of slavery, in ways that her contemporary blackness has not required. Lisa Woolfolk argues that “Kindred’s representation of a bodily reference to the slave past ... [and] introduces the concept of bodily engagement to the discursive practice of trauma theory to produce a representation of traumatic knowledge that combines the literal and the figurative, and equally values soma and sema (body and mind)” (33). In this particular scene, her body also bears the brunt of a sexual assault as well, which is how she understands the inclusion of her breasts in the blows she receives, comparing these kinds of blows to a kick in the groin (211). These white male characters insist that her black femininity is legible as inextricably linked to being enslaved through marking her body with the tools (torture devices) of enslavement, and she wears these same scars back to her contemporary time period. It is her body that experiences most physically the trauma of displacement and the immovability of the discourses of ethnicity. Whether in this time or the past, her black woman’s body is devalued and expected to perform certain tasks that may or may not be in
line with what Dana, or any individual black woman wants for herself. The fact that there are bodies on the line in this movement between the past and present is representative of the fact that racialization, as to tied to gender, is a physical violence that continues to traumatize contemporary raced and gendered subjects, and mark their bodies as vulnerable in specific kinds of ways.

In *Kindred*, the African American woman's body functions as an access point between time periods. Rufus can see and move her body across time and space, and when he needs her, he calls her to him in a way that she cannot forestall or refuse. The power dynamic between these two characters seems as uneven in the metaphysical realm as it does when they have physical contact, which Rufus clearly manipulates for his own benefit. It is a very interesting element of the plot that he calls Dana back to the antebellum south for his protection; not Alice, even as she suffers at the hands of Rufus and is in need of similar kinds of protections. Again, this hierarchical and uneven power dynamic remains intact, represented by the fact that black female subjects do not have power over black female bodies, only white male subjects do. That is the hierarchy that is in place in the time period Dana returns to again and again, and nothing about her own temporal origin changes that. Even in the end when she kills Rufus, virtually freeing herself from the past forever, Rufus is able to maintain his hold on her body, specifically on her left arm as she returns to her original time period, therefore literally fragmenting her body against her will (260-261). In the end, Dana and Rufus literally fight to the death over complete control over Dana's body. She will not submit to him, and he will not allow her to refuse him, because, again, he believes his control over black female bodies is paramount. No matter
what she does, Dana’s bodily agency is always mediated, always muddled by the white male characters in the novel. Even in the contemporary period Kevin tries to appropriate her body (and the labor associated with it) at times, regardless of her own needs and wants. Butler includes the fight Dana and Kevin have over her refusal to type his manuscripts as a mirror to the kinds of labor white men could expect and extract from black female bodies in past time periods (109). Kevin also uses Dana’s body to bring him into contact with "memorial time" in ways that exposes his own body to certain kinds of discourses and violences. The third time that Dana travels through time and space to save Rufus’s life Kevin travels with her. Butler writes, "Suddenly Kevin was beside me holding me. I tried to push him away. I was afraid for him without knowing why. I shouted for him to let me go" (58). Kevin, through his contact with Dana’s body is brought into contact with the distant past, and it will only be through contact with her body that he will be able to return. Dana tells him, "stay close to me. You got here because you were holding me. I’m afraid that may be the only way you can get home" (65). In other words, the atemporality is grounded in the locus of Dana’s body in the same way that her race and gender are. Parham argues that “by literally making Dana’s body a text, that which holds the narrative, Butler suggests one can only travel to a past about which one has a prior-memory sense, through which one is already haunted” (80). In other words, Because of the never-changing nature of ethnicity, Dana’s African American body is legible in ways that give her access to the past, and as a white male post-slavery subject, Kevin’s only means of accessing the trauma of slavery is through Dana’s body. Furthermore, Kevin is able to opt into this movement through time and space, and appropriating even the labor of the movement and using
Dana’s body as the speculative version of a vehicle. Yet, through this movement Kevin sacrifices some agency, because he has no control over his return to his own time period. He and Dana become similarly vulnerable to the discourses of the people that populate the past. However, because he is a white man, he is allowed a freedom of movement and of choice that Dana will never have in either time period of the novel. Dana is not even allowed the agency to move her body away from danger, unless it would be fatal. Dana is often unnerved by the dangers this bodily movement between time periods makes her vulnerable to. She says, "I feel like it could happen again- like it could happen anytime. I don't feel secure here" (17). Even within the power of being able to transcend time and space, because Dana does not control the movement of her body between the time periods, she is often caught between and must necessarily vacillate between the needs of white men and certain death, in order to survive.

Dana’s body is often implicated in the way others try to control her. However, it is also through her body, that she is able to gain some manner of freedom and agency in both the past and present. In Dana’s present, she is able to use her body to claim a kind of agency through sexuality. When she returns with Kevin to 1976 after he has been trapped in the past - five years for him and eight days for her- she wants to have sex with him, not only as a means of reconnecting, but to prove that she still has control over her sexuality and over her body in general, and to prove that she is different from the women who have their sexuality appropriated as a means to perpetuate their enslavement (190). In direct response to the ways that others try to control her body, Dana uses her body and her sexuality to free herself. Some of the enslaved women on the Weylin plantation are able to
carve out small niches of freedom because of their sexual relationships with the men who owned them. Alice, in particular, uses her sexual relationship with Rufus to her advantage; fearlessly ignoring the orders of the overseer. In response to Dana’s fear for her, Alice says, "he knows where I sleep at night" (182). Even though the sexuality of enslaved women is the property of their slave owner, many of the enslaved female characters within the novel find ways to use sexuality as a means to curry favor and aid in the persuasion of the white men who controlled everything. Part of the discursive potency of ethnicity has always been tied to both reproduction and sexuality, particularly in terms of the African American female body. In her discussion of the imbricated nature of intimacy, race, and power, Christina Sharpe writes,

> We see some of the ways that sexuality... appears... as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power... not the most intractable element in power, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality. that is, not withstanding legal emancipation, the very force of the law, trauma, sexual violence, the need or compulsion to work, and familial ties, kept people bound to awful material and psychic conditions. (37)

In Butler’s characterization of Dana’s and Alice’s relationships with Rufus, their sexuality becomes a most powerful bargaining chip, with which Rufus intends to control them. As far as Alice is concerned, it is the trauma of having run once before unsuccessfully, the force of law that keeps her tethered to the Weylin plantation, even as sexual violence at the hands of Rufus creates a situation that makes her want to run again. Particularly once she bears children, it is ensuring their safety that makes it necessary that she stay, and it is the loss of
her children that inspires her to seek the ultimate freedom in death (251). Dana withstands the traumas of enslavement because of familial ties to both Rufus and Alice and because of some idea of self preservation, but she allows the physical and psychic traumatizing of herself only up to the point at which Rufus tries to rape her. For Dana, sexuality is the line that she refuses to cross in the bodily experience of being enslaved, as if it is the usurpation of one’s sexuality and/or reproductive labor that would complete her transition from a person to a slave. For Dana, this is the situation from which there is no return, even if she were to return to her own time period. In a situation where Rufus clearly has some control, much control at certain points, over Dana’s body, controlling her own sexuality is literally the only thing that separates her from the other enslaved women on the plantation, and it is a distinction that is more important to her than life itself. For Dana, sexual agency is also the constant between the different time periods for her. Dana’s sexuality is representative of the ways that racialization is always imbricated with power, class, and sexuality. Sharpe notes that "African and diasporic texts... are concerned with... the violence, often sexual, by which one is made a subject, subjected by others" (3). In *Kindred*, Dana believes in the power of sexual domination to unmake her as subject, and she is desperate to disallow this unmaking. On the level of the narrative, because black female sexuality operates as this "dense transfer point" of power relations, it is one of the best and most realistic means of working through the question of agency, in the past and in the present, for the black feminist self.

In *Kindred*, in order to textually represent racialized discourse as inextricably bound to a stagnant "memorial ethnic time," it is not the time that moves, but Dana’s body (and
Kevin’s) between time periods. Because of the time travel, Butler is able to engage the physical effects of past traumas on contemporary subjects through more than just traumatic memories. When Dana returns to the contemporary time period of the book, it is, at first, the memories of the antebellum south that causes Dana to have issues reconciling the post-traumatic with the traumatic. Dana even though she is back in her present, "felt strangely disoriented. For a moment, I thought Rufus was calling me again. Then I realized that I wasn’t really dizzy, only confused. My memory of a field hand being whipped suddenly seemed to have no place here with me at home" (115). However, unlike a true post-traumatic subject, Dana still has the physical and psychical open wounds of a person who very recently experienced trauma first hand. In the contemporary era, Dana is "afraid to leave the house," because she is always wary of the pull of the past, and this fear of being moved between time periods exacerbates her feeling of being caught between. In terms of the effects of trauma, Griffith writes, "the emotional and physical responses not experienced initially are raised when the survivor perceives a potential threat in a new situation, causing the survivor to relive on a physiological level the terror of the original experience" (Griffith, 47). Thus, for Dana, like many people who have experienced trauma, the terror never ends. Much like Spillers’ idea of the appreciative nature of ethnicity, the trauma associated with ethnic discourse seems to be just as physically and psychically appreciative for Dana. For example, when Dana returns to her original time period, she carries around literal baggage everywhere she goes. At one point Kevin says to her, "you know, someday, you’re going to have to stop dragging that thing around with you and come back to life" (244), but how does one stop "dragging around" something that is literally and
figuratively tied to the body? I think Butler allows Dana to experience so much trauma, to offer ways of alleviating (some of) the effects related to the trauma of racialized gender discourses, particularly in terms of the African American body, and also perhaps working toward some kind of contemporary resolution. In the words of Griffiths, *Kindred* "attempt[s] to confront the historico-racial schema or genealogy of the black female body within the dominant white culture and represent a desire to find a means to articulate her own experience and the bodily response to the traumatic history she has inherited" (Griffiths 51). Dana’s trauma is representative of the physically and psychically violent transfer of ethnic discourse through multiple generations, and her literal contact with this trauma, though harrowing, allows her to understand and kill the power of these discourses at their origin.

Through giving voice to the enslaved black female characters of the novel, and allowing Dana to literally sever the hold that the past might have on her present, *Kindred* operates as a realistic, though fantasy driven, means of testimony, and the first person narration carries through the testimonial feel of the narrative. According to Griffiths, "Writers such as [Butler] reconstruct traumatized female ancestral figures from memory, imagination, and desire, and in the aesthetic space of multi-cultural writing and performance, the body and voice of the female ancestor and the contemporary woman join together to create a new form of testimony. This testimony attests to the paradox of traumatic memory, a memory that is both constantly present and absent within a survivor. The writer addresses the threat of violence felt by subordinated subjects and the way this operates at the level of memory, particularly
traumatic memory that seizes or possesses the living body and testifies to violences against bodies in the past” (63).

In this way, testimony is crafted as the mode of resolution that has the power to transcend time. In *Kindred*, due to the speculative device of time travel, Butler is able to combine both the witness and the survivor into the character Dana. In order for Dana to represent a kind of culturally based aesthetic resolution she had to experience more than the contemporary manifestations of racialized ethnic discourse, and this was only possible through the use of the speculative. Also, due to the way that traumatic memory functions, particularly the way it becomes imbedded through discourse onto black women’s bodies, it is ultimately necessary for black feminist aims to aesthetically render the black female body as the locus of conflict and resolution, and to bring this black female body into contact with the past. Griffiths writes, "even the more recent understanding of the post-traumatic condition fails to account for the complex interplay between struggles in a hostile present environment and a past that keeps resurfacing" (66). Butler’s juxtaposition of the past and the present, of the traumatic with the post traumatic, serves as an aesthetic theorization of the ways that being an African American subject is always already an atemporal and traumatic experience. Furthermore, the physical scars and injuries that Dana brings back with her to the present are representative of the ways that the injuries of discourse can transcend time and continue to be anachronistically marked on bodies that should have post dated that kind of trauma. For the African American post-slavery subject, the inability to define oneself in ways that are not marked by stereotypical discourses is as necessarily
speculative as engaging the actual people within the institutions of African American enslavement.

The juxtaposition of these two very different time periods within *Kindred* also forces the reader to confront his or her own subject position in an American context. This text engages the reader’s own understanding of American slavery and "slaves." which allows some part of us to accept the conditions, challenges, traumas, as given, as somehow not affecting people like us. Due to these reasons, the anachronicity of Dana’s presence in this time period is disturbing. Even though this book was written in the late 1970s, there is something about the liberal cosmopolitan nature of the protagonist Dana that makes her familiar to a new millennium audience. She is our friend, sister, aunt or othermother, and the idea of this individual suffering the inescapability of slavery through her body is very disturbing. As readers, we can say unequivocally that Dana is not Alice, but the vulnerability of her racialized and gendered body as it moves through both of these time periods, offers an uncomfortable counter to that argument. Butler, according to Jennifer Henton, "writes on the brink of the backlash against liberalism, near the close of a second Black Renaissance when black power movements created an atmosphere of realism and resistance" (106). I would classify this time period as an important black feminist aesthetic period in its own right, which is only peripherally related to the Black Arts movement as the black art movement that immediately pre-dates it. Butler, Like Morrison, Jones and other Black women writers, are doing something unique and novel by using different narrative styles, like the speculative and other post-modern forms, toward black feminist aims. These writers know that sometimes in order for realism and discursive resistance to
exist within the same novel, and even within the same black female body, the use of the speculative becomes more than an aesthetic or creative decision, it becomes a necessity. Henton writes,

Imagine one's own subjectivity in terms of history becomes a feat of science and fiction in the African-American Diaspora. Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) explores the ellipses-like knowledge that American letters foster. But early African-American literature remains marked (haunted) by a lack- that is, by what could not be said, written, or sung. More modern works... reconstruct history by incorporating both fact and fiction. (110)

Through *Kindred*, Butler works to fill some of the gaps, and communicate the unspeakable violences of gendered ethnic discourse. Through her text, she also tries to communicate to a contemporary audience that in an American context, we are all traumatized by the appreciative nature of ethnicity, and that we continue to be haunted by the people and traumas of the past in a way that we cannot control.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that the use of the speculative was an invaluable tool for African American women writers of the 1970s and 1980s. Particularly in terms of the novels I have engaged at length, Beloved by Toni Morrison and Kindred by Octavia Butler, the speculative allowed African American women writers to center the African American female subject, and to engage the perpetually embodied nature of racialized trauma. It is the speculative novel that gave African American women writers of the seventies and eighties a less restrictive creative space in which to (re)create their foremothers more completely, and where it is possible to engage the past, present, and in some cases, the future, simultaneously. Even in novels that I have not treated in this piece, such as Corregidora by Gayle Jones, a kind of speculativity becomes a necessity for representing the power of the past on contemporary subjects. In Corregidora, Ursa’s mother and grandmother physically and psychically imprint memories of their slave holder and father, Corregidora, onto the bodies of the next generation as a means of keeping contact with the traumatic past. Through the character Ursa, Gayle Jones engages what happens when there are no more generations, and how else the body might serve as a tool for continuing this contact with the past through new mediums, particularly in relation to a blues music tradition.

Interestingly, there are several texts, such as Dessa Rose (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, The Price of a Child: A Novel (1995) by Lorene Cary, and Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant (1993) by Michelle Cliff, that are a part of the liberatory narrative tradition as Angelyn Mitchell defines it, and that do not make use of speculative themes and
characters. Consequently, these narratives are only able to focus on contemporary understandings of the past, and cannot engage as fully the atemporality of racialized gender traumas and the manifestation of these same traumas in the lives of contemporary African American women. Again, it is the speculative that allows contemporary and ancestral subjects to knowingly and intimately communicate with each other in a text, and it is this conscious communication between the past and the present that most veraciously represents the inner lives of African Americans. Because of this focus on discursive redefinition by many African American women authors of the 1970s and 1980s, many novels by African American women writers in this time period created an interesting symbiosis between the use of the speculative and the production of liberatory narratives. These narratives focused on the reclamation of a black female self, and often the speculative was an important component in making the goals of liberatory narratives attainable in text. Due to the embodied nature of racialized gender discourses, if an author uses the speculative to create new kinds of raced and gendered bodies, the result is that the discourses that surround that body shift and are unable to adhere so closely to this new embodied form. Therefore, the speculatively rendered body becomes an important form of resistance for African American women writers as they try to disidentify with the discourses of the dominant memory.

Following this second renaissance of African American women’s literature, African American authors, though still very interested in recreating and reclaiming the individuals underneath the discourses of slavery, began to focus less on the past and more on the present and future of both race and gender in their texts. In a society that claims to be
moving toward a post-racial and post-gender existence, even as racist and sexist discourses and practices become more entrenched in American institutions, authors like Dolen Perkins-Valdez have continued recovering the African American past through the liberatory narrative form and authors like Nalo Hopkinson and Tananarive Due have continued to use the speculative to project an African cosmology into the future.

Interestingly, in many of the speculative texts by African American authors that project into the future, race and racism are still functioning constructs, even in the presence of other forms of difference and often outlasting the American nation-state in the dystopian futures of African American speculative fiction. The discursive persistence of blackness begs the question: will racist discourses ever become completely untethered from the African diasporic body, and is that the utopian ideal for a raced subject? An interesting example of one text that engages the complexities and challenges of destabilizing all aspects of identity is *The Activist (2003)* by Renee Gladman. Gladman takes up many of the “characteristics of postmodernism,” that Mitchell mentions as also characteristic of liberatory narratives, such as “fragmentation, non-linearity, discontinuity, and cognitive disruptiveness” (Mitchell 11). However, in Gladman’s text identity does not adhere to bodies; characters change race, gender, and sexual preference throughout the novel, which completely disrupts the processes of racialization and gendering. Yet racial hierarchies and racist discourses still persist, even as they are unable to be tied to any particular character, and the communities and affective relationships, like the ones we see in novels like *Kindred* and *Beloved* that are organized around racial and/or gender identity as support systems, are dispersed by this fluidity of identity. The perpetual embodiment of racial discourse is violence perpetrated
against raced bodies, but *The Activist* makes clear that the opposite would be equally contentious. In the future of African American literature, I am interested in the kinds of genres, characters, and media that will be involved in finding a middle ground in terms of the representation of ethnic and gendered identity.
Bibliography


