

Introduction

In the middle of her opening poem “In 2006 I Had an Ordeal with Medicine,” Bettina Judd writes “I had an ordeal with medicine and was found innocent / or guilty. It feels the same because I live in a haunted / house. A house can be a dynasty, a bloodline, a body.”¹ I have chosen to structure this project around those lines of Judd’s poetry, focusing on themes of dynasty, bloodline, and body in the prose fiction works of late twentieth-century African American women writers because Judd’s work helped provide inspiration for this project and because her poetry is concerned with the historical use and abuse of Black women’s bodies. I use the structure of haunted houses to explore the concepts of time, the fantastic, the body, reproduction, and the archive in these novels. The focus of the following chapters centers on how these themes come to dominate and define a specific genre: the neo-slave narrative. Drawing on those ideas, I argue that enslaved African American women and their bodies, relegated away from the traditional archive, exist in the theoretical spaces affected by history and past brutalities. Exemplified within those spaces are the ways in which modern day women’s bodies and lives are affected by the passed down, ingrained notions of the past that exist just beneath the surface of American culture. I argue that fiction in the neo-slave narrative works to reclaim the past by acting as the missing pieces of America’s archive precisely because those stories and the bodily experiences of the people who lived them are hard to account for otherwise in the historical record.

Working with that idea, I analyze the following neo-slave narratives written by women about women’s experiences of the vexed relationship between temporality and embodiment as a site of archival reclamation: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, Gloria Naylor’s

Mama Day, Phillis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*, Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, and Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*. In this project I am leveraging these six novels as conversational contemporaries that work through similar problems of past and present Black female embodiment by creating characters whose bodies are subversive, living archives. More than anything this project is about Black women's bodies and what Lisa Woolfork terms "bodily epistemology," a mode of bodily reference that considers corporeal experience in relationship to trauma.² Throughout the project I explore how these authors employ the body as a way of knowing the past, arguing that the body comes to stand in as the missing pieces of an incomplete notion of history. In the following chapters, I use these novels to argue that these contemporary authors work to break down the distinction between the past and the present while simultaneously reclaiming the past and paying reverence to forgotten ancestors and their pain. In the spirit of Judd's work, which includes a research question, I work through these texts with my own research question in mind: why do these writers consistently choose to write the past violently on the backs of African American women?

I have used both historical and sociological texts to frame my approach to this literature; these texts illustrate the many forms of abuse that Black women have suffered. Throughout this project I rely heavily on the work done by Dorothy Roberts in *Killing the Black Body* and Harriet A. Washington in *Medical Apartheid*. Washington's book tells the long story of the contentious relationship between African Americans and the medical field from America's beginnings through the present. A key tenet of Washington's argument that she outlines in her first chapter is that "Enslavement could not have existed and certainly could not have persisted without medical science."³ Drawing on the breadth and depth of America's history, Washington's book is important because it works to expose structural abuses against Black bodies. Roberts' book

focuses specifically on the bodies of Black women and how their reproductive systems have been a political and medical target for the entirety of America's history. In her introduction she writes that she wants her book "to convince readers that reproduction is an important topic and that it is especially important to Black people."⁴ However, she shies away from portraying Black women as passive and without agency, stating that "The full story of Black women's resistance and its impact on the national movement for reproductive freedom is long overdue."⁵ The topics of these secondary sources that I have drawn from include: acts of slave breeding, the life and brutal experiments of J. Marion Sims (known as the father of modern gynecology), and the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century. Together, I have used these two books to examine the historical moments that these novelists are writing about and from, as well as to gauge the ways in which this literature becomes activist.

In addition to secondary historical texts I also draw from the primary stories of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Harriet Wilson in *Our Nig*. Both *Incidents* and *Our Nig* are novelized autobiographies. *Incidents* details Harriet Jacobs' life as a house slave in Edenton, North Carolina, as well as her relationship with her family and her journey to freedom in the North. Over the course of the narrative, Jacobs' experiences multiple forms of sexual harassment and hints at sexual abuse, a part of her life that ends only because she takes a white lover who promises her freedom but leaves her with children in slavery instead. Both similarly and by contrast, *Our Nig* focuses on Harriet Wilson's life in the North held as an informally indentured servant throughout her formative years by an upper class white family with whom her destitute white mother leaves her. Though she does not experience sexual harassment in the way that Jacobs does, she does face physical abuse, disability, and manipulation. All of my research is based first on these primary sources because they exemplify an early conversation about what

corporeal existence means for African American women. This historical context, alongside the secondary sources discussed before, lays the groundwork for the literature that I have taken up here; it is this long history of vulnerability that informs their content. It is because of and in spite of this history that these novels exist, and it is this past that they endeavor to reclaim and remember. With these ideas in mind, I have devoted a short overture before my chapters to the historical and literary backgrounds of this project.

That each of the twentieth-century novels I discuss at length comes out of the postmodern literary period and the post-Civil Rights world cannot be overlooked because each novel is arguably equally informed by both moments in time. Near the end of his monograph *Why Literary Periods Mattered*, in his chapter titled “Stories of Parallel Lives and the Status of Anxieties of Historicism in the 1990s,” Ted Underwood theorizes the prevalence in postmodern literature of stories that draw on present day connections to the past. He does so by examining stories in which lives in the present mirrors lives from the past; these stories include texts like *The Hours*, a novel and film in which three women’s lives are affected by the writings of Virginia Woolf, and *Possession*, a novel about two academics combing through a paper trail of a previously undiscovered history. Underwood defines stories of parallel lives as those that move beyond mere nostalgia into fiction that works to “transmute historical representation into something like personal memory.”⁶ He asserts that this is achieved by creating characters that set off on a trail and are confronted by other characters, from an earlier period, that are found out to be prototypes of themselves. The result, Underwood argues, is a literature of historical layers that is resistant to periodization and the suspense of which lies in the struggle to remember the past.

Underwood's theory surrounding postmodern literature is useful insofar as it leaves room to begin thinking through the literature of the recent past and it provides a language with which to talk about historical fiction. However, it fails in two key respects: it does not present a clear answer as to why postmodern writers are making the move to think about the past, and it often neglects to take authorial identity into consideration. By not engaging with varied identities Underwood's work blankets the postmodern period and diminishes the importance of the many histories from which its literature arises. For example, Underwood asserts that characters in parallel lives stories have "private yearnings for a lost past,"⁷ in the context of the neo-slave narrative and similar forms of historical fiction such assertions are a fatal flaw. Postmodernist tendencies are present in neo-slave narratives but not in the sense that authors or characters long for a lost past, but that they mourn for the loss of knowledge enacted by the writers of history and work to reclaim those narratives into the broader story of the archive. This idea is exemplified when Perry's character Lizzie asks: "If I wanted to escape, don't you think it would be to somewhere a little less horrible than a slave ship?"⁸

By contrast, in *Neo-Slave Narratives*, Ashraf Rushdy takes a stance on why postmodern writers are crafting stories that attend to the distant past. As the title suggest, Rushdy examines neo-slave narratives, fictional stories of slavery written by present day writers. Rushdy examines the social impact of the genre as well as its literary form. The conclusion that Rushdy comes to is that, as a genre, the neo-slave narrative is not looking back on the distant past that it explores on the surface, but rather that these stories use the distant past to think about the recent past. For Rushdy the genre points to the movements of the 1960s; he asserts that the neo-slave narrative is a tool used by African American authors to revisit the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Nationalist Movement, and other twentieth-century African American movements. Rushdy's

analysis, much like Underwood's, provides important background information on the genre itself along with a framework through which to think about neo-slave narratives. However, his analysis fails to consider other possibilities, and it fails to sufficiently take into consideration neo-slave narratives written by women. Though his argument is valid, it can be taken a step further to encompass a richer view of history by thinking about how these writers may have been using the past to connect it to the present. Expounding upon both Rushdy and Underwood, the postmodern writings of African American women turn to the distant past out of a sense of loss in an attempt to reclaim a past that in fact cannot be reclaimed.

More important to my own argument are texts like Salamishah Tillet's *Sites of Slavery* which builds, in part, on Rushdy's work, but does so in a dynamic way that takes the distant and recent past into consideration. Tillet argues that neo-slave narratives and other representational forms that turn towards slavery in the postmodern period "reveal an African American preoccupation with returning to the site of slavery as a means of overcoming racial conflicts that continue to flourish after the height of the civil rights movement in order to reimagine the possibilities of American democracy in the future."⁹ Similarly, Kimberly Juanita Brown's book *The Repeating Body* offers a visual framework through which to view the past and present by looking at how we represent the past in modern culture, literature, and art.¹⁰ Furthermore, Sherryl Vint's article "Only by Experience: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives" details how and why the fantastic is used so often in these texts.¹¹ Vint argues that in the wake of a surreal past and a hole-filled archive authors turn to the fantastic as a way to make sense of an unintelligible past. Timothy Spaulding works in the same vein in his monograph *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Neo-Slave Narrative*.¹² These texts have informed much of the project because of their fresh readings and intricate analyses of

the ways in which the past affects the present and the present represents the past. Together, along with the body of literature with which I engage as well as historical sources, these theoretical texts delve into America's history, examining one of its most painful memories.

Each of the novels that I explore here revolve around the bodies and lives of women, and in doing so each evokes the sentiments that Alice Walker laid out in her essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," in which Walker imaginatively describes how Black women kept creativity alive despite centuries of oppression. In the essay, Walker thinks about her own mother's garden and how she used it as an escape from field work and her many children. Walker goes on to famously argue that it was not so much what Black women sang as it was that they kept alive the notion of song.¹³ This idea goes along with one that lies at the crux of this project: how memories and bodily experiences can be and have been kept alive and passed down for generations. Authors like Morrison, Butler, and their contemporaries use this idea to undermine the distinctions between the past and the present in an effort to call attention to forgotten past wrong doings and to illustrate the ways time has failed to change the landscape of America for African American women. This undermining is achieved by way of a conversation in which these texts engage. Many of these novels make the same turns, telling the same past over and over again for their readers. This repetition, which Brown points out in *The Repeating Body*, conveys the sense of loss that is both postmodern and unique to this literature, in that it is not nostalgic but rather mournful of the past that can never truly be remembered. By writing, embodying, and repeating this past on and through women's bodies these authors make it tangible and undeniable, simultaneously honoring those lost by time and fighting for a more equal future.

In the following chapters, I detail how these novels engage with and use the female body to illustrate and establish the past, and I argue that this group of literature uses women's bodies as a historical metaphor while also remembering the trauma inflicted on female bodies. The chapters begin first with "Dynasty," moving then to "Bloodline," and finally moving on to "Body." "Dynasty," the first chapter, focuses on the ways in which Butler and Jones legitimate themselves within a literary dynasty of African American women and the ways in which they rely on generation making as an alternative means of passing down history. This chapter focuses on how dynasty is made through the creation of a living archive in the shadow of an imperfect written archive. "Bloodline," the second chapter, focuses on issues of reproduction in *Dessa Rose* and *Mama Day*, as well as how Williams and Naylor choose to represent the brutality of stolen reproductive rights. In this chapter I also begin to argue that these novels are themselves a form of activism employed by their authors. In the third chapter and final chapter, "Body," I discuss the ways in which the past becomes embodied in *Stigmata* and *Beloved*, as well as how the distinctions between mind and body are disintegrated by Perry and Morrison in order to underline how knowledge can become ingrained in the body. There I argue that the female body can become a subversive site of memory.

Near the end of *Mama Day*, Naylor writes, "You're never free from such a loss. It sits permanently in your middle, but it gets less weighty as time goes on and becomes endurable."¹⁴ Though she writes here of the widowing of one of her main characters, it can be taken also in a more metaphorical way. Perhaps these words ring true for the erasure of names and stories that have been forever lost. Perhaps it is in these moments, in post-Civil Rights America in which these novels were written, that the pain of knowledge lost lessens in weight enough for writers to begin to sort through exactly what they have lost. Perhaps it is in these moments, in the late

twentieth century, that writers can begin to imagine the past in the wake of such a heavy and damaging loss. Perhaps also these writers are the inheritors of women who, in the words of Alice Walker, “kept alive the notion of song.”¹⁵ And in turn, perhaps these are the songs that echo forth from the canyons left behind by those women who kept gardens and made quilts and raised children. Mirroring those gardens, these novels do the digging work that Michel Foucault described as archeology when he outlined the archive as a site of history that is both a result of the time from whence it comes and of historian interpretation, because they seek to represent history in full rather than leave it to stagnate in the narrative created by the past.¹⁶ As a form of creative activism these novels work to fill in the gaps left by history and remember those women in truth. These novels look back unflinchingly at history’s physical and emotional pain; in doing so, they build haunted houses and exorcise history’s ghosts, giving them room to exist in the archive and in America’s memory.

Overture

“I guess it is the contrast that makes me laugh”: the words that Phillis Alesia Perry begins her novel *Stigmata* with are about the differences that her main character finds in the rooms of the mental institution in which she is housed.¹⁷ However, those words can also be read as a comment on the time that Lizzie, her main character, is able to channel, transmuting the past the distinction between past and present through her connection to her foremothers. Here she compares the lush room of her doctor with her own padded cell down the hall; collapsing that difference illustrates Lizzie’s ability to exist in the old and new worlds that she knows. She knows the world of her enslaved foremothers and the world that exists around her. Lizzie knows that there is no difference between her cell and her doctor’s office, in the same way that she knows that there are similarities between her world and the brutal world of which her foremothers were a part. I begin my discussion of historical and literary contexts here because this moment in Perry’s novel offers a particularly poignant example of the ways in which the authors I am interested in take up the past. In her monograph, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*, Lisa Woolfork argues that readers have to try to go there in order to know the past.¹⁸ With that in mind, nineteenth-century slave narratives shine an important light on twentieth-century texts because they provide a historical narrative backdrop for the ideas forwarded in neo-slave narratives.

The literature taken up in this project descends from a long line of African American women writers who wrote and thought about motherhood, the body, and pain. The focus of this overture is on the literary and historical lineage from which texts like Morrison’s and Butler’s originate. The literary works of Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs are an oddly complementary

pair; one is set in the so-called free North, the other in the slave-holding Antebellum South. What both texts have in common is a binding preoccupation with the body and its limits as well as a pervasive focus on motherhood, its downfalls, and its strengths. Though the stories are vastly different both reveal the kinds of cultural norms that can only be revealed through difference. The emphasis on the body and on motherly roles reveals both the physical and mental hardships of being an African American woman. When taken together, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Our Nig* create case studies of what nineteenth-century America was like for African American women from childhood to motherhood. Similarly, Harriet Washington's *Medical Apartheid* and Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body* tell complementary stories about America's past in relationship to Black bodies, specifically Black women's bodies. Read as cultural documents, novels like *Beloved* are the culmination of the forgotten pieces of American history and the work done by early African American women writers.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl tells the story of Harriet Jacobs' life from the first person perspective of her pseudonymous main character, Linda Brent. Linda's mother dies when she is young, leaving her in the hands of her white master, Dr. Flint, and mistress, Mrs. Flint. In the absence of her mother Linda's role model becomes her grandmother, a hard-working woman who worked to free herself and all of her children except Linda's mother. As she grows older, Dr. Flint sexually harasses Linda relentlessly, making her life harder and making Mrs. Flint jealous of her. Linda, having been denied the chance to be with a young Black man she loves by Dr. Flint, begins a relationship with a white neighbor named Mr. Sands, with whom she has two children. She writes of her second child who was a girl: "When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women."¹⁹ Able to take no more of slavery and Dr. Flint's advances she

escapes and lives in a cramped attic near her grandmother's house for seven years, in the hopes that when she escapes to the North she will be able to take her children with her. Linda does eventually escape to the North, where Mrs. Bruce buys her freedom, and her children follow.

Similarly, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* tells the story of her life from childhood to adulthood as an indentured servant in the North. P. Gabrielle Foreman posits that Wilson challenged conventions throughout her life: "After daring to write a book that is both the first black woman's novel and an important autobiography of an indentured servant."²⁰ Like Jacobs, Wilson also uses a pseudonymous main character, Frado, to tell her life's story. The daughter of a lower class white mother and a Black father, Frado is left by her mother on the doorstep of an upper class white family as a child after her father's death. She never sees her mother again. The Bellmonts, the family with whom her mother leaves her, take her in as a quasi-indentured servant until she is an adult. Over the course of her time with the Bellmonts she is treated with utmost malice by Mrs. B and her daughter; Mrs. B overworks her and abuses her both physically and mentally throughout her childhood. The abuse that Frado suffers leaves her physically disabled as an adult and send her into prolonged bouts of illness, an aspect of her life that does not keep her from trying to support herself. Once she leaves the Bellmonts Frado marries a Black man who turns out to be a fraudulent runaway slave lecturer who leaves her and their young child.

The main characters of both texts – Linda in *Incidents* and Frado in *Our Nig* – become mothers without mothers, a fact that suggests a kind of solitude in regards to African American motherhood during the nineteenth century. Both children display deep concern for the loss of their mothers. Linda states of her mother's death, "My young mind was troubled with the thought who would take care of me and my little brother."²¹ Similarly, when Frado's mother departs the narrator states that "Frado waited for the close day, which was to bring back her

mother. Alas! It never came.”²² In this way, both characters display a deep sense of abandonment and loss that underlines the uncertainty of life for African American women and children during the period. This aspect of both women’s lives shapes them when they become mothers themselves. However, though both characters lose their mothers, neither is completely without maternal support which suggests a kind of prevalent surrogacy for children during the time period. Linda says of her grandmother, “to this good grandmother I was indebted for my many comforts.”²³ Furthermore, because of her grandmother, she calls the circumstances of her childhood “unusually fortunate.”²⁴ On the other hand, Frado is not so lucky. Her time with the Bellmonts is marked by Mrs. B’s pervasive cruelty. Her only quasi-maternal solace is in Aunt Abby, Mr. B’s live-in sister, who offers her comfort and refuge from Mrs. B’s wrath. While Linda comes to fill her loneliness with her grandmother, Frado, it seems, is unable to ever fill that gap in her life.

Both *Our Nig* and *Incidents* respond to hardship with an overwhelming sense of maternal sacrifice, thereby asserting African American women’s place in society as good mothers above all else, an assertion that ran counter to the prevailing notions of the time. The most telling example of maternal sacrifice comes from Jacobs’ narrative, during her time in the attic. She states of her time, “I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air...for nearly seven years.”²⁵ Linda’s time there serves as a bastion of African American maternal will power and a testament of tenacity. Maternal sacrifice in *Our Nig* comes by way of Frado’s selflessness. Though her story does not focus on her child, she works hard through disease and physical disability to provide not only for herself but also for her young child, endeavoring always to “gain an easier livelihood.”²⁶ Furthermore, in *Incidents*, Linda states of her mother’s relationship to her grandmother that her “mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the

mistress might obtain sufficient food.”²⁷ This passage implies two things: that white motherhood was a role of luxury, exempt from the even the most menial tasks and that enslaved black women and their children bore the brunt of that luxury. In addition to caring for her own children, Linda’s grandmother becomes a kind of mother to her master’s children. *Our Nig* portrays white motherhood differently; mainly because Frado’s mother is white and because of the geographic context of the North. Frado’s own mother is portrayed in the beginning of the text no better than Frado herself is portrayed near the end. In this way, Frado and her mother are bookends that frame the rest of the text, reinforcing the similarities between free black mothers and poor white mothers in the North. The theme of maternal sacrifice that prevails in the two texts works to humanize the characters to an audience that may have otherwise not believed them to be full imbued with humanity.

Though both narratives depict the harsh realities of motherhood for African American women at the time, both ultimately reinforce the capability of African American women, free and enslaved, to be good mothers in spite of a world stacked against them. Both Frado and Linda persevere despite all odds and in doing so demonstrate an unparalleled tenacity of spirit and body. Frado’s never-ending work and her optimism in the end of her story is a testament to that tenacity, as is Linda’s seven years spent in a cramped attic space. Perched underneath Frado’s few comments about her child is the woman who willingly works through disability and disease to feed that same child; and under Linda’s guilt about her sexual history lies the woman willing to risk her own life and body to achieve the freedom of her children. Taken together, both texts highlight good qualities prevailing over bad circumstances. In her monograph, *Women and Sisters*, Jean Fagan Yellin, eminent scholar of Jacobs’ work, states that “the surviving cultural monuments of the past tend to perpetuate only the voice of the hegemonic group,”²⁸ she goes on

to argue that “these monuments can be located within the dialogic system only by restoring or reconstructing the voice that initially opposed them.”²⁹ Taking Yellin’s argument into consideration these texts come to stand in as the voices who opposed and continue to oppose the oppressive world in which they lived. Despite a world turned against them, both Frado and Linda are able to triumph as women, as mothers, and as literary foremothers.

These accomplishments are especially important in light of the historical context revealed by the work of Dorothy Roberts and Harriet A. Washington. In her chapter entitled “Reproduction in Bondage,” Roberts explores the world in which both Wilson and Jacobs lived. She argues that “For slave women, procreation had little to do with liberty. To the contrary, Black women’s childbearing in bondage was largely a product of oppression rather than an expression of self-definition and personhood.”³⁰ Roberts focuses her argument around how motherhood was broken down by the institution of slavery through slave breeding, the legality of ownership, and never-ending work. In some of Washington’s most compelling moments she writes the Story J. Marion Sims and the slaves on whom he experimented. Sims is known as the father of modern gynecology because he invented the speculum and perfected a surgery to correct a childbirth injury known as a vesicovaginal fistula, a fissure between the bladder and the vaginal wall.³¹ Washington rightfully brands him a sadist for his refusal to administer anesthesia to the slaves whose bodies he used to perfect the surgery, while also illustrating how his practices were not uncommon and fit into the largely notion that slaves could not feel pain. Though Sims is a particularly gruesome case, Washington argues that he was certainly not alone, stating that he “epitomizes the two faces – one benign, one malevolent – of American medical research.”³² Taking Washington’s and Roberts’ arguments into consideration not only makes the

works of nineteenth-century women writers more important but it also makes room for what those women may have left unsaid.

Yellin argues that “*Incidents* is an attempt to move women to political action”; building on that argument, the postmodern works taken up in this project are the inheritors of that attempt.³³ The ways in which motherhood and the body are portrayed in neo-slave narratives can be traced back to the groundwork laid by authors like Jacobs and Wilson. The narratives of Wilson and Jacobs inform postmodern texts because they put forth the historical background needed for authors like Morrison and Butler to do imaginative work with the past, memory, and the historical record. Pain, both in mind and in body, manifests itself in these early narratives as an inevitable consequence of motherhood. The ever-present importance of motherhood and pain in neo-slave narratives exists because motherhood and pain are important to texts like Jacobs’ and Wilson’s that tell modern readers of the past’s minutia. In the hands of postmodern authors the pain described by Jacobs, Wilson, and their contemporaries becomes tactile, graphic, and written. Taken together, nineteenth-century and late twentieth-century texts form a long narrative of activism with regard to the lives and bodily experiences of African American women from past to present.

Dynasty

By definition, the word “dynasty” connotes a succession of rulers of the same line of descent or a powerful group or family that maintains its position for a considerable time. What the word itself, and its definition, neglect to portray is the hard work that goes into building a dynasty. The dynasty building work done by African American women writers relies not only on their ability to place themselves within a line of descent, but also their ability to tell the stories absent from the archive and to bear witness to the past. Creating a dynasty means creating an archive. That postmodern African American women writers are members of a literary dynasty is evidenced in the ways their characters tell stories, give evidence of the past’s brutality, and place themselves in relationship to others. In these works, dynasty is built on the act of telling the stories that have been forgotten and swearing allegiance to their truths. *Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler and *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones serve as particularly good examples of these themes because of their attention to the ways in which information is handed down from generation to generation and because of their ever-present, time transmuting acts. Situated amongst these texts, dynasty takes on another meaning: narrative obligation to one’s ancestors. Dynasty, here, is the melding of memories, stories, and obligation to create an archive.

Dynasty is applicable to this project for two reasons: first, it clarifies the ways in which the archive and its rethinking can create dynasty and vice versa; and second, because it provides a framework for exploring the ways in which forgotten memory and its relationship to the body exists in this literature. I have conceptualized dynasty in this chapter in two ways: first, through the archive of the past that is left behind and the ways in which that archive is challenged in these novels, and also, through the ways in which authors like Jones, Butler, and their

contemporaries situate themselves within a literary dynasty of African American women. I have chosen to move back and forth between the two novels because they serve well as complementary examples of the ways in which dynasty can be seen in this literature. Dynasty is created both on and off the page and fits in to the postmodern narrative of the African American woman by calling attention the incomplete nature of the archive and by situating oneself in relationship to others.

Kindred, arguably Butler's most well-known novel and one that is quite different from her other works, focuses on the life of Dana, an African American female writer who, in the late 1970's, starts being pulled back in time whenever her white male planter ancestor is in mortal danger; all the while her white male partner, Kevin, is either left in California to wait or comes with her only to live for years in Maryland when she travels back home separately. Each time she travels from 1970's California to nineteenth-century Maryland, it becomes harder for her to return to the present because her return depends on her mortal endangerment. As she grows used to the dangers of the Antebellum South her trips back in time increase in length and brutality, curtailing her ability to travel back home. Try as she might to change her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin, and make him a more empathetic person, her attempts are to no avail. Butler gives her reader a realistic ending rather than a satisfying one; ultimately Dana's female slave ancestor, Alice Greenwood, with whom Rufus has a child, hangs herself. Afterwards, Rufus becomes increasingly brutal. On her last trip home, Dana loses an arm trying to kill Rufus to defend herself from his sexual advances.

Corregidora is obsessed with the fragility of the archive. Central to the plot of the novel is a group of three women – a daughter, a mother, and a grandmother – all of whom are the living archive for slaveholding rape and incest. Their last name, Corregidora, was the surname of

the mother and grandmother's former owner and lover. Each woman is a product of white male perversion, and each woman knows it. Throughout the novel the story of Corregidora is told over and over again, obsessively and in bits and pieces. Each time the story is told the teller, usually the mother or the grandmother, stresses the importance of "making generations" because that is the only proof of what happened, especially since the "papers" were all burned. Ursa Corregidora, the novel's main character and the daughter in this line of women, is a blues singer who is unlucky in love. Her life is detailed in the novel but is filtered through the story of her mother, and her grandmother, and her great-grandmother before her, and Corregidora herself. In terms of narrative structure, the novel is one of spurts and starts, allowing the reader only bits and pieces of the story at a time. When the reader meets Ursa she has just been thrown down a set of stairs by her husband; she has a hysterectomy as a result and the reader later finds out that she was pregnant at the time of the incident and lost the child. Ursa's inability to have children shapes the rest of the novel, both in terms of her love life but also in terms of what legacy she will leave having been deprived of her utmost important capacity to make generations.

Both works of historical fiction, *Kindred* and *Corregidora* deal with the faultiness of the American archive, the line of descent that is built on the bodily experiences of bygone women, and how the past can transmute time to affect the present. David Bate points out in his rereading of Michel Foucault's theory of the archive that Foucault believed that while society often tasks historians with going to the archive for answers the archive is all too often incoherent. Bate also points out that Foucault believed that the archive was a result of "historical a priori" or an artifacts' "condition of reality."³⁴ Bate writes, "the archive in Foucault's work is nothing so literal as rows of dusty shelves in a particular institution, but rather involves the whole system or apparatus that enables such artifacts to exist."³⁵ Though Bate is writing several decades after the

publications of both *Kindred* and *Corregidora*, the arguments that he pinpoints in Foucault's work are without a doubt a part of both novels. Butler and Jones write novels that take up the very idea that an archive is nothing without the culture that produces it by underlining the ways in which African Americans, specifically African American women have been kept out of the formal archive in America.

From *Kindred's* opening, Octavia Butler makes the textual present within the novel, in doing so she underlines the prevailing presence of the archive in our modern world, for better or worse. The first chapter of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* opens with a scene that sets this tone for the rest of the novel. Dana sits with her husband, Kevin. Butler establishes both characters as writers; both aspiring novelists struggling to make ends meet. Their house is filled with books, "fiction only."³⁶ There, in the opening chapter, they sit together on the floor and rifle through book after book as they unpack and organize their many shelves. A short conversation ensues about Kevin's struggle to write a new story, to which Dana replies by setting down a stack of nonfiction in front of him; at which he frowns. "Hell, why'd I come out here?" Kevin asks; "To get more ideas," Dana replies.³⁷ Butler carries this presence of the textual throughout the novel. In the end, the reader finds Kevin and Dana analyzing archival materials about her ancestors on the other side of the country in a Baltimore courthouse. There Dana states of their mutual time in the past, "If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane."³⁸ Though they may always question their sanity, for Dana and Kevin their time in the past real and made all the more real by the documents that sit in front of them in the courthouse that detail Rufus' death. Butler calls her readers' attention to the imperfections of archive by making the textual present and by highlighting the ways in which only Dana and Kevin will ever know the truth; in doing so she makes room for historical fiction as an answer to a problematic archive.

Butler relies on the fantastic to create the story of *Kindred*, and in doing so she accomplishes two things: first, she points out the gaping holes that exist in terms of stories in the American archive, and she works to disassemble the perceived differences between the past and the present by portraying how the past can affect the real lives of present day people. *Kindred* is a novel about transmuting time and about the complicated idea that time can change a person, a country, a world. In some ways time does change people – it certainly changes Dana and Kevin – but for others, like Rufus, time changes nothing. His movement towards anger and brutality marches on, in the same way that time does. For Dana, and the people she loves, time moves differently. Dana is able to dart in and out of the past, creating a time for her that is her own; she cannot change the past for her enslaved ancestor, Alice, in the same way that she cannot make the people of 1970's California understand why her arm is missing. The fantastic allows Dana, and Kevin to some extent, to live in this liminal space in time, giving them both knowledge that present day individuals cannot know and giving them the option and luxury of leaving the past. The use of the fantastic is one that both Sherryl Vint and A. Timothy Spaulding characterize as a key tenet of many neo-slave narratives because it allows their authors to “critique the limitations of the realist form.”³⁹ The fantastic opens up a space in this novel and the others to create a new kind of archive. In this way, in the face of a faulty archive that has excluded her ancestors and reduced them to numbers, Dana becomes the archive through her knowledge of the past and present; she holds on to and preserves evidence of the past and the present.

The past and present are tied inextricably to both actions and feelings in *Kindred*; fear pushes Dana forward in time in the same way that Rufus' actions suck her back in time. Dana's agency is tied to fear and her lack of agency is tied to action; when Dana is afraid she is able to take control of her situation, conversely Rufus' actions steal her agency from her. Butler uses

agency in the novel to reinforce the connection between the past and the present by mirroring the history of agency for African American women. For example, in Jacobs' narrative the actions of her master and mistress deny her agency, and it is fear for her life and the life of her children that finally pushes her to reclaim agency. Leaning in to that mirroring effect, the plot of *Kindred* creates a nuanced story of the past and the present and the ways that the past can affect the present; Butler uses the narrative to argue that the actions of the past create the fears of today. *Kindred* illustrates how the actions perpetrated in the Antebellum South have created the lingering fears of today that surround race and racial prejudice. The world of *Kindred* is awash in the ramifications of both action and fear, the actions that Rufus and his father perpetrate as slave holders, the actions that Alice takes when she decides to take her own life rather than live another day as a slave, the actions that ultimately created Dana, and perhaps the most physical manifestation of fear: Dana's missing arm. In *Kindred* the past does not affect the present in abstract ways, but rather in ways that alter the physical world and the mental stability of all who touch it; no one and nothing escape from the past unscathed.

By physically connecting the past to the present *Kindred* argues that women are the glue that physically connects the two. Butler's use of the fantastic allows this argument to shine through in a way that is not at first obvious, however valid nonetheless. The move that Butler makes to write Dana as the conduit between past and present is another way African American women writers present themselves, and their peers, as members of a dynasty. Dana is not just another woman, within her body she holds the past, the present and, presumably, the future. Dana is a member of a dynasty of physicality – a house can be a body, a bloodline, a dynasty – in the same way that Butler is a member of a literary dynasty – a writer can be a voice, women, or a woman. Dynasty is created when writers connect the past to the present through themselves and

through the bodies of their characters. Dynasty is created when the archive is created, as well as when the archive is filled in. The acts of remembering, of writing, and knowing one's body come to be the loci of archival creation and preservation; neo-slave narratives – particularly those written by women – come to stand alone as radical acts of literature and life.

In *Kindred* the archive remains physical, material; however, in *Corregidora* the archive moves from the physical towards an oral tradition in the wake of and even before Ursa's sterility. Near the beginning of the novel, in a narrative intervention of memory, Ursa hears the words of her foremothers: "The important thing is making generations. They can burn papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that [sic] what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict."⁴⁰ Though the Corregidora women urge the importance of making generations as a way to bear a witness to the past and to provide evidence of historical trauma, it should not be forgotten that they pass down a story, or a conscious, along with their DNA. For these women, Ursa's mother and grandmother, making generations is not truly enough to remember the past; they are obligated to tell the story incessantly until that story becomes a part of Ursa's own memory, as much a part of her life story as it is of theirs, despite the fact that she never met Corregidora. Past the halfway mark of the novel Ursa engages in a conversation in her head with her ex-husband. She states of the effect of their memory on her own; "I never told you how it was. Always their memories, never my own."⁴¹ The alternative archive that they create is nothing without the story, and so they tell it to Ursa again and again and again. In this way, the archive in *Corregidora* that is built to fill in the gaps of history is both physical and narrative. The papers have all been burned that would tell the story of Corregidora and his women and his ways; the archive that comes to stand in its place is Ursa, with all of her hand-me-down memories and the body that comes to be broken by another man. Never allowed to fulfill her

destiny of making generations, Ursa herself becomes an imperfect archive; with no one left to pass the story on to, she turns to music instead. Despite its shifting and difficulty being passed down the archive, like in *Kindred*, remains female.

Performance comes to fill the void left by infertility in *Corregidora* – precisely because of the oral tradition to which making generations is so tightly bound – offering multiple versions of archival repair. Making generations in *Corregidora* requires an element of performance. For Ursa’s mother and grandmother that means telling the story of their past, the story of the forgotten that should never have been forgotten. That performance comes in conjunction with the act of actually making generations, and for the two women and their predecessors stories and children are enough to build a legacy on. However, in the shadow of losing what she has been told her entire life defines her femininity, Ursa turns to the blues. In doing so, Ursa makes a different kind of generation. When asked in her imaginary conversation with Mutt whether or not she’s lost the blues she replies, “Naw, the blues is something you can’t loose [sic].”⁴²

Performance, like generation making and the archive, becomes a female space within the novel, and in that way it becomes an extension of the collective memory of the past held by the *Corregidora* women. The move that Jones makes here is not only important to Ursa’s story but to the grander story of dynasty within this literature because it asserts not just one but many places that belong to women, their memories, and their stories.

The importance of the archive to the theme of dynasty found in *Kindred* and *Corregidora* is invaluable because it is the archive that would normally create a dynasty. As Salamishah Tillet argues, African American writers “self-consciously return to antebellum chattel slavery as a way of remembering a forgotten past and gaining equal recognition in the present.”⁴³ In the absence of a clear archive, authors like Jones and Butler are left to imagine that dynasty instead, and in

doing so they endeavor to recuperate the archive and tell stories that have been left behind. The only way to recuperate that archive – taking all the burned papers and all the unmade generations and all the unexplainable experiences into consideration – is to create fiction. As Spaulding puts it, “By deploying elements of the fantastic or metafiction in their texts, these writers force us to question the ideologies embedded within the ‘realistic’ representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction.”⁴⁴ In doing so they situate themselves within the longer history of writers like Jacobs and Wilson who were also aware of the danger that comes along with telling the truth. *Corregidora* and *Kindred* are neo-slave narratives, not only because of their subject matter but because of the very ways in which they engage with the archive. The admission that the archive is flawed, incomplete, and imperfect in *Corregidora* and *Kindred* mirror the changes made in *Our Nig* and *Incidents* that admit the imperfection of the world. If the archive is imperfect in neo-slave narratives, then society is imperfect in slave narratives; each form builds a dynasty on pushing back against imperfections that leave the vulnerable behind and ignore the ugly parts of the past and present.

Moving beyond the archive, *Corregidora* makes reproduction a remedy in a way that is both forward and backward looking while also setting up infertility as inherently anti-feminine – in making this move the novel engages with gender in a way that fosters female relationships in the face of toxic masculinity. However, both fertility and infertility are portrayed in this way because of the actions of the men in the story. It may seem obvious to say that without the men in the story there would be no way nor need to make generations, however, it goes beyond that surface statement. Without the men in *Corregidora*, Mutt and Corregidora namely, the need to make generations as a way to prove one’s past experiences or to prove one’s femininity dissolves. Reproduction becomes the remedy to the pain of the past for the exact reason that the

past was painful. Without *Corregidora*, there would be no burned papers that must be made up for by way of children. Without Mutt and his violent tendencies, there would be no reason for Ursa to prove her femininity. The only concrete reasoning behind having children that does not center on the men of the novel comes out near its close. Towards the end of the novel Ursa's mother tells her that before she was born she knew that she would be a girl, she knew that she would only ever have a daughter; "I knew you was gonna come out a girl even while you was in me. Put my hand on my belly and knew you was gonna be one of us [sic]." ⁴⁵ This moment, small though it is, provides the reader with a glimpse at the one other way in which reproduction may be a remedy within the novel: for each of the *Corregidora* women reproduction gave them a friend, someone to share the loneliness of time with and someone to help bear the pain of the past. Making generations becomes a way of absolving the past in the novel; the *Corregidora* women are not only bound to make generations to bear witness to the past but also because one day there may be a daughter that will know nothing of that past.

The dynasty making work done in *Kindred* and in *Corregidora* is achieved by creating a living, breathing archive that is able to pass down not only stories but also the truth of history. Dynasty, then, is more than the making of generations or the passing down of stories and art. Dynasty becomes the sum of these varied and integral parts. The important move that each of these authors make is to make dynasty and dynasty creation a feminine, and by extension a feminist endeavor. Dynasty means telling the stories of one's mother, and her mother, and her mother before that. Dynasty means telling the stories that are hard that may make others question one's sanity. Dynasty means making generations and making new kinds of generations and making a path. Dynasty means existing between the past, the present, and the future; a space that only women can fully occupy in this literature. It is in this way that women become the bearers

of the past and the future, containing within their bodies the stories of their mothers and the potential of their children. It is not enough then to say that authors like Jones and Butler are situating themselves within a literary dynasty, it would be more accurate to say that they are situating all women within a literary dynasty. Butler and Jones argue not only that women create and embody the archive, but that they are a far more accurate archive; in doing so each author pushes back against the dominant narrative of history, reclaiming the past and staking claim to the future – it is the present that is left in the balance.

One testimony to the dynasty built by authors like Jones and Butler lives on the continued interest in their work, not only in academic communities but also in popular culture. This year a graphic novel adaption of *Kindred* was adapted by Damian Duffy and John Jennings and published by Abrams Comicarts. The release of a graphic novel adaption nearly forty years after *Kindred*'s first publication speaks to the book itself, the racial climate of our current world, and Butler's ability to place herself within a dynasty of African American women writers. In many ways, the graphic novel is a testament to the abilities of Butler and her contemporaries to create thought-provoking, challenging stories that make us rethink the past. It is arguable that *Kindred*, *Corregidora*, and their fellow-novels published in the late twentieth century by African American women created generations of their own and space for later writers. If that is the case then these novels, their predecessors, and their descendants can be seen on a cultural scale as a mirror for the work done in novels like *Kindred* and *Corregidora*; and if making generations, in any varied way, is a female task then these authors have created for themselves a cultural dynasty on which new authors continue to build.

Bloodline

Bloodline, like dynasty, is built with flesh and blood; unlike dynasty, bloodline refers not to the reputability of that blood but to the literal, biological relationships that it encompasses. In this literature, bloodline is illustrated through themes of reproduction, womanhood, and motherhood. In this chapter I argue that by thinking through motherhood, womanhood, and reproduction consistently these authors seek to give agency back to their characters while also underlining realistic fears. My discussion centers on *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams and *Mama Day* by Gloria Naylor, focusing specifically on the female characters portrayed in each novel. I return to the idea of archive and relationships between older and younger women that I outlined in the first chapter. The mixture of anxiety and obligation portrayed in these novels cannot be codified simply; however, it points toward a particularly postmodern view on the acts of reproduction that create bloodlines. Disillusionment and horror become commonplace in these novels when it comes to reproduction, motherhood, and womanhood; and as such, each novel forwards a view of the world that looks toward a better future while also remembering the trauma of the past. In the end, novels like *Mama Day* and *Dessa Rose* use womanhood, motherhood, and reproduction as devices to show the cruelty and fragility of both the modern world and the past. If dynasty is an archive, bloodline is the archive passed down.

Lisa Woolfork argues in her study of postmodern African American literature, film, and performance that “the slave past is presented as a concrete and necessary reminder of unacknowledged trauma.”⁴⁶ Building off of that line of inquiry, bloodlines are employed in this literature as a means of passing down the concrete realities of the slave past. Passing down the archive, and making a bloodline, as described in these novels, is a fearful and dangerous act that

is necessitated by an inherent need to gain freedom, and combat what Tillet calls “civic estrangement” or the condition of those that fall outside of the accepted civic history of America.⁴⁷ *Dessa Rose* and *Mama Day* offer unique juxtapositions that illustrate the different ways that each author approaches issues of reproduction. For example, *Mama Day* is not a straight forward neo-slave narrative – though it does draw heavily on the genre and it does involve passed down stories of an enslaved ancestor – in the way that *Dessa Rose* is. Furthermore, both make use of incredibly different writing styles and narrative structures. By using texts that are so dissimilar, I hope to illustrate how motherhood, womanhood, and reproduction are utilized by African American female authors in the postmodern period as a means of understanding historical trauma and its connection to women’s bodies and their children. In *Dessa Rose* and *Mama Day*, passing down the archive, one that is often painful, and possessing a reproductive body are sites of contention and fear that underscore the activist work that both authors undertake.

Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day*, set in the late twentieth century, focuses on the present and former female inhabitants of an island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia that is a part of neither. The island, Willow Springs, is a self-governing, strange place filled with so-called magic and a convoluted history that stretches back to the eighteenth century when, allegedly, a female slave named Sapphira seduced her master into giving her and her descendants freedom and the island itself. Though Sapphira looms over the novel, its characters never learn the extent of their history and its connection to her. The bulk of the novel focuses on Ophelia; granddaughter and grandniece of Abigail and Miranda, or Mama Day. An expatriate of the island, the novel picks up with Ophelia in New York City, entangled in a tumultuous love affair – and a later marriage – with orphan and businessman, George, who loves Ophelia with every bit

of his physically defective heart. At the center of the novel is Ophelia's homecoming with George at her side. Much of the novel is also taken up by the side story of Bernice Duvall, a townswoman of Willow Springs desperate to have a baby, one desperate enough to seek Mama Day's alleged magical help. The novel's climax occurs after George and Ophelia's homecoming when Mama Day and George are tasked with saving Ophelia after she is hexed by Ruby, a jealous townswoman and amateur conjurer. The mission is one that takes George's life, leaves Ophelia to live without him, and forces Miranda to deal with the memories of her own mother's descent into madness.

By contrast, *Dessa Rose* is firmly situated in the neo-slave narrative genre; the story focuses on Dessa Rose, an enslaved pregnant woman who has recently helped lead a coffle insurrection. When the novel picks up Dessa Rose is in late term pregnancy and is being held prisoner for her violent actions. The novel opens with her being interviewed by a man who writes manuals on how to best deal with one's slaves. Dessa, with the help of her male friends who were also on the coffle, escapes imprisonment and gives birth to her child while running away. Her escape leads her and her friends to a run down, abandoned farmhouse and its white mistress and children; the house, land, and woman have been left behind by the man of the house. A former Southern debutant, Rufel, mistress of the house, seems blissfully unaware of her situation and allows the group of friends to begin to take over her plantation bit by bit. Dessa awakes from her journey in Rufel's bed to find Rufel nursing Dessa's newborn child. Much of the novel is taken up with ideas of slave breeding, nurturance, and anxiety. The narrative structure of the novel follows Dessa's path to freedom, becoming increasingly more coherent as Dessa's life comes closer to freedom and slavery recedes. The end of the novel finds Rufel, Dessa, and Dessa's friends running a con artist scheme to get the group of friends enough money

to travel west away from the Antebellum South, toward freedom. When the group has enough money they go west, leaving Rufel behind of her own accord. Together through their stark contrasts, *Dessa Rose* and *Mama Day* provide examples of the ways in which mothers and reproduction act as sites of fear and empowerment in postmodern African American women's writing.

The title character's pervasive fear of childbirth runs throughout Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*; calling on historical truths, this aspect of the novel forces its modern day readers to imagine the terror of childbirth in bondage. In the opening scenes of the novel, the reader is told that Dessa is in late term pregnancy; due to give birth any day. We also find out that the baby's father, Kaine, is another slave of the plantation on which Dessa used to live. In one particularly brutal and sickening moment Nehemiah, the writer who is interviewing Dessa for his book on slave insurrections, notes to himself that she has grown so large that she will probably die in childbirth before she ever reaches the noose. The narrator interjects in the story with Nehemiah's thoughts: "Her belly was almost as big as she and Nehemiah thought privately that birthing the kid she carried – a strong lusty one judging by the size of that belly – would probably kill her long before the hangman came for her neck."⁴⁸ From that moment forward, until Dessa gives birth, fear pervades the novel's descriptions of childbirth, especially when the novel turns to Dessa's thoughts. Tied in with that fear is the innate fear that seems to come from Dessa's partner Kaine at the thought of bringing a new child into such a cruel world. Unlike *Corregidora*, in which all of the women feel obligated to make generations in order to provide proof of the past, *Dessa Rose* looks forward, in worry for the life of the mother and the life of the child. By presenting reproduction as an act that is perilous for all involved, beyond the normal danger that

comes along with childbirth, *Dessa Rose* hints at some of the ways that childbearing and childrearing was and has been different for African American women.

Dessa Rose is filled with small, sickening moments and thoughts surrounding the act of being and becoming a mother that point toward a larger fear of one's body and of other bodies that is not uncommon within this literature. Written sixteen years after Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, *Dessa Rose* echoes that work in many ways, not least of which in how the body comes to serve as a site of terror, dread, and disgust. Later on in *Dessa Rose*, after Dessa has successfully given birth to her child and after she is taken in by her friends to the abandoned plantation, she struggles to produce milk and is forced to let Rufel, the white mistress, nurse him for her because "She was the only nursing woman on the place... and so continued of necessity to suckle the baby."⁴⁹ That Dessa cannot breastfeed her son and is forced to let a white woman take her place as his provider is a point that not only pains her but makes her angry; angry at the white woman who can produce milk, and angry at her own body for not doing what she feels is its job. When Dessa first finds Rufel nursing her baby her back is turned to Dessa and Dessa is just awaking; "Where [sic] my baby at?" Dessa asks, to which Rufel replies, "He [sic] right here."⁵⁰ The narrator notes from Rufel's point of view, "She could see the girl's body stiffening, her hands fumbling as she tried to rise from the bed."⁵¹ Another way in which fear and disgust of the body plays out in the novel is through the scars of Dessa's enslavement. Every character in the novel that gets the chance to see the whipping scars that wrap around Dessa's body from waist to thigh responds with nothing less than mortification. When another one of the slaves tells Rufel about Dessa's scarring after she exclaims that Dessa "don't have a scar on her back" she shivers and thinks to herself, "that couldn't be true, it was too, too awful."⁵² In this way, the

horror that surrounds the reproductive body itself in the novel underlines and mirrors the horror that surrounds the act of reproduction.

In some ways, *Mama Day* takes the fear of the body exemplified in *Dessa Rose* one step further, extending it into a basal fear of womanhood itself. The fears that take hold in *Mama Day* are all connected in some way to the ways in which these women experience and act out their femininity. The elements of horror that Naylor leverages in *Mama Day* are some of the most basic – and somewhat stereotypical – fears a woman can have. For example, Ophelia is afraid that George does not really love her, Ruby is afraid that her partner is cheating on her, Bernice Duvall is afraid she will never have children, and Grace is afraid that her granddaughter will turn out like her daughter and her mother before her. Never is this more clear than in Bernice Duvall's overarching fear that she will be unable to have a baby and the lengths that she is willing to go to calm that fear. She is willing to turn to medicine, her neighbors, and magic in order to have a child of her own. After she has a child, her fears then turn towards those around her and hoping they will never find out that she used magic, with Mama Day's help, to conceive said child. That her child dies near the end of the novel says something about the horror that is encapsulated in the story. Naylor makes a strong argument for embracing one's femininity and womanhood without fear, an argument that is decidedly not a stereotype, and as such this literature becomes, at least in part, about African American women overcoming deep-seated and often rightful fears.

Motherhood also shows up in other ways in *Mama Day*, mainly through the absence of mothers that Naylor leverages to create a space for other kinds of femininity and womanhood. The novel is littered with characters living without a mother; George, Ophelia, Grace, Miranda, and Bernice all move through their lives and through the novel without their mothers present. In

that absence the novel also becomes littered with adoptive mothers and mother figures; for George it is the strict female leader of the orphanage he grew up in, for Grace and Bernice it is Miranda, and for Ophelia it is Grace and Miranda, her grandmother and her great-aunt. Miranda is the best example of the kind of woman that can exist because of that carved out space. In that space Miranda exists as a woman of power and magic who is independent, feared, loved, and imitated. That space frees up room for Miranda to take care of and heal so many others; she helps raise Ophelia, she helps deliver the children of Willow Springs, she nurses her mother and countless others, and she looks after her sister. In a particularly tender moment for Miranda, as she helps Bernice deliver her baby, she thinks about how she help deliver most every person in town but was never able to have children of her own; a fact that she chalks up to her always taking care of others rather than herself when she says, “Gifted hands, folks said. Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own. Saw so much heartbreak, maybe I never wanted my own.”⁵³ In this way the novel presents two models for the space left behind by absentee mothers: one, through the product of adoptive mothers, and two, through the inner monologue of a woman who takes up that space. The novel uses motherhood and the lack thereof to underline the ways in which femininity must be negotiated.

Naylor, despite the fears embodied in her novel, gives agency back to her female characters over their bodies and their anxieties, by leaving choices in their hands and by giving them the power to negotiate their relationships and their bodies. In a particularly poignant moment in *Mama Day* George and Ophelia capture the idea of overcoming fears; they stand together on the George Washington Bridge and despite all of the relationship struggles they have had together they throw her diaphragm over the edge. George takes the diaphragm out of its case and give it to Ophelia saying, “I want you to do it. Because later on you’ll turn around and say it

was my idea.”⁵⁴ Then Ophelia’s narration breaks back to tell the reader, “I held the diaphragm like a Frisbee and sent it flying over the railing.”⁵⁵ The moment is symbolic for the two characters in that they are making the commitment to have a child together, but I would argue that the moment also has a large socio-cultural significance as well. That moment is about the very act of overcoming fears, fears that have been rightfully held. In some ways *Mama Day* is not a neo-slave narrative because its narrative occurs completely within the confines of the twentieth century; however, it embodies the tenets of the genre insofar as it shows the repercussions of slavery. Additionally, *Mama Day*, like *Corregidora*, expands the genre by showing what the archive looks like once it has been passed down for generations. This moment in the novel could also be a symbolic moment of defiance and activism against moments in history like the early nineteenth century when, with emancipation behind them, African American women and couples faced eugenic treatments that endeavored to squelch their population. In either case the reader can interpret this moment as one that opens the door for metaphors that surround reproduction, women, and fear. It is important to note that it is a diaphragm that Ophelia and George are tossing over the side of the Brooklyn Bridge, not the pill, because it means that before there was a physical barrier – negotiated by Ophelia – to their having children that has been tossed aside.

In a similarly activist way, motherhood in *Dessa Rose* literally equals freedom, Dessa gives birth to her son as she is escaping her bonds for the last time, and in doing so she asserts that being able to have a child, perhaps specifically one with a man that she loved, is the ultimate act of defiance for a free woman. *Dessa Rose* focuses on how slavery took mothers away from their children and vice versa through the flashback moments that Dessa has to her own mother. In this way, *Dessa Rose* presents another kind of absentee mother, the kind that is whisked away

by bondage and oppression. Perhaps this plot point is why Dessa is so upset by her inability to produce milk for her infant son. Motherhood, in the hands of Williams, becomes a moment when, fear inducing as it may be, Dessa can leave behind her chains and her scars, set free because she somehow set herself free. By connecting motherhood to freedom Williams creates a moment that is similar to the moment when George and Ophelia rid themselves of her diaphragm. With each novel written within two decades after the civil rights movement and after Margaret Sanger's death one cannot help but think that together these moments provide a powerful statement that argues for the true reproductive rights of African American women. When looked at in this light Williams and Naylor's novels leverage the passed down archive to critique the dominant culture from which they are only slightly removed.

The meditation on motherhood, womanhood, and reproduction taken up by both Williams and Naylor reflects back on the secondary research on the history of black bodies done by scholars and historians like Roberts and Washington. Furthermore, these novels function in similar ways as non-fiction books on the topic. Not only do the characters in *Mama Day* and *Dessa Rose* serve as reminders of what it means to pass down the archive, but the novels themselves work to pass down archival materials in creative ways. While Washington and Roberts pay careful attention to the historical facts that gird the underbelly of the archive, Williams and Naylor use fiction to illustrate both how that history happened and how it exists in our world today. The overwhelming preoccupation with the tenants of slave breeding and the fear of childbirth seen in *Dessa Rose* exemplifies the ways in which reproduction was a treacherous journey for nineteenth-century women, a fact that can be corroborated by secondary historical sources. *Mama Day* clarifies how reproduction, in some ways, remains perilous. Taken together, the novels and the secondary sources tell the broader story of American history for

African American women and African American mothers. By reflecting secondary sources in an artistic way novelists like Williams and Naylor not only have created works that are supported by the archive, but also serve to validate that archive because they bring that history into the public sphere.

Both Naylor and Williams give their characters the agency to choose how their bodies will be cared for, at least to some extent, and in doing so both authors make the case for the necessity of bodily autonomy for African American women. Williams illustrates how agency was negotiated by enslaved women in the nineteenth century while Naylor puts forth a novel that details the dangers of taking a woman's agency away. Near the end *Mama Day*, Ruby uses Ophelia's own body to hex her, using her hair to cast her spell. Once Ophelia is hexed she has very little control over her own body and nearly dies because of it, but not before she suffers from graphic, disfiguring hallucinations. Furthermore, it is Ruby taking agency away from Ophelia that causes George's death. Similarly, in *Dessa Rose*, when the Dessa is still enslaved, the narrative of Dessa's life is disfigured beyond recognition and it is only once slavery has been lifted from her that the reader can begin to understand the story of Dessa's life beyond the present. Slavery in *Dessa Rose* functions in a similar way as the hex does in *Mama Day*; taken together these two novels portray the disfiguring, pervasive, and devastating force of stolen agency on women's lives. When read in conversation *Mama Day* and *Dessa Rose* provide a strong, particularly feminist, argument for returning agency to women and taking it back by force.

One can also read Sapphira, the elusive female ancestor of the Day family in *Mama Day*, as analogous to Dessa, or more accurately two sides of a unique coin. Both women achieve freedom with children in tow and both women achieve that freedom with little to no help. These

two women, fictional enslaved mothers, are the women that modern readers may wish Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Wilson could have been. One wishes that Jacobs and Wilson could have escaped with little to no help and been greatly successful in life. One wishes that Jacobs and Wilson could have used their feminine wiles to outsmart a racist, patriarchal system.

Nevertheless, while both reclaimed agency of their own, Jacobs and Wilson were not those women; but characters like Sapphira and Dessa are a part of their literary bloodline. Yellin evokes this idea when she posits that “Sojourner Truth’s speeches – however mutilated in transcription – and Harriet Jacobs’ book – however shaped to appeal to her target audience of free white women – bring us as close as we can come to the words of African American women held in slavery.”⁵⁶ Because of writers like Wilson, Jacobs, and their contemporaries, who were brave enough to say anything at all, characters like Sapphira and Dessa – in all of their rage filled violence and cunning – can exist in the postmodern literary world. Similarly, Woolfork posits that Butler wanted to take her readers back in time to show “the difficulty of those choices” and to force them “to see the ethical complexity of those conditions in greater clarity.”⁵⁷ Reading Dessa and Sapphira as analogous characters tied to Wilson and Jacobs provides an even better vantage point from which to view motherhood in this literature, because it gives Wilson and Jacobs a second life in which they are allowed to say and do almost anything. Reading Dessa and Sapphira as connected to each other and to Wilson and Jacobs allows twentieth- and twenty-first century readers to imagine what could have been for Wilson and Jacobs. These novels work to reclaim women like Jacobs and Wilson as mothers, sexual and feminine beings, and as radical resisters of an oppressive regime; in these novels enslaved mothers get a second, fuller life and are given the space to be complete and even magical human beings.

Though both *Mama Day* and *Dessa Rose* begin with fear, in regard to the body and childbearing, both novels move toward peace in the end and in doing so they offer a particularly optimistic ending. In the closing scenes of *Mama Day*, Ophelia is happily married with children, and by the end of *Dessa Rose*, Dessa has escaped West with her friends to secure a more permanent kind of freedom. That both novels have happy endings despite the fear and pain encompassed in them says something about moving forward out of the past. Williams works to uncover the dangerous nature of the past for mothers, while Naylor works to connect that past to the present day; but by creating happy endings for each of their main characters both Williams and Naylor offer a view of motherhood that is scary but not overwhelming, meaning that they both argue that that fear is not one that cannot be overcome. Naylor and Williams write novels that could only be written in the late twentieth century with Civil rights behind them and a better understanding of the past moving forward. That they choose to write novels that center on womanhood, reproduction, and motherhood cannot be ignored in this context because both authors make motherhood a site of danger and agency mixed together. By making motherhood and womanhood a site of agency they underline the ways in which reproduction has been dangerous for African American women for centuries while arguing also for inclusive reproductive rights.

Body

In the late twentieth-century literature written by African American women all of the pieces of dynasty and bloodline fit together and alongside each other in the body because it becomes the keeper and transmitter of memories passed down: the vessel through which history flows. A subversive archive does not exist without the body and therefore cannot be passed down. In postmodern literature written by African American women the body becomes important because it is the site of oppression, expression, hardship, pain, and reproduction. The body becomes the most important archival tool within this literature, absorbing the past into itself and telling the story of that past bit by bit. The past becomes written on women's bodies in this literature because the body is the reason why the past ever existed. The past is written on women's bodies because it has to be. In this chapter I examine Phillis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* and Toni Morrison's masterpiece *Beloved*. Perry's novel is the most recent of the novels that I have taken up, written in 1998, and Morrison's is arguably the most recognizable. By providing haunting accounts of how the past interacts with the body – and how that interaction can affect the mind – the two novels illustrate the ways in which bodies can become another kind of document, arguing that in the face of a broken archive the body is the only alternative site of memory.

Beloved focuses on a former slave named Sethe and her relationship to her daughters Denver and Beloved. The novel is told in a mix of poetry and prose, flashback and present tense writing. Taken together, its fragmented narrative tells the story of pain, grief, loss, relationships, and supernatural phenomena. Near the beginning of the novel Sethe details the night that she had sex with a man in exchange for his engraving her deceased infant's headstone:

She hadn't thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible – that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered.⁵⁸

From that moment forward the novel is about how Sethe's body has been abused for the sake of or in spite of her children. Sethe is brutally whipped, raped, and has her breastmilk stolen from her while pregnant with her youngest child, Denver. She faces the dangers of escaping bondage alone while pregnant with Denver in order to get back to her older children, one of whom is still just an infant. Over the course of the journey she gives birth to her last child with the help of a poor white girl for whom Denver is named, an event that Morrison describes in graphic detail. The events of the novel come to be written on Sethe's body; for each event there is a memory that Sethe relays and for each event there is a scar. Those events are forever inscribed within and upon Sethe's body. Sethe tells Denver early on in the novel that Denver can never go back to the plantation where she was conceived, Sweet Home, because that place holds the memory of all the bad things that happened there and it will always be waiting for her; what Sethe does not seem to realize is that her own body holds those awaiting memories too.

Stigmata is, in some ways, the more coherent sister text for *Beloved*'s fragmented prose. Written from the perspective of the 1980s and 90s, the novel seems somewhat more accessible on the surface, with all of the same complex elements that allow the reader to imagine the past. The story focuses on the life, and temporary though long-term commitment to a mental hospital, of a young woman named Lizzie who inherits a quilt and a diary from her grandmother, her great-grandmother, and her great-great-grandmother before her. Here Perry represents the

archive in a way that is legible to her readers – inheriting a quilt is a rather ordinary form of passing down history – from there she uses that form to launch Lizzie and the novel into the realm of the fantastic and speculative fiction. The quilt and the diary send her back in time, literally. As she reaches her teen years, her consciousness starts being sucked back in time to the life of her grandmother, Grace, and her great-great-grandmother, Ayo, where she receives the wounds that they received in life. She inhabits their bodies and lives through memory, but their memories do not come without consequence: “I sit in bed with Grace, marveling that I can move her fingers and toes. Slowly her pain finds every part of me. We hurt, our body hurts. Arms and ankles and back. Everything is heavy.”⁵⁹ Her parents, straight-laced as they are, commit her to a mental hospital after she emerges from the past with all the wounds that her great-great-grandmother suffered over the course of her time on the Middle Passage. Again in this novel, the past is physically written on Lizzie’s body, connecting her through time and space to female ancestors that she never knew. Perry’s novel provides an extreme metaphor for the ways in which the past can reach through time and affect the people of the present, its legacy lasting long after it is believed to be over.

In both *Stigmata* and *Beloved*, the body becomes a part of and is reintegrated into the self; the main characters of each novel cannot pry themselves away from their bodies and what has happened to them and as such both are ostracized in one way or another because of it. Woolfork argues against trauma theorists, namely Freud, that such a reintegration is necessary because “separating the concept of trauma from the body has unintended implications and, when placed in the context of the trauma of slavery, signals the mind-body split dialectic that has adversely informed attitudes toward the Black body since the Enlightenment.”⁶⁰ By aligning the body with the self both Morrison and Perry, like Williams, force their readers into that intimate

space that is the brutalized body; their readers are forced to think about what it would be like to give birth while escaping slavery as well as what it would have been like to be a woman over the course of the Middle Passage. The alignment of the body with the self in these novels utilizes recognizable cultural knowledge (e.g. an African American person is black and cannot shed that identity, they will always look black) and leverages it to argue that history and historical trauma, particularly that enacted against women, works in a similar way. Using cultural knowledge both of these novels argue that bodies, particularly female bodies, hold the memories of the past as well as the potential for the future.

Morrison relies mainly on scars in *Beloved* to tell the bodily story of the past, and in doing so she provides a larger metaphor for the scars of time left by a racist, patriarchal society. The whipping scars that stripe Sethe's back are one example of this tactic; the near-decapitation scar that circles Beloved's neck is another example. The narrator describes the scar as a "little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under her chin."⁶¹ The scars portrayed in *Beloved* are always on female bodies, and they are always related to trauma enacted by another person; in other words the scars that Morrison writes are not passive or accidental, they were inscribed on those female bodies for a reason. Furthermore, Sethe's whipping scars are consistently connected to nature; throughout the novel Sethe says again and again that she has a tree on her back that she has never seen. From the point of view of Paul D, a former slave who lived on the same plantation as Sethe and who is for most of the novel her lover, the tree is something different: "nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting."⁶² Making sense of what it means for the novel that Sethe's scars mimic nature is a complex task. Above all, because Sethe's scars mimic nature they become a part of the natural world around her, a mimicry that illustrates their ordinariness in the context of the nineteenth century. In this way,

Morrison points to the commonplace nature of scars like Sethe's for nineteenth-century African American women while also using their juxtaposition with nature to explore the unnatural nature of such scars. Morrison returns to those scars again and again to emphasize her point that those scars were, and are, an unfortunately common and brutal, part of history while also emphasizing the surreal nature of the past. By writing that history on Sethe's body she connects the scars of the past to the present and the future because the reader can see how the scars impressed upon her by slavery affect her life in freedom and her abilities as a mother.

Scars also function in *Beloved* to emphasize the prevalence of brutality and hardship that hovered over African American women's lives in the nineteenth century. In a similar way to Sethe's scars, Beloved's scar, from her mother killing her, is circular, spinning about her neck in a subtle way that chokes her. If Sethe's scar points to nature then Beloved's scar points to nothing if not the circularity of time, and in doing so Morrison suggests that infanticide – and infant death more broadly – happened again and again during the Antebellum period. Roberts corroborates this when she states that “Infanticide was the most extreme form of slave mothers' resistance. Some enslaved women killed their newborns to keep them from living as chattel.”⁶³ She does go on to say that “while infanticide spared children from the horrors of slavery, it was not the most desirable strategy for overthrowing the institution.”⁶⁴ Prevalence rates, or lack thereof, aside, Morrison seems to turn to this particularly mournful part of history to underscore both the brutality of slavery while also reclaiming women who committed infanticide as good women and good mothers rather than historical villains. In this way, Beloved is the supernatural representation of all the children lost by African American mothers, taken either by force or by necessity. Beloved, mysterious as she is, becomes the stand in for all of those children that left and never returned or those whose mother's killed them out of compassion. Near the end of the

novel in reference to *Beloved*'s death Sethe thinks to herself, "She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter. And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper."⁶⁵ *Beloved*'s scars connect to her mother's physical and emotional ones because Morrison alludes that without the oppressive force of slavery Sethe would have never murdered her. By connecting their scars Morrison illustrates the ways in which trauma can be passed down through the body from one generations to the next. The scars on Sethe's back, and the acts that put them there, also create the scars around *Beloved*'s neck. If we are to perceive Sethe's and *Beloved*'s scars as the story that Morrison is telling about the past, then they must be attended to in a way that acknowledged them for all that they have to tell. By connecting these two ideas, the circularity of time and the ordinary nature of brutality, the scars on their bodies represent – in a condensed way – African American women's history; by placing these scars on women's bodies Morrison ties that history inextricably to women's bodies and the color of their skin.

Stigmata mirrors *Beloved* in its use of scarring as a way of documenting the past. The main difference between the two novels is their settings, one in the nineteenth century the other in the late twentieth century. What's interesting about the differences between the scars portrayed in the two novels is the ways in which they are received by those who see them. Sethe's scars are never questioned as legitimate, nor are *Beloved*'s; Lizzie is not so lucky. For Lizzie, the scars of the past that come to mark her body because of her connection to her ancestors also mark the beginning of her perceived descent into madness. Lizzie does not suffer from a mental illness according to Perry, other than her connection to the past, and the reader is never led to believe that Lizzie is hallucinating or committing self-harm. In fact, Lizzie is portrayed throughout the novel as a reliable narrator, at one point asking her therapist: "How

come mystics can talk about reincarnation all day long and I get committed for it?”⁶⁶ That Lizzie’s scars, binding scars on her limbs and whipping scars, are not believed to be true scars by her family because slavery is over illustrates the difference that time makes in these two novels. Furthermore, that her scars are discredited and she is sent to a mental institution for a decade because of them makes a strong statement about the state of America and the way that it views history. Perry, through scarring and alleged mental illness, illustrates how historical trauma is covered up and swept away under the pretenses that the brutality discussed happened a long time ago. Lizzie states ambiguously and somewhat dismally of her condition: “there is no cure for what I’ve got.”⁶⁷ History is Lizzie’s affliction and in its light her statement that there is a cure speaks to the inability to escape the trauma of the past, precisely because of the influence of passed down memory. Perry, building on the work of Morrison, illustrates metaphorically how historical trauma affects modern day lives and how it has the ability to ruin them.

In both *Beloved* and *Stigmata*, like in *Corregidora* and *Kindred*, women’s bodies become the conduit through which the past moves into the present; they carry the past with them written on and in their bodies and they pass it on to their children and their children’s children. By making women that channel the past, both Morrison and Perry gesture towards reproduction and how women’s bodies cannot only reproduce children but can also reproduce circumstances and memories. Moreover, they emphasize this point through their conflation of the self and the body. In the hands of Perry and Morrison the body becomes the past, memory becomes encoded into it and in that light it is able to be passed down. Following Brown’s argument, “The body holds the same photographic capacity of the afterimage, duplicates of racialized marking – the present *as well as* the past.”⁶⁸ This point is important because both novels are a statement affirming the existence and the detriment of historical trauma. Women’s bodies must have the past written on

them in brutal ways in *Beloved* and *Stigmata* because it allows Morrison and Perry to use women's bodies to pass the past down. Sethe is connected to the past by her body as is Lizzie's great-great-grandmother who survived the Middle Passage and both women pass that brutality down to the female descendants specifically because it is a part of their bodies and a part of themselves and they cannot forget it. In this way, writing the past on women's bodies makes it a tangible part of the self and it makes it real. Sethe's memories are written on her body and as such the past sticks with and continues to affect her life. What both authors suggest is that – because of the relationship between the body, reproduction, and the self – the past has stuck with African American women in unique and nuanced ways that are not always visible.

To extend that line of thought further, in the hands of Morrison and Perry, their female characters become the past; in doing so, Lizzie, Sethe, and Beloved become the living, breathing representation of all that has come before them. These female characters come to embody the past, not just through their bodies that are the past but also through their minds, their memories, and, in Sethe's words, their re-memories. The past becomes ingrained in them until it is a part of who they are, a part of how they see the world, and a part of how they function in that world. In this light, it is the past that links the body to the self. The past makes the body visible in these texts, through the use of scars, and in doing so it makes the body a part of how each woman views herself as a human being. Lizzie cannot untangle herself from the lives of her grandmother and her great-great-grandmother because that past is written on her body, visible every day and to everyone who knows her. Never is it clearer that the past is a part of who Lizzie is than when she uncovers Anthony Paul's painting of her – the stripes writ across her back, the ocean swirling behind her – when she sees that painting for the first time she knows simultaneously that it cannot be her because he painted it before they met and that it somehow, inexplicably is her. In

relationship to the painting she tells the reader, “While I lay silent and wandering, immersed in past dreams at Bentwood, a young man was putting layer upon layer of my past on this canvas.”⁶⁹ Similarly, Sethe’s tree is not just a part of her body but a part of herself, a fact that becomes clearer through her relationship with Paul D. during their first meeting, near the beginning of the novel Sethe tells Paul D, “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms.”⁷⁰ By tying the past to the self and the body Morrison and Perry create a portrait of African American women that engages with history and historical trauma’s effects. By creating female characters that are the past both authors endeavor to show the complexity of African American femininity, both historically and in the present.

Lizzie and Sethe both experience supernatural connections with other women – for Sethe it is Beloved and for Lizzie it is her female ancestors – through those connections they experience both pain and healing, and in this way both become a part of a larger web of bodily connections that underline the notion of sisterhood. These connections can be read as the loci of transmission; a kind of broadcast of knowledge occurs between the women through supernatural means. In this way, Perry and Morrison point to both the surreal nature of the facts of history and to the ability to connect with one’s ancestors or descendants across time and space by learning about their lives and their truths. In a way these novels become educational texts that argue that we all, but perhaps women especially, should take the time to learn about the past. Using bodies to convey this point makes it muddier but more impactful, because it drives home the ways in which we are all literally connected to the past through our bodies, specifically the bodies of our mothers. Again here we see Perry and Morrison use women’s bodies as the conduit between past and present because of their inlaid reproductive abilities. What makes these connections

interesting is that they occur over the course of time making these connections hauntings, for Sethe quite literally. Bodies become blurred by the idea of haunting that both Perry and Morrison use to deconstruct time, showing rather than saying that it is an illusion that we have come so far and pointing out that the bodies of women of color are haunted by many painful pasts.

Both of these novels are, in some ways, a meditation on pain and grief, exploring them through women's bodies and minds; in doing so, both novels seek to reclaim those emotions for women that were not always able to express them. Here the novels harken back again to original slave narratives, like those written by Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs who had to tame their stories for their primarily white readership to help achieve their goals of humanization and abolition. Here, however, we see the nineteenth-century African American woman unfettered from those ties, allowed to express her grief and feel her pain. Perhaps these are the things that Wilson and Jacobs would have said in graphic detail if they could have; perhaps they also would have graphically detailed abuse and the hardships of childbirth under slavery, perhaps they also would have spoken more about their bodily scars. In this light, these novels become reclamation texts, like *Dessa Rose* and *Mama Day*, that allow women like Wilson and Jacobs to speak through time and space to finally tell their stories. *Stigmata* and *Beloved* both honor women like Wilson and Jacobs by giving the space to tell the truths that they were not able to tell in life. In this way, *Stigmata*'s Lizzie becomes a writer herself, a documenter of the past, whereas *Beloved*'s Sethe is allowed to tell her own story. In either case, both novels return the radical notion of agency, one's voice and ability to tell their story, to women denied that right for centuries.

Corregidora defined the idea of making generations as an act in defiance of an imperfect archive and a way to bear witness to the past, applying that notion to *Stigmata* and *Beloved*

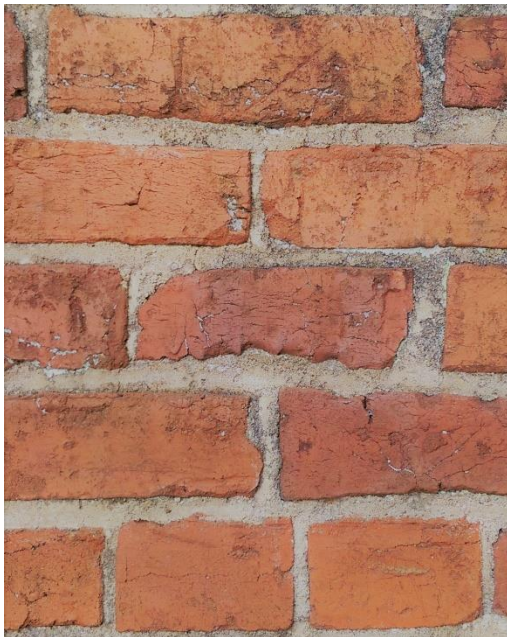
extrapolates how the body can become itself a radical archive. Those ideas bound up in *Corregidora* can be seen at work here in the novels of Morrison and Perry. *Stigmata* and *Beloved* as novels function in a similar way to Ursa's music, they provide another example of how to bear witness to the past and how to solidify memories that would often rather be forgotten. By using women's bodies, not their reproductive capacity, to make those figurative generations both Morrison and Perry make the past unforgettable because they drive their point home with pain and graphic descriptions of bodily hardship. That they choose women's bodies draws on the culturally constructed notion that, in some way, women's bodies are the link between the past, the present, and the future. In works like that of Morrison and Perry this link becomes the site of gruesome pain and disfigurement precisely because it is all of black women's history that they are writing onto the bodies of Lizzie and Sethe. This aspect is made clear during the scenes in which both novels engage with Africa, the Middle Passage, slavery, escape, and freedom. Both novels chart the course of African American women's history onto the bodies of African American women thus making it real and indelible; Sethe and Lizzie will always live with those scars and so will history.

Both of these novels, and arguably all of the novels taken up here, are a form of literary activism that appears to be centered on African American femininity, agency, reclamation, and historical trauma. In the scope of a post-Civil Rights world novels like *Beloved* and *Stigmata*, as well as the others discussed, can be seen as a subversive form of activism born out of the radical moment of racial tension that was the 1960s. In this way, these novels are both a product of the post-Civil Rights America as well as the longer span of American history. In both cases these novels become a way to memorialize the women who came before them. In part this comes out of African American feminism, or womanism as Alice Walker has construed it.⁷¹ In effort to

reclaim and retell the past, the choice to write about African American women of the past creates a conversation among the novels that venerates some of history's most vulnerable human beings. In this way, we can read all of these novels as feminist acts, manifestos on the importance of the women that were left behind by the white, second wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. The body, as well as bloodlines and dynasty, becomes the site of these manifestos because the history that it works against was written with bodies through bloodlines in effort to create dynasties. The feminism that the reader can see here fights back against centuries of bodily harm, lack of autonomy, and oppression. Therefore, the literary activism seen here has a dual mission: one, to show the ugly parts of the past, specifically for women, and two, to reclaim the past as their own story to tell. Constructing this past as female is then a double form of radicalism. It has been said that the future is female but maybe the past is also, these novels sit at that intersection.

Conclusion

These literary works examined here do not exist in a vacuum, but rather in a world that teems with the material history these authors take up. That history lives all around America – especially in the South – in our culture, in our buildings, on our monuments, and in our street names. Authors like Morrison, Butler, and their contemporaries turn to the material world and the corporeal self because it provides room for subversive forms of history that play on both the archive and the material world itself. Stagville Plantation, located approximately thirty miles northeast of the University of North Carolina, is a good material example of how the past can live on in the world. Previously owned by the Cameron family, Stagville is the site of a set of well-kept, extant slave quarters. Made up of brick and wood, the slaves who lived in the quarters also made them by hand. Imprinted into the bricks that line the outside of the chimneys are fingerprints, handprints, and even the swirls of a child's foot. Culturally, the marring of those



Stagville Bricks, photo taken by Hallie French.

bricks represent more than the sum of the indentations made by hands and feet, they serve as the living remnants of a past that often exists as sets of numbers. Those marks are the human reminder of the vast number of people that lived under slavery. The bricks at Stagville offer a unique perspective on how the past becomes embodied: by offering concrete, tactile reminders of the lives that passed before us, and by providing visual reminders of the capability of bodies to write history.

Much like the literature taken up over the course of this project, Stagville's bricks serve as a reminder of the past that simultaneously tells the viewer a story while leaving the details to the imagination. As viewers, we can never know the individuals whose hands and feet made those marks, in the same way that books like *Kindred* and *Beloved* rely on the fantastic to tell the story of slavery, because their individual lives are not recorded legibly. Stories that surround Stagville's bricks are easy to imagine. One can picture the child running over them while they were still drying or conjure up the image of the hands that made them imperfectly; however, the identities of the people to whom those fingerprints belonged are lost forever. They tell a universal story because they cannot tell a specific one. For example, the task of making bricks is one that, admittedly, would have been done primarily by male slaves. The textiles that women might have made, the gardens that they might have tended, the food they would have served, and other work that they would have engaged in is erased, leaving behind only the memory of the children they raised in the form of footprints. The products of African American women's work gets lost, even in this material, would-be alternative archive. Neo-slave narratives work with and against the imperfect nature of both the material and traditional archives to tell imaginable stories and recuperate the past in the process by attempting to add those stories back into the country's historical narrative. In this light, the bricks underscore the necessity of fiction because it is fiction that allows the reader to remember women's lives, women's bodies, and women's work.

We usually transmit history in two ways: through the catalogued archive, and tangibly, by way of bodies and the world around us – neither mode of transmission is perfect. For example, the archive has proven itself imperfect because of the influence of authorial intent; modern readers can never fully know the truth because the winners are most often the writers of history. Authorial intent leaves room for authors, in many capacities, to leave things out. On the

other hand, tangible history by its very nature is opaque and unstable because it leaves remnants of the past – remnants that are in no all-encompassing or representative – rather than legible information. The task then is to translate between the tangible and the theoretical in order to curate a full story of the past. Both the bricks and the novels taken up here reveal the imperfect nature of history, as we know it. Both, in one way or another, argue that modern day readers of the past can never fully know events, people, or their lives; filling in the blanks means using narrative and fiction to imagine the lives that left behind fingerprints, or nothing at all, and using fantastic plot devices fills in the contours of those fingerprints.

Ultimately, the lives of the “Sixty Million and More” to whom Toni Morrison dedicates *Beloved*, with the exception of a select few, are forever lost; their lives can be imagined but can never be known truthfully and fully. However, by using fiction to write the past onto women’s bodies the authors discussed here materialize the past – one that often seems far away and unimaginable – through narrative, and in doing so they make the past present. The bricks at Stagville reveal another kind of immutable past, one that is material and not collected or catalogued; the past written with bodies that exists in our physical world. Though neither form can tell a full a story of the past, both tell stories that remind their reader that the past was real while also solidifying it. Connecting the past to the physical world – whether it be by writing pain onto women’s bodies or by making the reader confront the fingerprints of individuals who have been lost to history – makes it apart of the present. Making the past present means making the past real and it means making the past knowable, even if only in part. In either case, fiction plays an important role in commemorating lives lost, specifically women’s lives, because it allows writers to take the knowledge that is available and piece it together into a coherent story.

Together, fiction, the archive, and the material world – despite all of their downfalls as individual pieces – come close to telling a richer story.

Between the tangibility of the Stagville bricks and traditionally archival forms of history lies photography, a form that complicates modes of transmission. Literally, photographs snip out moments in time and make them into a permanent, or at least semi-permanent, image. In this way, photography lends itself to telling the truth, but once again, authorial intent plays an important role. What the photographer chooses to leave out may say as much as what she chooses to put into a photograph. However, though intent obscures photography in the same way that it does archival modes of transmission, photography also physically represents the world and the past in bodies. One could argue that the very invention of photography was meant to preserve the images of individuals. What makes photography interesting is that it transmutes forms of historical transmission and allows its audience to see the past. This kind of quasi-time travel is one that, like the other forms of transmission, reveals some parts of the past while making others even more opaque. In terms of the lives of African American women, photography provides a medium that, like the novels, makes their lives knowable; knowing more about those lives by seeing them lends history a visual aid and helps incorporate them back into a broader narrative.

The Louis Round Wilson Library archives serve as a site of photographic, historical transmission. Housed there is the Bailey Daniel Webb Photographic Collection. The collection – bequeathed by Dr. Bailey Daniel Webb, an early female graduate of both the University of North Carolina and Duke University – spans from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth century. Part of the collection follows Kate Webb Williamson, Dr. Webb’s sister and a decorated public health nurse in rural North Carolina. The photographs that document Williamson’s time in Granville and Cumberland counties are particularly interesting because they detail her work with

African American communities, emphasizing the interaction between the female sector of the African American community and healthcare systems in the early twentieth century.

Furthermore, many of the photographs are of Kate Webb Williamson and her colleagues in practice. The patients focused on in the photographs are women and their children, many of whom recur throughout the collection of work. These moments snipped out of time press the boundaries between health and relationships by juxtaposing women and their children with groups of female healthcare workers.

In one particularly poignant photograph from the collection two young children flank a mother while she holds another on her lap. With the exception of two doctors, no men are in the photographs. The relationship between healthcare and the African American community are almost solely female. In this way, these photographs impart a certain kind of knowledge to their reader about what it meant to be an African American woman in the early twentieth century and what it meant specifically to be an African American mother. Much like the bricks at Stagville, these photographs provide the modern day reader with a physical background and context; the images

of poor mothers and children with rickets portrayed are undeniable because they exist physically in front of the reader. Furthermore, like the Stagville bricks they provide little else than a physical remnant of the past. The reader can never know the names or life details of the women



Photograph of mother and three children, in the Bailey Daniel Webb Photographic Collection #P0019, North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

depicted; what we can know is that they and their children most likely struggled to remain healthy, the implications of which are broad.

In the presence of many different imperfect archives, the turn to fiction in neo-slave narratives is important because it creates a space for stories that have been passed down in body and mind by women that would otherwise be lost in whole or in part. Both the Stagville bricks and the Bailey Daniel Webb Photographic Collection help extrapolate the relationship between the past and individual bodies, but even they are not perfect. The novels contend that no mode of historical transmission is perfect – history is either illusive or written by the biased, leaving modern day readers to learn imperfect stories in imperfect ways – but that the past can nevertheless the past can be remembered through historically based fiction. The loss of information that occurs in history books is inevitable in the same way that cultural objects and the material world becomes foggy with time. Even the body itself, useful as it is as a tool for memory, does not last. The only answer then to this conundrum is narrative; we are left to fill in the gaps that history leaves for us, some wider than others. At the same time when a reader looks at the Stagville bricks or the photographs in Wilson Library they long to know the stories behind them, creating a kind of intellectual demand. The historical novel (and the neo-slave narrative in particular) then becomes a necessary and vital byproduct of the gradual wearing away of truth by time.

The imagery of novels like *Beloved*, *Kindred*, *Mama Day*, *Stigmata*, *Dessa Rose*, and *Corregidora* underline this point by imagining the past in ways that mimic the tangible world around us, making the past a physical experience. By entering memory through women's bodies, these novels effectively conflate past, present, and future allowing their authors to critique all three. In these terms, women's bodies become the conduit through which time passes, allowing

these authors to embody the past in forms like reproduction, pain, and suffering. By making the past physical authors like Morrison, Butler, Naylor, Perry, Williams, and Jones make the past real. These writers must write the pain of the past onto bodies because doing so creates the past, makes it believable, and comments on the ways in which the past affects the present and the future. Women's bodies provide a particularly good canvas – or better yet, a particularly good blank page – because of the historical background in which they exist and because women's bodies already transmute the space between past, present, and future through biological reproduction. History, its modes of transmission, and the past itself may forever be blurred, but bodies are the living remnants of what came before. By taking bodily memory into serious consideration these authors argue that the only way to tell the story of the past, especially when it is painful, is to engage with the bodies that experienced it directly. These novels work to establish the past by using the female body in conjunction with fiction narrative; in doing so they make the implicit obvious and the forgotten tangible.

The authors explored here use the body to return agency back to their enslaved, formerly enslaved, and descendent characters because they contend that ultimately their bodies and their memories are the most truthful forms of the past. By arguing that the body, not the archive or the material world alone, is the best documenter of memory they advocate for a more inclusive notion of what is archival, making the past personal. In this light, this literature invokes the reader to take issue with the way history is written and to rethink the past. Perhaps such an invocation has no power on an individual basis, but in a broader sense it calls to us all to remember past injustices and work forward into a better world. These authors ask us all to remember those left behind in the same way that Walker asks us to remember her mother's garden and those who kept the song alive. Each of these authors asks their audience, pleads with

them even, to remember the past and not to repeat it. Women's bodies become their blank page in this plea because their bodies and their stories along with the remnants of their work are those which have become most obscured by time. Each novelist in turn asks their audience to engage with the past by exposing them to the ways in which America itself lives in a house haunted by trauma. Each novelist asks us all to take issue with and work to repair our broken history.

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Endnotes

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