SPECULATIVE PASTS, RADICAL POLITICS: HISTORICIZING IN BLACK AND INDIGENOUS FICTION

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SPECULATIVE PASTS, RADICAL POLITICS: HISTORICIZING IN BLACK AND INDIGENOUS FICTION

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This dissertation considers the ethical and political stakes of delving into the past. Literary critics have long contended that fiction about the past encourages an ethical relationship to violent legacies through a variety of narrative and affective techniques. According to such scholars, historical fiction works by evoking specific feelings in readers (*sentimentality*), bringing marginalized stories to the forefront (*visibility*), and filling gaps in archives (*recovery*). Departing from these approaches, my dissertation charts how non-realist elements transform historical fiction into a toolbox of political tactics such as direct action, covert movement, tangible care, community building, and the calculated use of the law. In other words, speculative tropes make history concrete in order to kindle decolonial and abolitionist politics.

Each chapter highlights the world-making quality of Black and Indigenous political imaginaries. My first chapter, on Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, explores how the sentimental conventions deployed in many neo-slave narratives can unintentionally undermine the genre's revolutionary goals by facilitating domestication that bolsters the antiblack nation-state. Whitehead's unsentimental novel of slavery instead turns towards affiliation mediated by palpable

care. Chapter two argues that Blake Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* demonstrates how making Indigenous history visible can collude with the assimilative function of settler colonial capitalism. In chapter three, I explore the limits of recovery through Octavia Butler's novel *Fledgling* as well as Butler's unpublished papers. I assert that *Fledgling*'s Black amnesiac protagonist models how to grapple strategically with an unrecoverable history.

Reconceiving both speculative fiction and historical fiction, my project intervenes in broader conversations across the humanities about what constitutes an ethical relationship to the past. I demonstrate that though speculative fiction appears concerned with the fantastical, imaginative, or contemplative realms, it offers concrete tools for dealing with tangible injustices that persist in our current moment.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gabriella Friedman completed her B.A. in English at Whitman College in 2013. She was awarded a Beinecke Scholarship by the Sperry Fund to pursue advanced study in literary studies. After a year of language teaching in France, she began her Ph.D. program at Cornell University in 2014 in the Department of Literatures in English. Her doctoral work focused on the intersection of Black studies, Indigenous studies, and contemporary literature. She takes particular interest in how literature helps readers engage with contemporary political and social structures. Her peer-reviewed articles appear in *Modern Fiction Studies* and *American Literature*, and her book reviews appear in *MELUS* and *American Quarterly*. She has been a recipient of Cornell's Provost Diversity Fellowship and The Huntington Library's John Brockway Huntington Foundation Fellowship. She has taught courses such as "Reading Now," "Science Fiction," "Speculative Histories of Slavery and Colonialism," and "American Ghosts." She also served as a co-facilitator for "Writing 7100: Teaching Writing" at the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines and as an instructor for the Cornell Prison Education Program.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Fiction Reimagined

Historical fiction is an enduringly popular genre, and perhaps never more so than in the early decades of the twenty-first century. These days, contemplations on the past appear in fiction, television, music albums, Hollywood blockbusters, and more. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* imagines an African country untouched by colonialism and a superhero king who must contend with the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* invokes Igbo Landing, the dungeons of Elmina Castle, and Fort Macomb.[1] Ryan Griffen's *Cleverman* melds superhero comics with the Indigenous Aboriginal oral tradition to create an action-packed dystopian T.V. series that comments on Australia's settler colonial history, especially the country's practices of policing Indigenous people and stealing Indigenous children. Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* uses the tropes of dystopian fiction to foreground the history of settler colonial control over Indigenous women's reproductive health. Historical fiction is no longer only fiction set in some past locale—it is not limited to period pieces—but seems endemic to contemporary literature and media.

All of the above examples use the tropes of science fiction, fantasy, or other "non-realist" genres to consider the past. My dissertation contends that such elements do not merely provide entertainment value but are central to the kind of historicizing

[1] Igbo landing, on St. Simons Island, GA, was the setting of a revolt and mass suicide by enslaved people. Elmina Castle in Ghana was the "door of no return" through which many African captives passed before being forced onto slave ships. Fort Macomb was a Confederate military stronghold taken over by an all-black Union army unit.

these texts enact. I chart how non-realist elements transform historical fiction into a toolbox of political tactics such as direct action, covert movement, tangible care, community building, and strategic use of legal mechanisms. In other words, speculative tropes make history tangible in order to kindle decolonial and abolitionist politics. My understanding of the "speculative" is not only about non-realist tropes. I center these tropes as metonymic ways of conceptualizing the relationship between past and present, but I am equally interested in speculation as a mode of radical political thought—a mode of worldmaking. Speculative texts imagine, implicitly or explicitly, how society could function differently from our current reality and offer ideas for how we can shape more just and livable worlds. These texts' various meditations on history are inseparable from this worldmaking project. The key argument of this dissertation is that historicizing must be speculative in order to be abolitionist and decolonial.

Since this project uses speculative fiction to offer a new understanding of historical fiction—and through that, the process of historicizing as it manifests in cultural production—I begin with an overview of common arguments scholars have made about the function and import of historical fiction. In my project, historical fiction refers to fiction that represents or grapples with the past. Importantly, I do not believe that temporal setting is a central defining characteristic for the genre; a literary work does not need to take place in the past to be historical fiction. On this issue, I concur with critics like David Cowart, who argues historical fiction is "any fiction in which the past figures with some prominence" (6), including those books set in the reader's present (or future) but "tasked with gauging the historical forces responsible for the present" (2).

Critics widely accept the idea that historical fiction has the potential to inspire social change. This focus is a vital characteristic of the European historical novel that emerged in the early nineteenth century through novels by Walter Scott, Alessandro Manzoni, Victor Hugo, and others. As Sandra Bermann puts it, "Through its focused attention on a national past, its new interest in the material conditions of life, and its frequent choice of protagonists from the middle and even the lower classes, the historical novel easily became a vehicle for strong political and social statements" (Introduction to Manzoni 29). Though contemporary American historical fiction differs significantly in milieu, political goals, attitude towards nationalism, and even literary form from these earlier European iterations, the emphasis on social change remains evident. I argue that historical fiction—and especially work written by so-called "multiethnic" U.S. writers—is typically read through three prevailing analytics: sentimentality, visibility, and recovery. Each of these analytics describes a particular idea about the specific effects historical fiction arguably has on readers—and thus how this genre leads to social action in the service of justice. These three analytics are closely related, but each has a different texture. I think of these analytics as interwoven strands that are part of a larger argument about historical fiction's significance. These analytics will be discussed in much greater depth across my dissertation chapters, but I offer a brief overview here.

The first strand foregrounds emotion, suggesting that when readers affectively immerse themselves in the past, they will—through the power of empathy, sympathy, or identification with characters—gain the ability or willingness to change unjust social conditions in their present. A nascent form of this argument appears in the European

historical romances of the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The nineteenth-century author and critic Allesandro Manzoni poetically describes the historical novelist as a person who seeks "to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history" (68). In an influential formulation, Georg Lukács, writing about nineteenth-century historical novels, claims that such novels cause readers to "re-experience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality" (42). Another key predecessor of contemporary historical fiction can be found in the tradition of the slave narrative as well as in American sentimental fiction. The writers of slave narratives (and other abolitionists) used their fiction to appeal to their readership's supposedly righteous impulses. In today's historical fiction, affect continue to play a central role. Marni Gauthier, for example, argues that contemporary historical novels "invite readers to perceive rather than merely to consume the story...they demand the reader's imaginative stepping into the narrative and thereby—through unique readerly experiences of the past—transmute obscure histories into memories" (22). The neo-slave narrative tradition that emerged in the 1960s as the direct literary inheritor of antebellum slave narratives has often been read as a genre especially concerned with feeling.[2] I refer to this type of argument with the term "sentimentality," which I use

[2] In this dissertation, I use the term "neo-slave narrative" to describe, broadly, fiction about the legacy of transatlantic slavery. Coined by Bernard Bell and popularized by Ashraf Rushdy, "neo-slave narrative" remains the most widely used term to describe this literary tradition, even by scholars who depart from Bell's and Rushdy's original, arguably constricted definitions of the genre. I have chosen to use the term "neo-slave narrative" for several reasons. First, the term is widely understood and accepted among scholars, even if the specific elements of the genre to which it refers is complex and much debated. Second, I like that this term directly references the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition, establishing a continuity between history and the present.

broadly to index ideas that deal with the ameliorative value of readerly emotional engagement.

The second type of argument contends that historical fiction brings into view the stories of marginalized peoples. By rendering discernable those histories that settler colonial, white supremacist institutions have obscured, historical fiction can bring alternate perspectives—about particular institutions, groups of people, or concepts—to the forefront. Jerome De Groot describes "the ways in which the challenge to orthodoxy and potential for dissent innate to historical fiction have been used to challenge mainstream and repressive narratives: by postcolonial authors to 'write back'; by lesbian and gay authors to reclaim marginalized identity; by politicians and public figures to posit or explore new ideological positions" (3). Nancy Peterson argues that American women writers of color "turn to unofficial histories" (5) in order to articulate counternarratives that bring marginalized stories into national consciousness, pushing back against the "crisis we might call American amnesia" (4) so that literature becomes "an unofficial, unauthorized site for writing history" (5). Christopher Leise contends that contemporary writers challenge and rewrite totalizing narratives about America's so-called "Puritan" origins. This rewriting is a political act that makes intelligible "the voices of nondominant agents in the *demos*" (Leise 4). He examines how novelists make "distinct attempts to reinscribe the forms of the Puritan myth with more inclusive visions of Americanness" (Leise 20) and lead to "expanded effort to better understand colonial America as a borderlands space wherein plurality supersedes polarity in defining America's origins" (Leise 20). What unites all of these critics is the project of making legible aspects of history that have been occluded and thereby creating a more

inclusive national imaginary. I describe this analytic as that of "visibility," a term that indexes a concern with perspective and knowledge, which are both linked closely in Euro-American epistemology with literal acts of seeing.

Finally, the third type of argument emphasizes how historical fiction might imaginatively fill gaps in the historical record created through the violence of slavery and colonialism. Literature, the argument goes, can animate the lives of people whose names are unknown, and in some cases, create a sense of what might be called reparation. Marni Gauthier argues that contemporary historical fiction seeks "not merely to transmit an unknown or vague history but to transform that past into a memory experienced and possessed" (22)**.** This strand of argument suggests, implicitly or explicitly, that literature has the potential to undo some of the violence of history. In an interview about *Beloved*, Toni Morrison discusses the process of writing the novel as a mode of healing. She explains that "The collective sharing of that information [about slavery] heals the individual—and the collective" (Morrison and Darling 248). The shorthand term I use to describe this set of arguments is "recovery." This term simultaneously indexes a concern with retrieval and redress. As part of my discussion of recovery in historical fiction, I consider the conversations about the so-called "recovery imperative" of Black Atlantic studies—that is, historians' and others' efforts to grapple with the erasures inherent to the transatlantic slave trade.

In this dissertation, I argue that approaches to historical fiction revolving around sentimentality, visibility, and recovery—while incisive and important—have significant limitations. I am not categorically rejecting such approaches but rather engaging a set of questions: What happens when we shift our critical attention from history as a narrative

about the past to history as a material structure? Must we assume that inclusion in the nation-state and its mythologies is an inherent good? What are the limitations of a political imperative centered on feelings like empathy or sympathy? What paradoxes arise in the attempt to use linguistic means to attend to an ongoing, tangible wounding? Most importantly, can historical fiction guide readers not just towards creating better narratives but also towards creating a more materially just world? While no one person can definitively answer these questions, I hope to show that speculative fiction offers a set of metonyms that allows us to grapple with these questions while setting aside some of our typical assumptions about history and literature.

The relationship between history and literature is a central concern of my project. Scholars often argue that history and fiction work similarly because both are narratively based. The historian Hayden White uses literary and narrative theory (particularly formalism/New Criticism) to understand how historians interpret historical phenomena. While he does not deny the existence of historical facts, White forwards the idea that writing history involves a fictive element; as he puts it, "invention also plays a part in the historian's operations" (7). Because he makes an explicit connection between literary and historical modes of thinking, White's work has influenced many literary critics. Perhaps the best known of these critics is Linda Hutcheon, who coins the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe the postmodern approach to historicity. Hutcheon's coinage describes "those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (5). The postmodern, for Hutcheon, is characterized by the way "it raises questions about (or renders problematic) the common-sensical and the 'natural'" (xi).

Historiographic metafiction treats history in a way that challenges common assumptions. Such fiction "subverts, but only through irony, not through rejection. Problematizing replaces exploding" (Hutcheon xii).

White and Hutcheon, by highlighting the artificial (that is, constructed) of historical narratives, draw on a long tradition in Euro-American continental philosophy, a tradition that distinguishes traditional history from what Nietzsche called "genealogy" or "effective history" (*wirkliche Historie*). Michel Foucault poetically describes genealogy as "gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times" (Foucault 76). Unlike traditional history, genealogy does not make large-scale claims about the past, but instead focuses on "discontinuity" (Foucault 88). Effective history seeks discontinuities, gaps, and alternatives to the accepted, traditional narratives of history. It emphasizes the non-objectivity of the historian and the need for uncovering multiple perspectives. It is non-comprehensive, focused not on grand narratives but rather on discontinuities that do not fit into the master narrative, or, indeed, that may not have been considered significant enough to include in the narrative. As Foucault writes, it is "history made for cutting" (88). As valuable as genealogy can be, its limitation is the same as that of most postmodern approaches: an overemphasis on the narrative and discursive aspects of history at the expense of a focus on how history functions materially in the present—and, more importantly, on what can be done about it.

I should note that when I say critics like White, Hutcheon, Foucault, and others understand history as discursive, I do not mean that they deny any materiality to

history.[3] Hutcheon explicitly responds to similar claims when she argues that in postmodern art, "History is not made obsolete; it is, however, being rethought—as a human construct" (16). In other words, historiographic metafiction does not posit the unreality of history but rather contends that "its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality. We cannot know the past except through its texts: its documents, its evidence, even its eye-witness accounts are *texts*. Even the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices, could be seen, in one sense, as social texts" (Hutcheon 16, emphasis original). Few scholars, postmodernists included, would go so far as to say that history has no material basis at all. Nonetheless, as is evident in Hutcheon's emphasis on "textuality," postmodernist approaches hold that history becomes comprehensible primarily—perhaps exclusively—through textual means. Hutcheon's own words reveal a problem with such a stance: when she claims that "we cannot know the past except through its texts," (Hutcheon 16) she elides the blunt, corporeal ways that history makes itself evident for Black and Indigenous people. She elides, too, the worldmaking power of Black and Indigenous historicizing, which is so often rooted in concrete action rather than (or at least in addition to) genealogical exploration.

Any theory about the "materiality" of history will likely be faced with questions about its relation to historical materialism. Broadly, historical materialists argue that history results from, and cannot be understood without reference to, a society's mode of production. Simply put, economic conditions and class struggle are the forces that shape

[3] Other scholars that draw on the postmodernist stance I have described include David Price, Amy Elias, Brian McHale, and Timothy Parrish.

change in human societies. For many Marxist literary critics, historical fiction helps people to understand the past, to see the latent sparks of radical potential inherent in historical phenomena, and to use these to shape a better future through revolutionary action. My contention that history is material bears some resemblance to—but is not equivalent to—Marxist historical materialism. The resemblance comes down to the fact that I see history as an infrastructure for the present, and I believe, as many Marxist critics do, that literature has a role to play in helping its readers navigate that infrastructure.[4] But my project departs from historical materialism in several significant ways. First, I do not take a purely Marxist approach to history because such an approach does not attend to antiblackness or settler colonialism in any significant way. For Marxists, the economic mode of production forms every society's base, and class struggle is the primary driving force of history. Race, gender, sexuality, and Indigeneity are secondary considerations to class status, and some Marxists even see so-called "identity politics" as a distraction from the work of labor organizing. Also, reliance on a purely Marxist framework can replicate problematic dynamics, particularly because Marx's primitive accumulation thesis assumes the vanishing of Indigenous populations. As Shona Jackson succinctly puts it, "The Marxist or materialist approach offers a view

[4] In a Special Issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* on "Infrastructuralism," the editors point out that "infrastructure is supposed to go unnoticed when it works" (Rubenstein et. al 576). I find this observation useful for my purposes even though I am deploying the concept of infrastructure differently than theorists in the nascent field of infrastructuralism or infrastructural studies. These scholars tend to be interested in infrastructure as a "public good or the commons" (Rubenstein et. al 577), and thus in what literary depictions of infrastructure might have to tell us about neoliberalism. I am interested in how societal infrastructures such as antiblackness and settler colonialism are figured through the metonym of literal infrastructure.

of history and social organization that unavoidably locks Indigenous Peoples in the past" (33). In short, Marxist historical materialism alone cannot articulate how history works, and this is especially true in the United States, where Indigenous genocide and the transatlantic slave trade formed the foundation of society in fundamental ways**.** In this dissertation, I center antiblackness and settler colonialism as material frameworks that undergird the U.S. nation-state and thus as major driving forces of American history since 1492. [5]

Another departure I make from historical materialism has to do with precisely how historical fiction works. Frederic Jameson—perhaps the best-known contemporary Marxist literary critic—argues, following Lukács, that in prior centuries, historical fiction provided "the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective project" (18). In contrast to these earlier iterations of the genre, Jameson famously argues that postmodern art—postmodernism being a "periodizing hypothesis" (3) that describes the "cultural dominant" (4) of late-twentieth-century cultural production—is characterized by ahistoricity. Postmodern novels present history as "a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum" (Jameson 18). Writing of E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Jameson argues that the novel "not only resists interpretation, it is organized systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws" (23). The undercutting of

[5] This is not to say that capitalist exploitation and labor struggles are not important; rather, it is to say that capitalism must be understood as intertwined with racism and settler colonialism. As Glen Coulthard puts it, highlighting "colonial dispossession in no way displaces questions of distributive justice or class struggle; rather, it simply situates these questions more firmly alongside and in relation to other sites and relations of power that inform our settler colonial present" (15).

interpretation is a problem for Jameson—indeed, a source of "poignant distress" (25)—because a lack of stable historical referents also means that readers cannot "[confront] our own current political dilemmas in the present" (25). Jameson laments how contemporary historical fiction leaves readers bereft "of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (21). What interests me about Jameson's discussion of contemporary historical fiction is his insistence that to be politically effective, such fiction must inspire affect and not "short-circuit" interpretation.[6] In contrast to Jameson, I argue that the texts under study in my project sometimes refuse affect—and the "possibility of experiencing history" (Jameson 21)—in politically fruitful ways, as I contend in chapter one. In other cases, complicating the process of interpretation—whether by denying access to a character's interiority or by offering conflicting plotlines—is an equally crucial political move, a point I discuss in all three chapters. I do not think that historical fiction must vicariously immerse its readers to be effective; rather, I focus on how the introduction of speculative tropes enables a unique kind of meditation on history that models political strategies for its readers as well as reflection about how each of us is implicated (in different ways) in the legacies of historical violence.

[6] I do not take any particular stance on "postmodernism" or the nature of postmodern art. That is not my topic here, though, for what it is worth, I do not see any of the texts I discuss in this dissertation as "postmodern" in either Hutcheon's or Jameson's definition of the term.

"A Rickety Gallows"

To reiterate, my focus in this project is on the materiality of history: history as an (infra)structure rather than (or, again, at least in addition to) a narrative, text, Derridean trace, or ghostly remainder. Moreover, antiblackness and settler colonialism are constitutive features of U.S. history and the contemporary U.S. nation-state. Speculative fiction that deals with history can concretize that structure for its readers. Colson Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist*, offers an incisive meditation on how speculative fiction aids readers in thinking about the structural organization of society. *The Intuitionist* takes place in an alternate past where the most revered members of society are elevator inspectors. Lila Mae Watson, the first Black female inspector in an unnamed (but very New York-like) big city, is one of the best inspectors, boasting a one-hundred percent accuracy rate. The novel follows Lila Mae as she investigates the mysterious crash of an elevator she had recently cleared as safe. The elevator, the central conceit of the novel, comes to represent the impossibility of racial uplift in a society that claims to be colorblind yet continues to enforce antiblack norms. At the same time, via meditations on a theoretical elevator referred to as "the black box—a perfect elevator that will break through both technological and metaphysical barriers—Whitehead's novel suggests the need for a radical rebuilding of the very infrastructure of society. The "black box" is not simply an elevator that has been tweaked, reformed, or updated, nor can it fit into existing cities. As the novel prophesies: "They will have to destroy this city once we deliver the black box. The current bones will not accommodate the marrow of the device. They will have to raze the city and cart off the

rubble to less popular boroughs and start anew" (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 199). The "black box" is a new kind of vehicle, one that necessitates a new infrastructure.

The Intuitionist also suggests that history itself functions as an infrastructure. On one of her inspections early in the novel, Lila Mae sees a mural in the lobby of the Fanny Briggs building, where the catastrophic elevator accident that the novel centers on will later take place. The mural shows selected scenes from the city's history:

> The lobby of the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building was almost finished when she arrived…The mural, however, was not complete. It started out jauntily enough to Lila Mae's left. Cheerless Indians holding up a deerskin in front of a fire. The original tenants, sure. A galleon negotiating the tricky channels around the island. Two beaming Indians trading beads to a gang of white men—the infamous sale of the Island. Big moment, have to include that, the first of many dubious transactions in the city's history…The mural jumped to the Revolution then, she noticed, skipped over a lot of stuff. The painter seemed to be making it up as he went along, like the men who shaped the city. The Revolution scene was a nice setpiece—the colonists pulling down the statue of King George III…The painting ended there…Judging from the amount of wall space that remained to Lila Mae's right, the mural would have to get even more brief in its chronicle of the city's greatest hits. Either the painter had misjudged how much space he had or the intervening years weren't that compelling to him. Just the broad strokes, please. (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 47-48)

This mural, which illustrates the dominant narrative of American history (the one where freedom and equality feature so prominently), is a commentary on historiography, demonstrating that historical narratives are constructed and biased. At first, it might seem like Whitehead is gesturing towards the kind of historiography that White, Hutcheon, and Foucault describe: one that finds the discontinuities, fills in the gaps, alters the portrayal of the historical actors, or even creates additional wall space that can accommodate a more complex story. However, as the reader quickly learns, it is not the mural itself that is threatening, but rather the scaffolding the painter is using: "the muralist's scaffolding totter[s]above Lila Mae like a rickety gallows" *(*Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 48). A scaffolding is "The temporary framework of platforms and poles constructed to provide accommodation for workmen and their materials during the erection, repairing, or decoration of a building" and also "A supporting framework" ("Scaffolding, n."). The scaffolding is what makes the work of building, repairing, or decorating possible, and Whitehead intriguingly shifts the readers' attention from the mural to the scaffolding. This shift suggests that changing the narrative that the mural tells would be an inadequate solution. The scaffolding that allowed for the mural to be created would still remain. The simplistic and inaccurate narrative of history portrayed in the mural is an effect of a broader system, not its cause. Moreover, the muralist would presumably use this same scaffolding, or a similar one, to make the changes to the mural, which does not bode well since they would be coming at the "revisions" while supported by the same framework that created the original, problematic mural. Maybe they could improve the narrative in the mural, but these changes would likely not be transformative.

I read the mural scene in *The Intuitionist* as an indication that discursively oriented approaches are limited in their ultimate ability to undo a societal scaffolding. Because both the United States as a nation-state and Euro-American historiography are undergirded by slavery and settler colonialism, altering historical narratives does not in itself create a more just world. Furthermore, an overemphasis on the discursive nature of history can elide the more revolutionary potential of historical fiction—the *speculative* work it can do. I draw inspiration here from Fred Moten, who distinguishes between a project of "debt collection" and a project of "complete overturning" or Black radicalism:

> There's a very important, and let's call it a righteous strain, of Afro-American and Afro-diasporic studies that we could place under the rubric of debt collection. And it's basically like, "we did this and we did that, and you continue not to acknowledge it. You continue to mis-name it. You continue to violently misunderstand it. And I'm going to correct the record and collect this debt." And there's a political component to it, too. Maybe that's partly what the logic of reparations is about…I don't disavow that rhetoric or even that project...I also think that that project is not the project of black radicalism, which is not about debt collection or reparation. It's about a *complete overturning*—again, as Fanon would say, and others have said. (Moten, in Harney and Moten 151, emphasis mine)

To return to the mural scene in *The Intuitionist*: it is not just the historical narrative that is the problem. It would not be enough to take down the problematic vision of American

history shown in the mural and to put up a new one. That would be a project of debt collection or reparation.[7] While a mural that, rather than uncritically showing select scenes from white American history, instead showed, for example, the story of Harriet Jacobs or William Apess might be an improvement, the scaffolding, "like a rickety gallows," *(*Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 48) would still be there**.**

Antiblackness and settler colonialism make up the scaffolding of the U.S. nation-state. This scaffolding, like that of Whitehead's muralist, is a "rickety gallows," a site of suffering and death, corporeal as well as social and civil. In this dissertation, I draw attention to the limits of what sentimentality, visibility, and recovery can do in terms of changing these material social conditions. I also articulate an alternate theory of how historical fiction can help create social change. I argue that by using speculative tropes, such fiction can metonymize the materiality of structural violence and model specific strategies for intervening in this violence. When readers pay attention to this alternate current within historical fiction, we gain insights into how to operate in a world materially structured by the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. By reconceiving historical fiction, this dissertation contributes to conversations about what constitutes an ethical relationship to the past.

[7] I should note here that like Moten, I take seriously the need for reparations, including material/monetary ones, for atrocities such as slavery and indigenous dispossession. Reparations, when done well, attend to continuing structural harms, and are not about settling accounts for "past" injury. That said, I see reparations as necessary but not sufficient. That is, they can mitigate the effects of structural injustice, but they do not ultimately tear down the structure. I discuss reparations at more length in chapter 3.

Indexing Speculation

The term "speculative" operates in numerous ways in this project. On one level, "speculative," when paired with "fiction," demarcates an umbrella term for various non-realist literary genres, including fantasy, science fiction, supernatural horror, and magical realism. I do not distinguish strictly between these genres. While some scholars are invested in generic categorizations, such as the distinction between science fiction and fantasy, I draw inspiration from those concerned with what speculative fiction *does* rather than what it *is*. In this vein, Aimee Bahng writes that she is "less interested in literary taxonomies than in the various modalities of writing and reading that can alter relations between writer and reader, shift ways of thinking, and produce different kinds of subjects" (13). She sees potential in speculative fiction's "promiscuity and disregard for the proper" (Bahng 16). Similarly, Shelley Streeby embraces the term speculative fiction (rather than "science fiction") "because it is less defined by boundary-making around the word 'science,' stretching to encompass related modes such as fantasy and horror, forms of knowledge in excess of white Western science, and more work authored by women and people of color" (20). In this dissertation, I conceptualize "speculative fiction" as a broad, hybrid, and deliberately unwieldy category—promiscuous, to use Bahng's language. I use the terms "speculative tropes" and "speculative elements" to describe non-mimetic features of literary texts: features that do not exist in our current world. These are often conventions of various non-realist genres: highly advanced technologies, superheroes, vampires, ghosts, utopic or dystopic imaginings of the future, time travel (through technological, magical, or unexplained

means), counterfactual history, and more. I am interested in how these elements work and what they do rather than their specific genre.

On another level, "speculative" indexes what does not (yet) exist and thus is a term deeply connected to worldmaking. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, among the definitions of "to speculate" is "To engage in thought or reflection, esp. of a conjectural or theoretical nature, on or upon a subject" ("Speculate, v."). Speculative fiction is conjectural and imaginative in apparent ways: envisioning possible futures, pushing beyond the bounds of realism, or creating alternative societies or different versions of our known human history. But I want to emphasize that speculative fiction is about more than non-realist tropes. Thinking capaciously, we might label as "speculative" any sort of writing that imagines how life and society might be different. This dissertation examines the relationship between non-realist tropes and this more capacious understanding of speculation as conjectural, imaginative thinking. Writers of speculative fiction are known for creating new worlds, and so are their characters.

Speculative fiction is a fraught space when it comes to racism and other forms of social subjugation. Joanna Russ and Samuel Delany discuss science fiction's radical potential in a 1984 conversation published in *Callaloo*. Delany contends that because science fiction, generically, "grows up outside this established set of literary ideas"("A Dialogue" 29), it makes sense for people who are "on the margins" of the dominant society, such as women and Black people, to appropriate its tropes. Russ adds that "Science fiction is a natural, in a way, for any kind of radical thought. Because it is about things that have not happened and do not happen … It's very fruitful if you want to present the concerns of any marginal group, because you are doing it in a world

where things are different" ("A Dialogue" 29). On the other hand, scholars have extensively studied the colonial underpinnings of science fiction.[8] Others have analyzed how the fantasy genre draws on romanticized, whitewashed versions of medieval history and racial pseudoscience, resulting in a propensity to reify white supremacist understandings of the world.[9] For this reason, Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown use the term "visionary fiction … to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power" (10). Imarisha and brown recognize both the problematic underpinnings of mainstream science fiction and the potential of speculative fiction to be used in the service of justice.

Paradoxically, though speculative fiction is associated with the hypothetical, contemplative, and imaginative—that which does not exist—it is also, as Russ puts it, "materialistic" ("A Dialogue" 34). She explains that "Science fiction uses language literally" ("A Dialogue" 25), citing Delany's contention that science fiction uses metonymy, not metaphor.[10] The literalism of speculative fiction enables readers to think in more concrete terms. It is this materialism at the heart of numerous fantastic genres (though Russ speaks specifically about science fiction) that intersects with radical

[8] See, for instance, Rieder and Kerslake on the origins of science fiction.
[9] See, for instance, H. Young and Sturtevant on race in the fantasy genre.
[10] Russ continues with an example from Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall." Readers of "Nightfall" first thinking that the story centers on the metaphor "Light is knowledge." But "what finally happens is that what you thought was a metaphor isn't one. It is literal reality. What we know about the universe comes to us through light—a faraway universe is nothing but light…So what you have (in the story) is not a metaphor but a literal reality and the whole experience becomes cleansed and refreshed and beautiful" ("A Dialogue" 35).

political thought *and* action. Shelley Streeby argues that speculative fiction describes not only fiction with non-realist elements but also the "visionary work [activists] are doing in imagining the future of climate change" (26). For example, the first chapter of Streeby's book *Imagining the Future of Climate Change* examines the #NoDAPL movement and other worldwide Indigenous struggles over resource extraction alongside Anishinaabe scholar Grace Dillon's theorizing and literary works of Indigenous futurism. Streeby suggests that "Indigenous science, fiction, and futurisms have converged to shape struggles over the DAPL as well as other struggles over water, oil, and resource extractions" (Streeby 36). Similarly, Michelle Commander links speculative literature with the material ways Black people resist antiblackness. Commander's argument crystallizes in her analysis of "Bree" Newsome and Emmett Rufus Eddy, two Black Americans who climbed flagpoles to remove Confederate flags from public buildings. Through their "ascensions into thin air," (Commander 213) Newsome and Eddy materialized the Black fantastic.

Activists like Newsome and Eddy also point us towards the final dimension of speculative thought and practice that I want to highlight: the propensity for speculation to involve uncertainly and danger. Newsome and Eddy each put their bodies at risk when they removed those Confederate flags—they took on not just the risks of toppling from the flagpoles but also the risks of retaliation from a white populace all too willing to dispose of Black people. All activism involves risk, though the level of risk varies depending on the activity and the structural position of the person enacting it. Indeed, worldmaking itself is an inherently risky activity. Aimee Bahng distinguishes between the risk management that financial speculation involves and the opening to risky,

unpredictable futures that speculative fiction enacts, understanding speculative fiction as a "counterpoetics to the predatory speculations of global capitalism" (8).

My use of "speculative fiction" in this dissertation encompasses all these dimensions. I argue that speculative fiction writers deploy tropes drawn from fantasy, science fiction, and other genres as metonyms, making large-scale social structures and long-standing historical legacies more concrete and tangible. When such histories are rendered concrete, it becomes easier to envision strategies for intervening in their legacies. In other words, my project revolves around a counterintuitive insight about speculative fiction: though it appears concerned with the fantastical, imaginative, or contemplative realms, it actually offers concrete tools for dealing with tangible injustices that persist in our current moment. Building on the work of the scholars discussed above, I argue that the term "speculative" characterizes a range of texts, both literary and otherwise, that enact a mode of thinking, acting, and being. The speculative mode, at least at its best, embraces wonder, uncertainty, contingency, imagination, invention, and an impulse toward collective creation. Speculation teaches us to imagine that the world could be more just—and suggests that we each have a role to play in creating such a world.

Thinking Alongside: Black and Indigenous Worldmaking

Both the Black radical tradition and Indigenous decolonial theory can be considered "speculative" because they think beyond our current world's constricting structures. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls on Indigenous people "to create networks of reciprocal resurgent movements with other humans and non-humans

radically imagining their ways out of domination, who are not afraid to let those imaginings destroy the pillars of settler colonialism" (10). Her insistence that Indigenous refusals of colonialism are ways to "generate something different" (L.B. Simpson 17) capture the speculative thrust of Indigenous critical theory. Likewise, Robin D.G. Kelley emphasizes the role of dreaming—or what he calls, drawing on Aimé Césaire, "poetic knowledge"—in the Black radical tradition. Drawing together strands from Black feminism, Black Marxism, reparations movements, third world liberation movements, and more, Kelley insists that "the map to a new world is in the imagination" (*Freedom Dreams* 3).

Though Black and Indigenous struggles in the U.S. have been closely intertwined for centuries, it is mainly in the last few decades that academics have attended to the connections between Black and Indigenous studies in sustained ways. The first wave of scholarship laid the groundwork for thinking about Black-Indigenous relations in the Americas and beyond. Jack Forbes's book, *Africans and Native Americans,* traces the relations between Black and Native people in Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean—including before Columbus's landing in the "New World"—with particular focus on the rise of racial classification systems and how these systems overdetermine the ways Black-Native relations are studied (or not studied). Writing in the early 1990s, Forbes notes that "relations between Native Americans and Africans have been sadly neglected," this subject having been elided to due to a "focus upon European activity and European colonial relations with 'peripheral' subject peoples" (1). His main goal is "to establish a sound empirical and conceptual basis for

further study in this area, and more importantly, to demonstrate beyond any doubt that old assumptions must be set aside" (5).

The early 2000s saw the publication of several edited collections on the subject. Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Holland's *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds* asks "not only how Native place and presence have affected black life, but also how black peoples and cultures have influenced indigenous America, for better and for worse" (3). The essays in the collection examine both the "expressions of alliance" and the "adversarial relations" (10) between Black and Native Americans. Angela Cotton and Christa Acampora's *Cultural Sites of Critical Insight*, meanwhile, focuses on the "aesthetic similarities and intersections between both cultures" (4), articulating what the editors call a "crossblood literary aesthetics" (5). They draw on Holland's coinage of "crossblood identity," a concept that rejects biologized racial categories and "constantly cross the borders of ideological containment" (Holland, quoted in Cotton and Acampora 11).

In the early 2010s, scholarship shifted from analyzing discrete cultural objects to theorizing Black and Indigenous relations on a larger philosophical and geopolitical scale, this pivot perhaps having been precipitated by what Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith describe as the "turn towards theory" (1) in Native studies. Jodi Byrd's *The Transit of Empire* shows how colonization and racialization have historically been collapsed into one another, with Indians becoming coded as racialized and other racialized populations becoming coded as "Indian." The figure of the "Indian" functions as a "transit" that allows U.S. empire to replicate itself worldwide under the guise of multicultural democracy. Byrd challenges, too, the "distortive" (*Transit* 30) ways that

Indianness-as-transit has been used in contemporary continental philosophy. Turning to Indigenous critical theory, Byrd rethinks the relationship between colonialism and racialization, arguing for the need "to understand colonial discourses not only as vertical impositions between colonizer and colonized but also as horizontal interrelations between different colonized people within the same geopolitical space" (*Transit* 63). To express these complex power dynamics, Byrd uses the term "arrivant" to describe "those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe" (Byrd, *Transit* xix). Shona Jackson's *Creole Indigene*ity is similar to *The Transit of Empire* in its ambitious interdisciplinary scope and careful attention to the fine-grained textures of colonial power. Jackson's research takes up Indigeneity and Blackness in Guyana. Unlike Byrd, Jackson insists that "settler" is an appropriate term for the descendants of enslaved and indentured people in the Caribbean because the term calls attention to how these populations craft "creole Indigeneity," or a sense of "material and metaphysical belonging" (2) that necessarily displaces Guyana's actual Indigenous people.[11] Neither Byrd nor Jackson explicitly expresses a goal of facilitating coalition or solidarity among Black and Indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, Byrd and Jackson each offer distinct vocabularies and methods for thinking through Black and Indigenous relations in North America.

[11] Though Jackson's claims are specific to the Caribbean, *Creole Indigeneity* is nonetheless important for projects on the United States because of the influence of Caribbean intellectuals such as Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, and others on contemporary Black studies.

In recent years, scholars such as Iyko Day, Justin Leroy, Frank Wilderson**,** Jared Sexton, Kyle T. Mays, Chad Infante, Mark Rifkin, Tiffany Lethabo King, and others have weighed in on debates about how antiblackness and settler colonialism interact. It is important to note, as perhaps has been implied in my discussion thus far, that the encounter between Black and Indigenous studies has been as fraught as it has been productive. When key recent theories from Black studies and Indigenous studies come into contact, they can sometimes seem incommensurable. To demonstrate the challenges inherent in bridging Black and Indigenous studies, I will focus in some detail on two monographs, both published in 2019, that deal with Black and Indigenous relationalities: Mark Rifkin's *Fictions of Land and Flesh* and Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals*. Proceeding in quite different ways, both books make significant contributions.

Rifkin argues that Black and Indigenous Studies are "oriented" towards different analytics—they each "[follow] their own lines of development and contestation that are not equivalent to each other" (5). He critiques "system modeling" approaches that "suggest that there is an underlying or overriding structure that has a particular character that ultimately shapes or overdetermines the terms, dynamics, and possibilities for change for what is understood as the system as a whole (20). Critical of attempts to synthesize different structures, Rifkin notes that

> While attending to 'slavery and settler colonialism' can enable exploration of how they influence and even co-constitute each other, triangulating them as part of a single structure (call it 'the modern social order' or 'the settler colonial racial state') does not necessarily address

> the dynamics by which Black and Indigenous movements encounter and engage each other." (30)

In other words, synthesizing slavery and colonialism occludes the complicated dynamics of Black-Indigenous relationality. Moreover, dialectical or synthesizing modes of analysis must inevitably impose "a resolution of difference" through "an overriding structural 'logic'" (30). In short, Rifkin argues against systematizing structural narratives that posit either antiblackness or settler colonialism as paradigmatic or primary, and he also opposes synthesizing the two structures into a whole. In place of exceptionalism or synthesis, Rifkin argues for starting from the premise of "irreducible difference" (30) as a "basis on which sustained relation becomes possible" (31). He posits that thinking between the two fields requires a "speculative leap" (7) that creates a subjunctive kind of solidarity" (221).

Rifkin incisively demonstrates the dangers of facile moves toward solidarity, no matter how well-intended, but his approach has limitations. First, he does not offer much of a picture of what actual relation might look like; he simply argues that such a relation is speculative. Rifkin's deployment of "speculation," in other words, appears to invite abstraction rather than specificity. Moreover, while his critique of structural modeling cautions scholars against making reductive claims, I would argue that a complete resistance to such modeling can cause us to overlook significant ways that history shapes contemporary societal institutions. On this note, Rifkin asks: "Must the process of relation proceed from the premise of the inherent imbrication of blackness and indigeneity?" (34). My answer to Rifkin's question is yes: the relation between Blackness and Indigeneity must proceed from the knowledge of imbrication because the

imbrication is grounded in material historical processes. My use of speculative fiction in this dissertation, therefore, contrasts quite dramatically with Rifkin's. Whereas for Rifkin, the speculative is a "mode of hesitation" (10) and of "acknowledging a plurality of legitimate, nonidentical truth claims," (8), for me, speculation (in the form of speculative fiction) concretizes some of the specific ways that Black and Indigenous histories intersect and highlights an array of strategies of resistance that both groups of people are using to create sustaining worlds for themselves.

Whereas Rifkin's book focuses on impasse, King's book emphasizes bridging Black and Indigenous lives and experiences. She introduces "the shoals" as a methodological, theoretical, and geological formation that reveals how Black and Indigenous studies and peoples contact one another. King conceptualizes her book as "an analytical and geographical site where Black studies attempts to engage Native studies on ethical terms that unfold in new places" (10). A key focus for King is the ways that anti-Blackness and settler colonialism are co-constituted. For instance, she highlights "Columbus's role in the slave trade and how conquest invented and instantiated Blackness as a form of abjection in the modern world" (39). At the same time, following Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, she cites 1441, the date that the Portuguese landed in west Africa, as a shoal that disrupts "normative theorizations of the geography and temporality of New World conquest" (T.L. King 19). King especially attends to the question of what it means to have an ethical encounter between Blackness and Indigeneity that "orbits around a notion of mutual care" (26). She reads a wide range of texts—from novels and films to monuments, maps, and sculptures—in what she describes as "speculative" ways, foregrounding interpretations that have been

obscured by the "White conquistador imagination" (T.L. King 124).[12] For instance, she contends that Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust*, through its images of indigo-stained hands, highlights the land-body connection in ways that resonate with both African American "blues epistemology" (Clyde Woods, quoted in T.L. King 130) and Indigenous ecological knowledge premised on the fact that "all bodies are always already embedded in and run conterminously with nonhuman life" (114). Dash's film functions as a kind of "speculative work depicting what is possible" (T.L. King 124). For King, then, "speculation" describes the mode of reading that is sometimes necessary to espy how "Black and indigenous people make a future, or worlds, for one another" (143).

As fruitful and powerful as it is, King's approach sometimes results in its own kind of flattening. In her analysis of *Daughters of the Dust* (the film as well as a novelized sequel bearing the same title), King argues that the Black-Native erotic relationships in the story articulate a "Black and Indigenous relationality that can exceed the notion of coalition" (143). Drawing on Jared Sexton and Billy Belcourt, King critiques the notion of sovereignty, a major touchstone of Indigenous studies, and seeks "a new grammar" that "might emerge at the erotic shoals of Black and Native porous futures" (151). In her effort to create such a grammar, King seems to conflate Euro-American notions of sovereignty (which, admittedly, some Indigenous people do embrace and transpose into Indigenous contexts) with notions of what Glen Coulthard

[12]King also describes her reading practice as a kind of "reparative reading" in the vein of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (53) and a form of "critical fabulation" as articulated by Saidiya Hartman (29).

calls “grounded normativity,” which are “Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time” (Coulthard 13). Grounded normativity, while it does not require sovereignty in the form of a nation-state, does require connections to land and to other Indigenous people. King, however, celebrates the fact that Dash’s fictional Cherokee, St. Julien Lastchild, “does not articulate a need for the recovery of land or a Cherokee people through a nation” (161) and instead, through his lover Iona Peazant, “becomes part of the Black community of the walking dead” (161). King’s argument, though it is more nuanced than my brief summary here suggests, does not seem to leave room for the possibility of Indigenous claims to land and peoplehood; this is what I mean when I say that King’s approach results in a flattening, or a foreclosure of certain possibilities.

Both Rifkin and King make key interventions, but this dissertation offers an alternative way of engaging Black and Indigenous literatures. I approach settler colonialism and antiblackness as interlocking systems that are fundamental parts of the infrastructure of U.S. history and, therefore, society. While it is important not to collapse essential distinctions, I believe it is possible to create a structural narrative while leaving space for difference and hesitation. Systematic thinking does not necessitate synthesis, nor does it necessitate prioritizing one structure over another. Indeed, the authors I examine in this dissertation suggest that the particular history of Black and Indigenous peoples in North America necessitates attention *both* to difference and irresolution *and* to intimacy and alignment. These texts also insist on the need for structural models that account for oppression because letting go of such models

makes it too easy to analyze social occurrences in a vacuum and to overlook connections between particular events or phenomena. To think historically is to think structurally.

When thinking structurally, marking disjuncture is as vital as noting connection. A too-sharp focus on Black-Indigenous intimacies, or on how settler colonialism and slavery align, can obscure important distinctions. This dissertation reads Black and Indigenous writers *alongside* one another, which is subtly different from reading them *with* or *against* one another. For this reason, I have chosen to center each chapter on a single text by either a Black or Indigenous writer, and I have selected texts that do not, on the surface level, engage with issues of Black-Indigenous relation, solidarity, or coalition. My approach departs from Rifkin in that he often contrasts how Black and Indigenous writers grapple with a particular analytic (carcerality, marronage, land-based peoplehood, and so on) as well as from King in that she often analyzes Black cultural production (broadly conceived) with an eye towards how Black-Indigenous relations surface in various ways.

In my project, I do not seek to synthesize the varying accounts of violence or resistance that each novel offers, but I am attentive to points of contact between these accounts. For instance, in chapter two, I consider how *Riding the Trail of Tears* alludes to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; these allusions signal a potential note of consonance about the role of fugitivity in both Black and Indigenous resistance to structural violence. In the same vein, across this project, I consider the overlapping strategies Black and Indigenous peoples use to create new worlds without assuming an inherent or natural solidarity between these groups. Similar strategies, overlapping values, or

shared glimmers of political imagination can all be fruitful starting points in negotiating difficult questions of solidarity. My intention—especially because I am a white settler scholar—is not to offer a totalizing or prescriptive account of Black-Indigenous relations but rather to map some of the entry points into such relation that I notice in literary texts. If speculative fiction offers a toolbox for engaging history, as I argue here, then perhaps some of the instruments in that box are portable and shareable.

Overview of Chapters

Each chapter of this dissertation highlights the worldmaking quality of Black and Indigenous political imaginaries. Chapter one, on Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, explores the tension between affect-laden approaches to history and the radical political goals of neo-slave narratives. Rooted partially in the U.S. sentimental tradition, neo-slave narratives often employ lyrical language, reveal their characters' inner emotional experiences, and evoke empathy to awaken the reader's ethical impulses. After highlighting the sentimental conventions in a number of classic neo-slave narratives, I analyze The *Underground Railroad* as a neo-slave narrative that rejects rather than repurposes sentimentality. The novel's central conceit, a literal subterranean rail network, offers an alternative to *Beloved*'s ghost as a conceptual metaphor for the legacy of slavery. The railroad illustrates how antiblackness, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism interlock to enable the U.S. nation-state and liberal citizenship. Sentimental conventions facilitate a process of domestication and capture, which allows the nation-state to function smoothly rather than disrupting it. Differing from most neo-slave narratives, *The Underground Railroad* foregrounds the prosaic

over the lyrical, veils the interiority of its characters, and unsettles the reader's ability to empathize with the enslaved. Through its departure from sentimental conventions, the novel models how to engage the history of slavery as an infrastructure: it depicts Black subjects' straying movement from the "tracks" of liberal citizenship and generates a model of affiliation premised on acts of tangible care, like the sharing of food, rather than affective identification.

In chapter two, I turn to Blake M. Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* to explore the complexities of rendering history visible—both viewable and knowable—in the context of settler colonial capitalism. Revolving around a virtual reality (V.R.) ride that allows tourists to experience the Cherokee Trail of Tears, the novel articulates how historicizing invested in visibility risks turning Native people and stories into objects that can be incorporated into—or consumed by—settler society. In dialogue with scholars such as Audra Simpson, Glen Coulthard, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, I argue that rather than seeking colonial recognition by making their history visible, characters in *Riding the Trail of Tears* mobilize invisibility to place a literal glitch in the program of settler colonialism. Surreptitious direct action and covert movement emerge as strategies that both counter colonial violence and sustain Native communities. Moreover, Hausman's novel formally prevents the reader from fully consuming it. The novel invites the reader to turn away from the desire for unbridled consumption through interpretive mastery. It teaches readers to pay attention to limits—which are based on a person's particular position in society and relations with others—when seeking knowledge.

Chapter three takes up recovery, a central analytic not only of historical fiction but also of Black studies writ large. Since the 1960s, both the historiography of slavery and its literary representations have been characterized by attempts to reclaim Black subjectivity and humanity. Recently, critics like Stephen Best have criticized this "recovery imperative," arguing instead for a relation to slavery based on non-continuity. After examining both of these frameworks' promises and limits, my chapter uses Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* and Butler's unpublished papers to elaborate an alternative to the recovery imperative that nonetheless centers tangible links between slavery and the political present. *Fledgling* follows a vampire, Shori, who has been genetically engineered by her family to have Black skin, allowing her to withstand sunlight. When her family is murdered in a racist attack, she sustains a head injury resulting in permanent amnesia. As Shori flees continued persecution, *Fledgling* models strategies for living within an antiblack infrastructure when attempts at recovery fail. Shori deploys the unique qualities linked to her Blackness to elude her pursuers; she builds a community through mutually beneficial acts of care; and she appeals to the law to gain provisional protection against further harm, though not redress.

In the coda, Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird is Gone: A ~~Monograph~~ Manifesto* occasions a brief reflection on the concept of framing. *The Bird is Gone* is an alternate history pivoting on the motif of the "frame," which recurs in different forms throughout the novel: a character named Chassis, the chassis of a car, a national border, rounds in bowling (which are called frames), the walls of a bowling alley called Fool's Hip, and frame narratives. I argue that Jones's novel highlights the problems of building a new structure using the frames of an old one. In the novel, Native Americans use a legal

loophole to reclaim the Dakotas and turn it into a pan-Indian nation. While on the surface, this appears to constitute material decolonization, the "Indian Territories" adopt many Euro-American institutional and racial structures, creating a new kind of dystopia. The Indian Territories were built on the existing frames of the U.S. nation-state. The dysfunction of the Indian Territories represents what happens when a new supposedly liberatory structure is built using the scaffolding— "the rickety gallows," to recall *The Intuitionist*—of an existing, oppressive structure. Significantly, the novel's counterfactual rewriting of U.S. history does not end up being a revolutionary move, as the reader might have expected. The Native retaking of the Dakotas becomes another way that settler colonialism reasserts itself.

That said, *The Bird Is Gone* is ultimately an optimistic novel, with an ending that offers a note of hope. Fool's Hip, the bowling alley where most of the novel takes place—and which serves as a microcosm for the novel's meditations on the nation-state—slowly collapses. Rather than treating this collapse as a tragedy, the narrator of this scene describes Fool's Hip as "an egg, cracking open" (Jones, *The Bird Is Gone* 152). I argue that the collapse becomes not a scene of destruction but a scene of generativity. Jones does not imply that a truly decolonized future for Native people in North America is impossible—instead, he implies that such a future cannot be built using colonial frames. Like the speculative metonyms in the work of Whitehead, Hausman, and Butler, Fool's Hip makes tangible the ways that history shapes the present without foreclosing the possibility that the future can be different.

CHAPTER 1

Sentimentality: Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Affect-laden approaches to history are often touted as uniquely able to bring the past to life and to awaken people's ethical impulses. For this reason, historical fiction generally and the neo-slave narrative particularly have long-standing links with Harriet Beecher Stowe's injunction to "feel right" (495).[13] But despite the political gains sentimental fiction has spurred, such writing also has serious pitfalls. At worst, it partakes of what Lauren Berlant calls the "sentimental bargain," ("Poor Eliza" 684) which replaces tangible action with feeling, offering "putatively suprapolitical affects or affect-saturated institutions (like the nation and the family)" as "universalist solutions to structural racial, sexual, or intercultural antagonism" (638). While overtly sentimental texts have been subject to extensive critique, Berlant identifies a second set of texts she labels "postsentimental."[14] Postsentimental fictions refuse some of the tendencies of sentimentality, such as the linear trajectory from suffering to transcendence, and therefore appear less politically problematic; however, they do not disrupt the basic formula "that proper reading will lead to better feeling and therefore to a better self"

[13] Ezra Tawil argues that the frontier romance (a type of historical novel) is linked to sentimental abolitionist literature, in that both kinds of fiction "concerned themselves with the sentimental properties attached to race" (3). Rebecca Wanzo points out that the neo-slave narrative "has evolved from the tradition of the slave narrative, which drew from sentimentality as well as other literary genres" (80).

[14] For instance, see Berlant's *The Female Complaint,* Noble, and Pelletier. Wanzo investigates the problems with "sentimental political storytelling" but also explores its benefits.

(Berlant, "Poor Eliza" 656). This chapter follows the affective threads running through many neo-slave narratives, which revise but do not reject sentimental conventions, and registers a competing politico-aesthetic approach evident in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Underscoring how sentimentality enables the U.S. nation-state and liberal citizenship, Whitehead's novel exemplifies an alternate mode of engaging the history of slavery that is more aligned with the radical political goals of the neo-slave narrative tradition.

The Underground Railroad follows Cora, a young enslaved woman, as she rides from state to state on a subterranean rail network, complete with stations, boxcars, and conductors. Born on the Randall plantation and orphaned when her mother escapes, Cora is an outcast even among the other enslaved people. When her friend Caesar proposes escape, Cora, though initially reluctant, decides the risk is worth it. But she quickly finds that each stop on the railroad offers not freedom but a different kind of subjection—from medical experimentation and lynching to the more subtle violence of "progressive" racism—as she flees from a slavecatcher, Arnold Ridgeway, who is hellbent on returning her to Randall at any cost. The novel interweaves its speculative storytelling with nods to the U.S. sentimental tradition in its widely varied forms. An enslaved man is coerced into reciting the Declaration of Independence. Cora reads James Fenimore Cooper's frontier romance *The Last of the Mohicans* while hiding, Harriet Jacobs-like, in an attic. A kindly-seeming white woman, Mrs. Garner, breaks a promise to release her human property, alluding to the Garners of *Beloved*. If sentimentality is "a set of cultural practices designed to evoke a certain form of

emotional response, usually empathy, in the reader or viewer" (Samuels 5), then Whitehead's novel puts these cultural practices both into play and under pressure.

In significant ways, Whitehead departs stylistically from the (post)sentimental conventions of neo-slave narratives: the novel features a detached third-person voice, fantastic elements that distance the reader from the antebellum setting, and scenes of violence portrayed with little overt emotion. Stephanie Li argues that these features render the novel problematic as a neo-slave narrative. Li contends that the literalized railroad "struggles to signify" (3), existing merely to offer Whitehead an "artful way out of the horrors of contemporary narratives of slavery" (9); that the novel's conclusion panders to a readership desiring happy endings (20); and that Whitehead irresponsibly fails to explore the interiority of his enslaved characters. While Li makes important points about the potential dangers of Whitehead's approach, this chapter charts how the elements she finds problematic can unsettle the affect-based modes of engaging history that neo-slave narratives (and, indeed, other works of historical fiction) frequently deploy.[15]

Such fictions incite the reader to engage in what I call *sentimental historicizing*: interpreting and relating to the past through affective, vicarious experience. This mode of historicizing rests on the assumption that feeling the weight of history and entering shared states of feeling with historical actors necessarily inspires ethical action in the

[15] Other critics have also contextualized Whitehead's novel within the neo-slave narrative tradition. Knight analyzes *Underground* as a subversion of the Afro-futurist neo-slave narrative; Feith reads the novel as what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction"; Dubey, in "Museumizing Slavery," understands it as part of a twenty-first-century turn in the neo-slave narrative tradition that responds to contemporary efforts to commemorate slavery.

service of social justice.[16] Even in its more resistant "postsentimental" iterations, I argue that this mode of historicizing has a domesticating function. It forces unruly subjects to fit into the infrastructure of the nation-state—keeping them "on track," to invoke *Underground*'s central metaphor. Relatedly, sentimentality encourages affiliation premised on capturing the interior experiences of Black subjects, who must become knowable and sympathetic to readers in order to gain contingent access to liberal citizenship. Thus, sentimental historicizing results, often inadvertently, in preserving rather than disrupting a violent national infrastructure. In contrast to Li's claim that Whitehead's literal tracks "flaunts any claims to a realistic past" (1), I contend that the railroad is a potent symbol of how the U.S. nation-state is materially built upon and structured by antiblackness, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism. Far from being an empty or confusing signifier, the railroad offers readers a concrete figuration of how the nation-states' infrastructures function in part through the workings of sentiment.

In the three following sections, I consider several qualities characterizing the sentimental treatment of history in novels of slavery: lyrical language, an emphasis on manifesting the interiority of enslaved subjects, and the evocation of the reader's sympathy or empathy. I demonstrate the centrality of these qualities to neo-slave narratives such as *Beloved*, Alex Haley's *Roots,* Octavia Butler's *Kindred,* Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes,* and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*. Across these three sections, I show how *Underground* contrasts with

[16] Best questions the "largely affective conception of history" (71) evident in both contemporary scholarship and fiction dealing with the historiography of slavery. Though I depart from Best in numerous ways, I concur with his critique of centering a critical and political method on feeling.

these other neo-slave narratives. Whitehead deploys prosaic language, foregrounds the opacity of its characters, and unsettles the reader's sense of identification. In the final section of the chapter, I argue that the *Underground* models ways of creating affiliation that does not rely on sentimentality.

Though uncommon, the unsentimental treatment of slavery is not unique to Whitehead's fiction. To varying degrees, other novels embrace a comparable approach. Satiric works like Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* and Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* push back against sentimentality through acerbic humor. Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* portrays brutality with startling matter-of-factness, using a form and language reminiscent of textbooks. Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* features an enslaved protagonist referred to only as the Girl until she becomes a vampire and takes the name of the woman who transformed her, Gilda. Just as her birth name remains hidden from the reader, the Girl/Gilda's interior experiences are often veiled by omniscient third-person narration and focalization that shifts away from the protagonist at crucial moments of subjection, such as during her attempted rape. Samuel Delany's *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand*—a science fiction novel that transposes the conventions of neo-slave narratives to an unexpected interstellar context—appears unconcerned with the interiority of its enslaved character, Rat Korga. Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, Morrison's *A Mercy* demonstrates a shift away from some of the sentimental conventions evident in *Beloved*. *A Mercy* is highly lyrical, especially in the chapters that Florens, the protagonist, narrates. However, *A Mercy*'s lyricism is

different from that of *Beloved*; it conceals Florens's interiority and disorients the reader rather than encouraging identification.[17]

Taken together, such novels index an alternative mode of historicizing slavery and its legacies that has significant political consequences. As might be evident from the publication dates of the various novels referenced throughout this chapter, I do not consider the unsentimental approach to have emerged in twenty-first-century writing; rather, it is a competing (albeit less dominant) impulse. I interpret *The Underground Railroad* as a paradigmatic case study of this alternative approach. Through breaks with generic conventions, Whitehead crafts a novel of slavery that turns away from the false promises of nation-state citizenship and towards fugitive modes of affiliation—those unmediated by shared feeling and not premised on the assumption of transparent, capturable interiority.

Prosaic Antiblackness

Lyricism is a common stylistic quality of many neo-slave narratives. I use the term "lyricism" to describe any writing that draws on the characteristics of lyric poetry. Jonathan Culler argues that "the most salient features of many lyrics" are those that "are not to be found in ordinary speech acts—from rhythm and sound patterning to intertextual relations" (2). Lyric poems typically use "triangulated address," or address to the reader via another addressee, often an object or absent person. These poems "create effects of voicing, of aurality" (Culler 35), emphasizing the importance of

[17] For analyses that distinguish *A Mercy* from *Beloved* in other ways, see Best and Crawford.

sound. Rather than relaying a plot, lyrics "attempt to create the impression of something happening now, in the present time of discourse" (Culler 37). Because of their emphasis on present experience, they partake of a "ritualistic" dimension that "recalls songs" (Culler 37). Finally, they have a "hyperbolic character" that "[gives] a spiritual dimension to matter" by "investing mundane objects or occurrence with meaning" (Culler 38).

Neo-slave narratives frequently draw on the features of lyric poetry or music in order to create an affective impression of the past for the reader and to express what ordinary language cannot. As Saadi M. Simawe puts it, "In many [works of twentieth-century African American fiction], one easily notices that writers use their language as their own musical instruments, pushing the conventional semantic and syntactic patterns to express the unsay able of the emotional and spiritual experiences" (Simawe xxiii). Song lyrics and biblical verses play a central role in *Beloved's* narrative mode, and the novel itself has musical qualities that prompt "participatory, open-ended, and intertextual" (J. Wolfe 277) reading and thus engagement of with the history of slavery. Hill's *The Book of Negroes* features chapter titles that evoke song lyrics, such as "We glide over the unburied," (58) or orally transmitted proverbs, like "Words swim farther than a man can walk" (126). In Williams's *Dessa Rose,* a formerly enslaved woman uses the "sound, rhythm, and movement of music" (Fox-Good 6) to craft "a means of expression that evades writing but not signification" (5), signifyin(g) on two specific historical incidents and on "the conventional text of history" (12). These texts incorporate elements of music and poetry to express what official history elides and to encourage the reader's affective engagement with history.

The language of *Underground* is strikingly different from these other texts. Reviewers have noted the "matter-of-fact" (Kakutani) or even "deadpan" (Schwartz) tone of the novel, a tone surprising in a novel depicting brutal torture. Whitehead's manner of describing antiblack violence is striking in its straightforwardness. A particularly gruesome incident takes place on Randall before Cora runs away. An enslaved man named Big Anthony attempts to escape, but the local constables quickly recapture him. His punishment is ostentatious in its horror: over the course of three days, he is secured in a set of elaborately decorated stocks, whipped in front of an audience of Terrance Randall's excited dinner guests, mutilated, and burned alive. The novel describes this punishment in matter-of-fact language that leaves little to the imagination. Many other neo-slave narratives, in contrast, highlight how trauma resists expression and produces, as Morrison famously writes, "undecipherable language" (*Beloved* 234) that gestures towards "unspeakable thoughts, unspoken" (*Beloved* 235). The indirection and aurality of the lyric convey a sense of the traumatic violence that cannot be expressed or can only be expressed obliquely. For instance, *Zong!* uses fragmented language as well as vocalizations, noise, silence, and other aural elements—elements so essential that Phillip frequently performs the poems—to recall a history that resists narration.[18] But there is no indirection in Whitehead's staging of Big Anthony's torture, and little resistance to narration; the novel straightforwardly informs the reader, for instance, that "[the] witnesses were spared [Anthony's] screams, as his manhood

[18] *Zong*! is not comprised of lyric poems. Nonetheless, Philip uses sound (and lack thereof) in ways evocative of lyric poetry's aurality.

had been cut off on the first day, stuffed in his mouth, and sewn in" (Whitehead, *Underground* 47).

What might be gained from such an unlyrical depiction of a Black man's torture? My point here is not to excoriate the poetic modes of (non)narration found in novels like *Beloved* or *Zong*!, nor is it my intention to claim that lyricism is inherently linked to universalizing notions of subjectivity. Instead, I want to consider the pitfalls that arise when the use of lyricism in the service of sentimentality is uncritically celebrated. Specifically, I seek to grapple with how lyricism can serve, often inadvertently, to render Black pain "hyperbolic" or "ritualistic," as lyric poetry characteristically renders objects and events. Because lyricism is explicitly distinguished by its use of devices not found in "ordinary speech acts," especially aurality, representations of suffering depicted with such language take on an almost otherworldly quality. As a result, Black pain can appear to reside in a sublime realm distinct from the quotidian reality in which the reader lives.

In other words, if Christina Sharpe refers to antiblackness as "the weather" because it "is pervasive *as* climate" (106, emphasis original), Whitehead's novel, through its stark prose and its central conceit, proffers a differently inflected metaphor. Antiblack brutality is not lyrical but prosaic: ubiquitous, mundane, and essential to the functioning of American society. In other words, antiblackness operates as an infrastructure. To attend to the long history of antiblackness requires locating that history firmly in the current, material, and everyday conditions of life in the United States: in the stolen land the society is built on, in the economic wealth accumulated from centuries of dispossession, in physical structures erected by unfree bodies, and in

institutions such as medicine and higher education whose rise relied on racialized oppression.[19] Like other neo-slave narratives, then, *The Underground Railroad* highlights how "emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection" (Hartman, *Scenes* 6). However, while neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* use lyricism to blur temporal distinctions and convey the continuity of racial trauma, Whitehead departs from lyricism in order to emphasize that the violence committed against Big Anthony and other Black people is not unspeakable, but rather all too speakable; it is the stuff of everyday existence in the United States. Grotesquely excessive and wholly mundane at the same time—like the dinner party during which Anthony is murdered—the theatrics of antiblack violence undergird the conditions of possibility for American citizenship.[20]

The specific kind of infrastructure at the center of the novel, a railroad, concretizes how antiblackness in concert with racial capitalism and settler colonialism materially undergird U.S. nationhood. A railroad is an apt symbol for the intertwining systems that support and enable American life. In the introduction to a special issue of *Social Text*, editors Jodi Byrd, Alyohsa Goldstein, Chandan Reddy, and Jodi Melamed use the term "economies of dispossession" to index the material and systemic nature of capitalist, racist, and colonial oppression as it has taken shape in the U.S. context: "Economies in the plural here indicates both the economic as a particular kind of

[19] See Wilder for a study of how the rise of American higher education is connected to slavery and Indigenous dispossession. See Washington for a study of how Euro-American medical knowledge relies on the violent use of black bodies.
[20] As Wanzo puts it: "The liberal subject always stands in contrast to the slave body; its perfection is a counterpoint to the abjection of bodies who are not strong enough to be free" (Wanzo 41).

material fulcrum—a mode and relations of production, distribution, consumption, and reproduction with all this entails—and economy as a specific systemic organization or logic of circuits of interaction and exchange" (Byrd et al. 2). I take this to mean that dispossession not just subtractive but also productive: economies of dispossession do not simply *take something away* from someone (such as land or freedom) but also *facilitate the making of* a new creation. The railroad in Whitehead's novel makes tangible the logic of propriation, which is "a conception and practice of the proper, propriety, proprietorship, and proprietary claims that instantiates property as a relation to private and public. Propriation suggests a double movement of making one's own and making one proper or properly oneself" (Byrd et al. 3). Through the logic of propriation, nation-making becomes possible, and likewise, through the use of railroads, the U.S. nation-state grew. Railroads were central to the expansionist project of manifest destiny and spurred settler economic growth at the cost of Native American removal and genocide. Moreover, railroads in the South "built most of their lines with enslaved labor" and by the mid-nineteenth century "were among the largest slaveholding and slave employing entities in the region" (Thomas). After the Civil War, indentured servants from China worked on the transcontinental railroad alongside Black people laboring under conditions of debt bondage. Whitehead gestures to this history of unfree labor when Caesar asks one of the conductors, Lumbly, who built the literal underground railroad he and Cora are about to ride, and Lumbly suggestively replies: "Who builds anything in this country?" (Whitehead, *Underground* 69).

The historical underground railroad also potently signifies nation-building because it is one of America's most widely circulated national metaphors and has taken

on a mythic quality—though the myth is not fully aligned with reality. Eric Foner points out that "During the 1850s, journalists throughout the country credited the underground railroad with far more organization and impact than it actually enjoyed" (Foner 6), frequently inflating the number of escapes (4). Even when enslaved people did use the railroad to escape, their journeys often did not lead them to a vaunted space of freedom in the North.[21] Despite these limitations, "the Underground Railroad mythos thrives in official state discourse and popular lore alike" because "it feeds the paradigm of racial reconciliation" (Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery" 120). The railroad "represents a moment in [United States] history when Black and white Americans worked together in a just cause" (Foner 15). The commonly accepted narrative of the underground railroad coheres the specious narrative of the United States as a nation supporting quests for freedom.

In multiple ways, then, the literal railroad in the novel illuminates how slavery and settler colonialism enable the American nation-state, demonstrating that liberal humanist "freedom" is imbricated with unfreedom.[22] To this end, the novel features numerous references to the Declaration of Independence, the most striking of which involves an enslaved man named Michael who, before arriving at Randall, was forced to memorize and recite the document as a "parlor trick" (Whitehead, *Underground* 32)

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[21] For instance, slavery in New York City did not end until 1827, and even after that "the South's peculiar institution remained central to the city's economic prosperity" (Foner 9).

[22] As Lisa Lowe argues in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, "I observe that the uses of universalizing concepts of reason, civilization, and freedom effect colonial divisions of humanity, affirming liberty for modern man while subordinating the variously colonized and dispossessed peoples whose material labor and resources were the conditions of possibility for that liberty" (Lowe 6).

for his previous enslaver's guests. Eventually, "His owner grew bored and sold the boy south" (32), resulting in Michael's arrival at Randall, where he performs his act a few times before being beaten to death because of an overseer's "exasperation" (32). Michael's story conveys the mundanity of Black subjection, signaled both by his first owner's boredom and by the brutal yet routinized manner of his death. The death is reported without fanfare to Michael's owner, James Randall, who shows "displeasure" about the fatality because "Michael's recitation had been a novel diversion" (33). In the Declaration of Independence, Rebecca Wanzo notes, "slavery is what makes the colonists' suffering legible" (20), demonstrating both that sentimentality "is very much part of a liberal project" (21) and that "representations of suffering blacks are rhetorically essential" (18) to the American sentimental tradition. Because the Declaration of Independence symbolizes the birth of the American nation-state and articulates its purported values, Michael's performance of the document and his subsequent murder emphasize the intertwining of sentimentality, antiblack violence, and the discourse of U.S. citizenship. His death is as fundamental to U.S. independence as the founding document he recites.

In this light, *Underground* serves as a reflection on how the United States is precisely what it was built to be: "Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood" (119). Whitehead deploys his literal railroad to represent how a network of oppressive systems—settler colonialism, slavery, and racial capitalism—materially and discursively serves as the infrastructure of the American nation-state. The nation-state is figured as a train that runs on a complex set of tracks (interlocking systems of oppression) and requires an infinite amount of fuel for

its engine (land and bodies). Cora cannot ride the railroad to freedom because the infrastructural integrity of the nation-state depends on her ineligibility for freedom.[23] Unsurprisingly, signs of slavery abound in the railroad's dark tunnels. When she arrives in South Carolina, Cora watches the departing train disappear, "leaving a swirling wake of steam and noise" (*Underground* 93). Cora inhabits the wake of the slave ship and the "still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery" (Sharpe 2). Later, Cora and Royal "hurtle through the underground passage, a tiny ship on this impossible sea" (*Underground* 271). When Cora lands in North Carolina, she sees that "The stone vault above was white with splashes of red, like blood from a whipping that soaked a shirt" (*Underground* 152). The mundane structuring violence of slavery appears inescapable. Prosaic rather than lyrical language best depicts this reality, conveying Black suffering as concrete and quotidian rather than inexpressible and otherworldly.

Fittingly, instead of song lyrics or poetry verses, the novel is interspersed with classified ads for fugitive slaves drawn from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's digitized collection of newspapers (Whitehead, "Write the Book"). Five real ads appear in the novel, along with a sixth fictional ad for Cora that Whitehead wrote himself, which I will return to at the end of this chapter. Throughout the twentieth century, historians have probed fugitive slave ads to discern evidence of enslaved resistance and interiority. In the absence of other accounts of enslaved lives, fugitive slave ads "are the chief mode of evidence for assembling individual or group portraits of African Americans of the eighteenth century North" (Hodges and Brown xv). Not

[23] See Sharpe as well as Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*.

only do these ads offer clear signs of flight, which "was the most effective individual means of struggle against slavery" (Hodges and Brown xiv), but they also "give hints of the interior lives of slaves" through noting their religious beliefs, personal characteristics, and possible motivations (Hodges and Brown, xv).

In *Underground*, however, the ads play a different role: rather than celebrating resistance or highlighting interiority, they remind the reader of the constant threat of recapture while emphasizing the pervasiveness of antiblackness. The language of a classified ad is not lyrical but rather direct and utilitarian, serving a clear purpose—in this case, a call for the return of lost "property." Whitehead is certainly not the first contemporary writer to use pro-slavery legal documents in his fiction, but his unadulterated incorporation of these documents is notable. As a contrast, we might consider Philip's *Zong!*, a book-length sequence of poems about the massacre aboard a slave ship in 1781 during which at least 130 African people were thrown overboard so that their enslavers could collect insurance on their "lost cargo."[24] The poems in *Zong!* consist of rearrangements of the legal decision Gregson vs. Gilbert. This decision—the only surviving written record of the massacre—upheld the legality of deliberately killing enslaved people. Philip fragments and rearranges the text of the legal decision in order to create a memorial to an unnarratable event. Whitehead, on the other hand, does not transform the first five classified ads in any way, as might be expected if he were using them to uncover evidence of resistance or inner life. He comments that he put the ads in without alteration because he could not "compete with the way they captured so

[24] For discussions of song in *Zong*!, see Fehskens and Dowling.

much about slavery" ("Write the Book"). Casually glossing the abuses enslaved people endured—through a note, for example, that a runaway's distinguishing physical quality is "a mark on her face from a burn" (Whitehead, "Write the Book")—the ads reveal the daily realities of slavery in a way lyrical language cannot. Whitehead's handling of the ads, then, articulates the limits of lyricism as well as the paradoxical promise of representing Black suffering exactly as it is: straightforward and ordinary.

Opaque Interiors

Like ads for runaways, nineteenth-century slave narratives offer a compromised and incomplete glimpse into enslaved lives. In "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison describes her goal of filling in two kinds of gaps in the original slave narratives. First, the writers of slave narratives avoided "dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience" (Morrison, "The Site of Memory" 90). One part of Morrison's job, then, is "to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" ("The Site of Memory" 91). Second, the original slave narratives contained "no mention of [the enslaved people's] interior life" ("The Site of Memory" 91). The writers of these narratives usually practiced a "quiet avoidance of emotional display" ("The Site of Memory" 88) while at the same time they "tried to summon up [the reader's] finer nature in order to encourage him to employ it" ("The Site of Memory" 88). Morrison, in turn, aims to "expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn't write it" (93). Morrison's essay highlights another convention of sentimental historicizing: an emphasis on revealing the interiority of enslaved people.

Morrison's twin aspirations for her work—to show the full horror of slavery and to reveal the erased interior life of enslaved people—imply a link between pain and interiority. In other words, fictions of slavery frequently highlight interiority through demonstrations of the enslaved person's susceptibility to pain. The equation goes something like this: to feel pain is to be sentient, and so to have interiority, and to have interiority is to be a subject (to be capable of possession, including of oneself). It is no wonder, then, that neo-slave narratives tend to emphasize vivid subjective descriptions of suffering. For example, Haley's *Roots* painstakingly documents Kunta Kinte's time in the hold of a slave ship, detailing the "stink and filth" as well as the "lice and rats" (Haley 221) to which the captives are subjected. Throughout, the third person narrator, focalized through Kunta, gives vivid accounts of his sensory perceptions and affective experience.

Along with depictions of pain, neo-slave narratives tend to emphasize the emergence of an agentive subjective that forms through self-exposing narration. Fittingly, many neo-slave narratives use first-person narration; for some critics, first-person narration is a defining feature of the genre.[25] Hill's *The Book of Negroes* uses a frame narrative in which the protagonist, Aminata Diallo, writes her own story of enslavement and freedom, resisting the attempts of white abolitionists to take on this task for her. She insists: "I have my life to tell, my own private ghost story, and what purpose would there be to this life I have lived, if I could not take the opportunity to

[25] Rushdy defines *Neo-slave narratives* as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy, *Studies* 3).

relate it?" (Hill 7). Aminata's desire to tell her story is distinct from the abolitionist project she is participating in, a cause "fatigues [her] greatly" (Hill 7). As Aminata foregrounds her own interior experiences, readers are "confronted with detailed scenes of the horrors of capture, the middle passage, and routine abuse at the hands of slaveholders and overseers" (Duff 242). The exposure of interiority requires the representation of pain.

Even neo-slave narratives that are not written primarily in the enslaved person's voice often feature sections where that voice emerges. Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* is an excellent example of how first-person narration can be used to foreground the emergence of agency that occurs through the process of revealing pained interiority. *Dessa Rose* is divided into three sections framed by a Prologue and Epilogue. The first section, "The Darky," is narrated in the third person and focalized primarily through Adam Nehemiah, a white man interviewing Dessa after she leads an uprising on a coffle; he is writing a book on preventing slave revolts. Like all three sections, "The Darky" opens with an epigraph. In this case, the epigraph is "You have seen how a man was made a slave…" (Williams 15) from the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* As the epigraph suggests, this section foregrounds the subjection of enslaved people—the language and practices that transformed humans into property. In addition to third-person narration, this section also includes first-person selections from Nehemiah's journal, in which he details his interactions with Dessa. Unsurprisingly, Nehemiah describes Dessa in dehumanizing terms, likening her to "a wildcat," (23) "a cow," (36) and a "pack animal" (32). While a brief part of the section is focalized through Dessa, Nehemiah's voice and thoughts—which render Dessa inhuman, abject,

by turns docile and hostile—dominate the section. Dessa is also subjected to various physical brutality, including being starved, denied fresh water, and shackled.

At the end of "The Darky," Dessa escapes confinement once more with the help of several other Black people, who take her to a homestead owned by a white woman, Rufel. The second section of the novel, titled "The Wench," opens with an epigraph from Sojourner's Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?": "I have plowed and planted and no man could head me…" (Williams 72). This line from what is often considered a foundational text in Black feminist studies indicates the section's key theme: the nascence of Dessa's Black female subjectivity. Dessa recovers from the tribulations of escape and giving birth, forms friendships with the Black men who aided her escape as well as a fraught relationship with Rufel, and struggles with memories of her past, especially the brutal murder of her lover, Kaine, at the hands of her first master. While "The Wench" features more parts focalized through Dessa than "The Darky," it is still told in the third person and focalized primarily through Rufel, telling the story of the white woman's childhood, marriage, and relationship with "Mammy," the enslaved woman who raised Rufel. "The Wench" serves as a transitional section: though it contains less overt violence and subjection than "The Darky," it is still focused primarily on the experiences of a white person, Rufel, and on the relationship between Rufel and Dessa. Indeed, Dessa later thinks of the bed where she spends most of Section 2 as "a grave and birthing place" (197)—a liminal space where one identity dies and another is born.

The third section of the novel is markedly different from the first two. Narrated entirely in the first person by Dessa and titled "The Negress," it opens with an epigraph from Taj Mahal's "The Cajun Waltz": "Ma negresse, voulez-vous danser, voulez-vous

danser avec moi, ici?" (Williams 161). In this section, Dessa participates in an elaborate scheme with Rufel and the Black people living on the homestead to make money in order to travel West. Dessa also saves Rufel from being raped, continues to care for her infant son, and develops a love relationship with one of the men, Harker, who at one point asks her to dance with him, drawing on the French he learned from a former master (that explains the epigraph). "The Negress," then, foregrounds Dessa's full-fledged subjectivity, agency, and voice. While Rufel still appears in this section, the section's emphasis is on Dessa, who is now the narrator. Dessa's voice emerges to foreground a pained interiority that transforms into agency, highlighting both the "centrality of violence to the making of the slave" (Hartman, *Scenes* 3) as well as the link between sentience and the re-assertion of personhood.

Critics frequently assert that the narration of this pained interiority is centrally important to the political work of the neo-slave narrative. This narration makes the reader into a witness of historical trauma and, as Caroline Rody writes, "reconceive[es] the historical novel as memorial" that portrays the "'interior life' of slaves" (98). Moreover, the narration of one's story to others (including, potentially, the reader) plays an important role in helping enslaved and formerly enslaved characters heal from racial trauma and perform, as Jocelyn K. Moody puts it, a "verbal reconstruction of [oneself]" (642). The ability to narrate one's story coherently suggests the emergence of self-esteem that slavery had destroyed.[26] Indeed, Arlene Keizer contends that it is precisely this "focus on the interiority of the slaves' experiences" (11) that defines contemporary

[26] For instance, Keizer argues that neo-slave narratives urge readers "to assume full and complex personhood in the enslaved and recently freed" (9).

narratives of slavery and makes them politically effective. Authors of neo-slave narratives sometimes comment explicitly on the desire to give voice to people whom historical records have silenced, a desire evident in Morrison's famous dedication of *Beloved* to "sixty million and more" as well as in Hill's comment that "[He] like[s] to imagine that there is a novel for every one of the people whose names are immortalized in the Book of Negroes" (xv).

Striking in its refusal to give readers unfiltered access to the inner experiences of its protagonist, *Underground* veils Cora's interiority by using third-person voice and refusing to present extended, vivid scenes of her bodily suffering. Compared with the depictions of beatings and sexual assaults in works like *Beloved*, *Dessa Rose*, *Kindred*, and *Roots*, Whitehead's portrayals of Cora's physical subjection are brief and restrained. For instance, on Randall, Cora defends her young friend Chester from an enslaver's attack, which results in her being beaten with a cane. The narrator describes the beating in two sentences: "[The cane] came down on her head. It crashed down again and this time the silver teeth ripped across her eyes and her blood splattered the dirt" (*Underground* 34). Both Chester and Cora are later whipped, but Whitehead does not describe these scenes in detail either, only noting that the overseer Connelly "peeled them open" and "called for their bloody backs to be scrubbed out with pepper water" (37). Cora's rape is rendered in similarly understated language: "Not long after it became known that Cora's womanhood had come into flower, Edward, Pot, and two hands from the southern half dragged her behind the smokehouse. If anyone heard or saw, they did not intervene. The Hob women sewed her up" (21). While *Underground*

represents violence, it glosses over Cora's subjective experiences of pain, giving the reader only surface-level access to her inner life.

For Li, this refusal to reveal the interior experiences of its characters renders the novel a failure. She critiques how Ava and Blake, two of Cora's fellow enslaved people on Randall plantation, are "ciphers, hastily sketched characters" whose motives are unclear (Li 15) and she finds Cora's protection of Chester "difficult if not impossible to understand" since "Whitehead's prose does little to elucidate her decision" (Li 17). She questions Whitehead's decision to disclose Cora's rape in "a handful of pithy sentences" (Li 15) rather than explore its psychological effects at more length. Finally, she suggests that "Whitehead's choice not to narrate from Cora's perspective or delve into her psyche leaves much of slavery's trauma unspoken, even as he depicts its physical horrors" (Li 21). Li implies that the political thrust of a neo-slave narrative is closely linked to its ability to show the inner experiences of enslaved people in a psychologically realistic way.

It is not only literary professionals like Li who have noted the emotional opacity of *Underground*. An (admittedly unscientific) perusal of Goodreads and Amazon reviews provides some insight into reader reactions. I think it is useful to consider these reactions in addition to those of academics since non-professionals tend to comment more extensively on their affective experiences of reading than professionals do. I was particularly struck by one particular review I came across. Goodreads user "Emily May" notes that although based on an interesting concept, the novel failed to engage her on an emotional level:

> It's a *cold, distant, impersonal novel* and it didn't pull me in … the characters are *undeveloped and forgettable*, but more than this, Cora herself wasn't given enough personality and development to really drag me into her world. The other central character—Caesar—is even less developed. I will probably have forgotten them both by tomorrow. Perhaps a first-person narrative would have better suited the subject matter and helped warm us to the characters … We should have been right there in the middle of the story with Cora, hearts pounding in fear, and yet I felt somewhat removed, reading—it seemed—an almost clinical account of history … I felt like this book full of clever ideas never became one I was truly affected by - *no enjoyment, no sadness, no anger, no nothing.* (Emily May, emphasis original)

Emily May expresses the expectation of being "warmed" to Cora—to know Cora's interiority. She comments that first-person narration might have been "more suited to the subject matter," that she as a reader should have been "dragged" into Cora's world, and have had her own heart "pounding in fear" during Cora's escapes. Emily May desires an immersion and closeness that allows identification with brutalized people; she desires a novel that engages in sentimental historicizing. Unlike Li, Emily May does not criticize Whitehead's novel on political grounds, but rather because Whitehead's style is unsatisfying. Her review suggests, implicitly, that something about being "dragged" into the interior experience of an enslaved person can be—even should be—satisfying.

Both Li and Emily May, for different reasons, express dissatisfaction with what Whitehead does not provide. If, however, we take Whitehead's style to be essential to the novel rather than a stylistic error, several questions arise. What are the stakes of gaining readerly satisfaction from *feeling with* the suffering of an enslaved person? Why might the opacity of the third-person voice—rather than first-person voice—be appropriate? What possibilities open when conventional Euro-American notions of interiority as revealed through self-narration are foreclosed? To approach these questions, I return to Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten's conversation about Frederick Douglass's autobiography in their respective books, *Scenes of Subjection* and *In the Break*. Hartman refuses to reproduce Aunt Hester's beating:

> Rather than inciting indignation, too often [such scenes] immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity—the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances—and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering." (*Scenes* 3)

The reproduction of scenes of Black suffering both normalizes and renders spectacular the image of the pained Black body. As a result, Hartman chooses to focus not on scenes of physical suffering but on those less spectacular "scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned" (*Scenes* 4). Moten, in contrast, reproduces the beating at length, arguing that the sound of Aunt Hester's scream "take[s] the rich content of the object/commodity's aurality outside the confines of meaning precisely by way of this material trace" (*In the Break* 6). Put differently, the scene of Aunt Hester's beating

offers the beginnings of an (anti)method for reading and hearing Black performance as improvisatory sound that cuts through traditional hermeneutics and expected forms of representation. Hartman and Moten thus model two approaches to grappling with Black suffering.

Whitehead takes up Moten and Hartman's converging project—the political deployment of Blackness as an opaque, concealed, and unreadable force—but he gets there using different methods, leaning away both from Moten's unbounded lyricism and Hartman's cautiousness about depicting overt torture. *Underground* is replete with scenes of violence, but throughout these scenes, the narrator veils Cora's interiority, denying readers unfiltered access to her thoughts or experiences. The use of third-person narration circumvents an easy route through which Cora might have been presented as a subject able and willing to self-narrate. Third-person narration combined with minimalist descriptions of violence against Cora function simultaneously to highlight the mundane pervasiveness of antiblack violence (the everydayness that renders this violence barely worth describing) *and* to refuse to make pained interiority foundational to Black existence. In *Underground*, brutality, despite its ubiquity, does not serve as "an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved" (Hartman, *Scenes* 3). Unlike Douglass, Cora never narrates her passage through "the bloodstained gate," thus refusing to solidify antiblack violence as "an original generative act equivalent to the statement 'I was born'" (Hartman, *Scenes* 3). *Underground* emphasizes the ubiquitous and mundane quality of antiblack brutality while at the same time refusing to portray this brutality as the genesis of a pained interiority that can be rendered legible as human through the reader's sympathy. Cora lives within an infrastructure of

enslavement, but she has not been produced as a subject through that enslavement, nor does she *belong to* or *within* its structuring logic.

Underground's veiling of Cora's interiority also means that Cora's voice evades capture on the page. Though unable to flee antiblackness, an inescapable infrastructure she inhabits no matter where she goes, she does escape the reader's attempts to seize and to possess her interior experience. Blackness is opaque, not transparent; Black interiority is not available to the reader of Whitehead's novel, which explains the disappointment that Emily May expresses in her Goodreads review. Just as the relentless Ridgeway cannot ultimately capture Cora, neither can the reader. Whitehead counters the tendency to showcase Black interiority by depicting susceptibility to bodily assault and pain—a mainstay of the U.S. sentimental tradition—without attempting to circumvent the representation of antiblack violence. In this way, the novel effectively resists pulling Black people into liberal humanist conceptions of personhood relying on the reader's recognition—and possession—of Black interiority.

The Evil Eye

The historical novel is classically theorized as a genre that pulls the reader into a re-awakened past.[27] Particularly when it comes to fiction depicting historical atrocity, critics also tend to assume that the vicarious experience of the past creates empathy or identification with the common humanity of marginalized characters, leading the reader to enact positive social change. For instance, in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken,"

[27] See Lukács.

Morrison comments that she intended *Beloved*'s opening sentences to make the reader feel

> snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign, and I want it as the first stroke of the shared experience that might be possible between the reader and the novel's population. Snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense. No lobby, no door, no entrance—a gangplank perhaps (but a very short one). And the house into which this snatching—this kidnapping—propels one, changes from spiteful to loud to quiet, as the sounds in the body of the ship itself may have changed." (32)

Morrison alludes here to the division of *Beloved* into three sections, each of which begins with a description of the house as first spiteful, then loud, and finally quiet. This structure, combined with the intense lyricism of the novel, immerses the reader in the setting and creates an affective identification with the characters. As Morrison indicates, the reader is meant to experience something of what the enslaved and formerly enslaved characters experience. *Beloved* combines a meditation on archival gaps with narrative and formal elements that affectively engage the reader and bring the past back to life—quite literally in this case, since *Beloved* is a ghost story. Butler's *Kindred*, too, was written with the express intent of making readers "feel the history: the pain and fear that black people had to live through in order to endure" (Butler and See 40). Indeed, the assumption that vicariously experiencing history leads to social change goes beyond fiction as well, as evidenced at sites like Colonial Williamsburg, a "living history"

museum where actors play enslaved people in order to ostensibly educate the public about the realities of slavery in a visceral manner. The goal underlying all of these efforts, arguably, is that of "facilitating an identification between those free and those enslaved… In this case, pain provides the common language of humanity; it extends humanity to the dispossessed and, in turn, remedies the indifference of the callous" (Hartman, *Scenes* 18).

Underground makes evident the limits of such efforts. Hartman has examined "the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy" (*Scenes* 18) and the ease with which empathy reinforces "the fungibility of the captive body" (19)**.** *Underground* supplements Hartman's insights by highlighting the fraught ways that attempts to "bring history to life" and related evocations of identification, empathy, and common humanity are double-edged. In South Carolina, her first stop on the underground railroad, Cora meets several people who seem to treat her respectfully. Among these people are the Andersons, a family who employs her as their housekeeper; Miss Lucy, a proctor in the dormitories where Cora lives; and Mr. Fields, a museum curator who hires Cora as an actress in his Living History museum exhibit. Her interactions with all these characters highlight how the recognition of common humanity—and especially attempts to teach history through this kind of empathetic identification—enable the domestication and containment of Blackness.

The South Carolina section of *Underground* begins innocuously, introducing the Anderson family and their housekeeper and nanny, "Bessie," which turns out to be the name used on Cora's forged freedom papers. Cora lives a relatively comfortable life, taking care of the Anderson children, doing the grocery shopping, and taking a pleasant

walk home each evening at six o'clock. Cora enjoys working for her employers, and the white people in town treat her with respect she had not previously experienced. Mrs. Anderson "thank[s] Bessie for her help" (*Underground* 88) and Mr. Anderson's secretary "[holds] open the door" (89) for her. On her walks home, she reflects on "her profound change in circumstances. She walked down the sidewalk as a free woman. No one chased or abused her" (89). However, the nature of Cora's work belies the reality of her situation: she has been literally domesticated, both in the sense that she works as a household servant and in the sense that she fits neatly into the confines of white domestic life. Her limited freedom and the recognition of her humanity are contingent on her willingness to accept her controlled state.

Moreover, Cora's living arrangement enables another less literal kind of domestication. South Carolina at first appears to be a haven for Black people; they receive "food, jobs, and housing. Come and go as they please, marry who they wish, raise children who will never be taken away" (95). Many of the newly freed and recently escaped live in government-owned dormitories where proctors provide them with guidance and education. Cora greatly admires her proctor, Miss Lucy, having "benefited from her advice many times" (91). Miss Lucy treats Cora with apparent esteem, even, to Cora's surprise, "bowing to a colored girl" (92). However, the positive treatment Black people receive in South Carolina has a dark underside, as the novel soon reveals that the residents of the dormitories are being studied, experimented on in a fashion reminiscent of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and, in some cases, forcibly sterilized. Cora herself is not forcibly sterilized, but a local doctor does pressure her to undergo the procedure. Even as she works to ensure white futurity through her

caretaking of the two Anderson children, her own reproductive future is at risk. Cora eventually realizes that the dormitories are not as different from the plantation as she had initially thought: "The [black] women were still being herded and domesticated. Not pure merchandise as formerly but livestock: bred, neutered. Penned in dormitories that were like coops or hutches" (128).

The justification for this different form of confinement and domestication is "colored uplift" (100), which highlights the intertwining of sentimentality with liberal progress narratives that rely on **"**narrating the journey from the suffering body to the ideal liberal subject, a fully self-determining citizen" (Wanzo 41).[28] As the Black women are "monitored" (Whitehead, *Underground* 114) by both proctors and medical professionals, Miss Lucy assures Cora that "all the numbers and figures and notes would make a great contribution to their understanding of colored life" (114). Sterilization, in turn, is presented as a "gift to the colored population" (*Underground* 115) that would allow them to "take control over [their] own destiny" (116). The Black women undergo what Wanzo calls "sentimental subjection": a "process of subordination and uplift under sympathetic gazes" (Wanzo 84). Through this process, a person is subordinated by systemic injustice and then must overcome that subordination. Through completing this process of uplift despite the ongoing persistence of structural barriers, the person becomes sympathetic, easier to identify with, and worthy of (always contingent) entry into white citizenship.

[28] For discussions of the role of slavery in the tradition of sentimental liberalism, see Berlant's *The Female Complaint* and Burgett. For a discussion of how sentimentality, via aesthetic theory, helped define liberal subjectivity, see E. M. Dillon.

This process is frequently in play when it comes to neo-slave narratives. In his analysis of Steve McQueen's 2012 film *12 Years a Slave*, Robert Patterson discusses the dangers of garnering white sympathy for the enslaved. Patterson's analysis demonstrates how the film sets up Solomon Northrup, the Black protagonist kidnapped into slavery, as an upstanding man with a Protestant work ethic and thus stages his enslavement as "an isolated outrage worthy of sympathy and political action because he … embodies several ideals of American (black) manhood" (Patterson 24).[29] Similarly, in *Underground*, the Black women in South Carolina's dormitories are "worthy" of white sympathy when they persist despite structural violence and when they make choices that are deemed "good" by their white supposed benefactors. The possibility of Black citizenship is thus always circumscribed by the Black person's willingness and ability to evoke white sentiment, which they accomplish through redemptive suffering under the gaze of the white citizen-spectator.

Cora's final job in South Carolina highlights the intertwining of sympathy, empathy, and containment. As a result of her successful work for the Anderson family, Cora receives a new job at the Museum of Natural Wonders, in the "Living History" division. She works as a "type" in a museum exhibit about American slavery where she and two other Black women stage three living dioramas—"Scenes from Darkest Africa," "Life on a Slave Ship," and "Typical Day on the Plantation." The women perform various domestic acts, from swabbing a ship deck to spinning thread. They are

[29] Patterson attributes this quality of the film to its discursive audience; as a filmic adaptation created for a wide audience, *12 Years a Slave* feeds into American narratives about "self help and individual success" (Erica R. Edwards, quoted in Patterson 20) at the expense of a more radical politics

the only living people in the exhibit—"The whites were made of plaster, wire, and paint" (*Underground* 117). Paradoxically, even as the exhibit offers a flesh-and-blood representation of enslaved people (contrasting with the inanimate white statues), it confines, domesticates, and desubjectifies the three actresses. In the display case, Cora finds herself exposed to the violence of surveillance, which reminds her of the overseer's gaze on Randall: "Her recent installation in the exhibition returned her to the furrows of Georgia, the dumb, open-jawed stares of the patrons stealing her back to a state of display" (128). Notably, the exhibit's problem goes deeper than inaccurate representation: the problem is not just that the museum exhibit distorts the reality of slavery, but also that it renders enslaved people objects of historical scrutiny—objects of and for knowledge under the gaze of white liberal humanist subjects. Moreover, the fact that living actresses and not mannequins portray the Black women in the exhibit does not prevent their objectification; actually, it increases these women's exposure to violence, calling into question the idea that "bringing the past to life" necessarily leads to an ethical relation to history.

Moreover, though ostensibly meant to educate the public—much like real-life Living History sites as well as historical fiction—Mr. Field's exhibit domesticates the history of slavery, limiting its scope to the confines of three small display cases and turning the Black women actors into one-dimensional "types" who function as fungible objects under the gaze of white citizens. While both Living History sites and historical fiction often seek to ameliorate structural oppression by making Black suffering visible, sympathetic, and available for white identification, *Underground* suggests that such

efforts are bound to fail.[30] Just as the walls of the display case contain the "types," sentiment domesticates Black subjects and limits their unruly movement by tethering them to colonial constructs of personhood, sentience, and interiority.

Cora quickly realizes the futility of making herself sympathetic. She will not be admitted into American citizenship because that would cause the infrastructure of the nation-state, which requires Black subjection, to collapse. While she continues to work in the museum, she begins to interact with the patrons in a new way. One day, irritated by the sight of a scowling white woman, "Cora stare[s] into her eyes, unwavering and fierce, until the woman [breaks], fairly running from the glass toward the agricultural section" (129). Cora's "evil eye" becomes a regular occurrence: "She got good at her evil eye…They always broke, the people, not expecting this weird attack, staggering back or looking at the floor or forcing their companions to pull them away" (129). The patrons expect Cora to be a passive object of their gaze, confined to a limited space where she works in service of their education and entertainment. Even as they enter an immersive exhibit, they expect a measure of control over the history of slavery. Cora's evil eye is alienating and disorienting—a "weird attack" that disrupts the patrons anticipated experience of the historical exhibit. One day Maisie, the girl Cora cared for while working for the Anderson family, comes to the museum with her class. Whereas Cora previously cared for Maisie and her brother, even expressing affection for them, now she "fix[es] [Maisie] with the evil eye," causing the girl's face to "[twitch] in fear"

[30] For a discussion of how Whitehead's novel critiques efforts to represent slavery in museal settings, see Dubey's "Museumizing Slavery."

(130). The evil eye epitomizes Cora's consummate rejection of her domesticated condition, including her role as a custodian of white comfort and futurity.

Cora does not attempt to disrupt her objectification by humanizing herself and seeking sympathy from the patrons. She does not attempt to gain access to the category of the human from which she has been excluded. Rather, she uses her eyes to defamiliarize the experience of the museum patrons, rupturing the confines of the museal container (the display case) into which the history of slavery has been placed and ousting the patrons from the immersive yet comfortable experience that they might have gained from the living dioramas. Similarly, Whitehead's novel turns a metaphorical evil eye on readers, refusing the affectively immersive experience they might have expected from a novel about slavery. *Underground* demands that readers relate to Cora, the novel, and the history of slavery in terms other than those of affective identification.

Going Off-Track: Unsentimental Historicizing

I have argued that the sentimental conventions often used to historicize slavery paradoxically keep the infrastructure of the nation-state functioning smoothly rather than rupturing it. The hallmarks of sentimental historicizing—lyrical language, attempts to reveal enslaved interiority, and the evocation of sympathy and empathy through displays of suffering—can unwittingly facilitate processes of containment and capture. In other words, these sentimental tropes contain Black people in order to keep their movements aligned with the interests of the American nation-state, and they attempt to render Blackness transparent in ways that encourage capture and possession. On the

other hand, *Underground* historicizes slavery by disrupting the domesticating workings of sentiment. Cora and other Black characters model alternative ways of engaging slavery as an infrastructure, creating a mode of affiliation rooted in acts of tangible care rather than affective identification.

Cora embodies the kind of Black subject that sentimental historicizing cannot capture. She inhabits the infrastructure of the nation-state to rupture it from the inside. That is, the underground railroad is simultaneously a space of subjection and potential resistance. Early on, during Cora's first trip, "The darkness of the tunnel quickly turned the boxcar into a grave" (Whitehead, *Underground* 92). However, several pages later, the narrator refers to the same tunnel as "deathless" (100). Like the railroad, Black life is often formulated as limned with death (social, civil, corporeal) that nonetheless fails to totalize Black existence.[31] Moreover, though the railroad does not carry Cora to freedom, it still seems imbued with potential. In one telling passage, the novel describes the aforementioned blood-spattered North Carolina station: "Crates of gear and mining equipment crowded the platform, making it a workshop. Passengers chose their seating from empty cases of explosive powder" (151). The description of the railroad as a workshop depicts it as the site of creation and experimentation.[32] The crates of explosive powder insinuate that whatever was or is being created is capable of literally

[31]Numerous thinkers evoke the idea of Black life that exceeds or exists alongside death. On the intertwining of social life and social death, see Sexton; on wake work, see Sharpe; on habeus viscus, see Weheliye.

[32] The idea of being "underground" can, in itself, signify being undercover, potentially for radical purposes. A literary antecedent of *The Underground Railroad* is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* in which the titular protagonist retreats to an underground bunker to prepare for revolutionary action. See Harney and Moten for an exploration of "the undercommons," which linguistically evokes the underground.

blowing up existing infrastructure. The railroad holds a potential for generative rupture, albeit a potential subdued for now since the crates are empty.

Whitehead suggests that rather than riding the railroad to freedom, Cora must harness and deploy its explosive potential, a task for which she is well suited. At Randall, Cora had lived at "Hob," a cabin for "strays"—people, especially women, considered strange and dangerous even by the other enslaved people. It is telling that "hob" refers to "Puck; a hobgoblin, sprite, elf" and that "to play hob" means "to 'play the devil,' work mischief" ("Hob, n.1"). The Hob women are outsiders, troubling the plantation's logic by refusing, whether intentionally or not, to live by its rules. To "stray," relatedly, means "To escape from confinement or control ("Stray, v.2"). Cora defies control numerous times even before she escapes from Randall: first when she protects a small plot of land outside her cabin from the encroachments of a man who tries to steal it, and then when she attempts to defend Chester from being beaten. Though both acts of straying result in punishment, they also enable Cora to live outside of complete confinement even though she is enslaved.

Throughout her journey in the novel, Cora remains a stray—even on the Valentine Farm, a refuge for Black people in Indiana, where she comes closest to belonging. As she sews a quilt with two companions, she cannot match their stitching: "The quilt betrayed a crookedness in her thinking: run it up a pole as the flag of her own wild country" (*Underground* 247-248). Cora's "country," it should be clear by now, is not America. The "crookedness" in her thinking places her outside the logic of the nation-state. In one telling passage, Ridgeway inadvertently explains why this strayness is so powerful. "I'm a notion of order," Ridgeway tells Cora. "The slave that

disappears—it's a notion, too. Of hope. Undoing what I do so that a slave the next plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too. If we allow that, we accept the flaw in the imperative" (227). Cora, then, is a flaw in the imperative. She embodies a fugitive hope-against-hope that endangers the infrastructure of the nation-state.[33]

Cora eventually harnesses the potentiality of the railroad-as-workshop when she literally goes off the tracks. Fleeing from Ridgeway after white vigilantes burn down the Valentine Farm, she enters an unfinished station. After subduing Ridgeway, Cora jumps into a handcar and pumps herself "into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere" (309). Through her subterranean, straying movement into a space not meant for her, Cora mobilizes her body into a vehicle that enables access to the elusive North. She wonders: "Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?" (309-310). It is only by digging the tunnel that Cora can travel through it, and it is through the act of traveling that she can build it: Cora "throw[s] all of herself into movement. Into northness" (309). "Northness" in the novel is not a fixed destination but rather a tunnel that comes to exist only as someone travels through it. As Cora moves through the tunnel, the "wild country" mentioned earlier in the novel seems to come into being: "Cora ran her hand along the wall of the tunnel, the ridges and pockets. Her fingers danced over valleys, rivers, the peaks of mountains, the contours of a new nation hidden beneath the old … She could not see it but she felt it, moved through its heart" (310). "Northness" indexes a materiality that eludes vision in all its connotations—knowledge, imagination, ocularity. Cora cannot see it either literally (the tunnel is dark) or

[33] In a similar vein, see Bey (129-135) for a discussion of how Cora enacts what Harney and Moten call "fugitive planning and black study."

figuratively (she does not know what this place is like). The haptic offers tentative access to this place; she can trace only its contours. The "North," then, resists possession because it can be *touched* but not *grasped*. Most importantly, though the phrase "she felt it, moved through its heart" (310) might at first seem to evoke sentiment, a more literal meaning is notable here: Cora feels the "new nation" on her hands as she builds the tunnel. The kind of "feeling" required to access the north is not affective but sensate.

Cora's hands-on movement "into northness" generates a practice of Black radical care that reconfigures affiliation, transforming citizenship into fugitive kinship. Though her journey is initially solitary, Cora eventually emerges into daylight and waits on the roadside. Two carriages pass her by, both occupied by white people. The first group says nothing to her, indifferent to her pain, while a white man in the second asks her vaguely if she "need[s] something?" (312). Cora simply shakes her head. The third group passing Cora are Black and formerly enslaved. One man, Ollie, asks Cora a specific question: "You hungry?" Cora replies that she is "very hungry," (312) and Ollie provides her with bread. Giving Cora food is a straightforward and tangible act of care. Though Cora and Ollie are both formerly enslaved, Ollie's offer of food connects them rather than the sharing of affect or personal stories. Indeed, Ollie "had a horseshoe brand on his neck and pulled up his collar to hide it when Cora's eyes lingered" (312). Ollie's gesture implies a turn away from the logic of sentiment, which dictates that displays of suffering reveal interiority and connect people through sympathy, empathy, or identification. Whereas many neo-slave narratives, as discussed earlier, emphasize the importance of formerly enslaved people narrating their traumatic history,

Underground stops short of this move. Ollie chooses not to make visible his injury, even to an empathetic witness like Cora. Similarly, even though they were all enslaved, Cora does not assume to understand the interior experience of her fellow travelers, including Ollie: as they ride away together, she "wondered where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him" (313). Theirs is a kinship without the assumption of transparent interiority. It is mediated by tangible care (Ollie's offer of food) rather than the revelation of personal history and inner experience.

It is important not to read this ending as purely triumphant; such a reading would simply reify the progress narrative so central to the sentimental tradition and would require overlooking Cora's fraught and circumscribed position. Despite her initial hope that she had "pushed beyond" America, Cora remains in it after all. In fact, when she climbs into the carriage, Ollie tells her that they are heading West to St. Louis and then to California. As Feith notes, Cora "is about to take part in the conquest of the continent" (155). Cora's fate at the end of the novel, in terms of her participation in settler colonialism, is especially striking in light of the novel's ongoing engagement with questions of Native removal and genocide. References to manifest destiny, stolen land, and Indian removal keep settler colonialism at the forefront of the reader's mind. In the Tennessee chapter of the novel, readers learn that Cora is traveling along the same path as the Cherokees did in 1838 during the Trail of Tears, and she reflects on the intertwining fates of Black and Indigenous people. However, no Native characters appear in the novel, other than a few mentioned in passing. Even more significantly, in its insistence on emphasizing the ravages of settler colonialism, the novel comes close

to suggesting that Indigenous people have been entirely eliminated from the United States. As Cora travels through Tennessee, the narrator, focalized through her, ponders: "She didn't know which tribe had called this territory home, but knew it had been Indian land. What land hadn't been theirs?" (281). The past tense here is mournful, reanimating, perhaps unintentionally, the trope of the vanishing Indian. The reader might recall this earlier passage at the end of the novel when Cora travels West, rather than North as expected.

Ollie's carriage and the kind of affiliation it represents does not tear down the infrastructure of the nation-state, but it does offer a refuge—a pocket where strays might assemble. At the same time that the novel reminds the reader of the reality of settler colonial dispossession—and Black people's involvement in it—the ending also contains a note of hope, offering Cora an "embryonic" (Feith 156) community and the potential for "happiness that is not a state but a process" (156). The formerly enslaved people are "arrivants"— "those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe" (Byrd, *Transit* xix). We could read this ending, or even the novel as a whole, as a missed opportunity for more robust thinking about the possibilities of solidarity between Black and Indigenous people. However, I suggest we read it more generously**.** The tunnel Cora builds represents a project, albeit one that Whitehead's novel does not fully carry out: to build a world that does not follow the logic of the one we already have. Though Cora, Ollie, and the others cannot escape the infrastructure of America, they do not fit into it smoothly and cannot be fully contained by its logic. Moreover, when Cora sets off with her new friends, the novel ends, rendering these fugitives entirely untrackable.

Having gone off the tracks, Cora absconds beyond pursuit, leaving behind both Ridgeway and the reader as well. She does not find a home or a definitive space of freedom, but neither is she captured.

By way of conclusion, I return to the fugitive slave ads Whitehead intersperses throughout the novel. In addition to the prosaic language inherent to the genre of the classified ad, the placement of these documents in the novel is significant. The novel alternates chapters named after states that Cora visits with chapters named after secondary characters. The ads appear before the beginning of each geographical chapter (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and the North), serving as paratextual links between distinct sections of the novel and between the different states Cora visits during her journey. The classified ads, therefore, function as an infrastructure for the novel itself, connecting the various geographical settings and providing a sense of continuity and repetition even as the states named move increasingly northward. By marking the way from Georgia to "the North" with a series of ads that remind the reader of the Fugitive Slave Act, the novel's paratextual infrastructure undermines the sentimental slavery-to-freedom progression central to many nineteenth-century slave narratives and abolitionist fictions. It is impossible to flee slavery, the ads emphasize, because no geographical location is untouched by the reach of antiblackness.

As I mentioned earlier, the sixth and final ad was not collected from UNC Greensboro's digital newspaper archive but rather written by Whitehead. Like the other ads, it appears on the opposite side of the page that shows the geographical location that

Cora will visit in the upcoming section of the novel—in this case, the north. In many other ways, though, this ad differs from the preceding ones:

> RAN AWAY
>
> from her legal but not rightful master fifteen
> months past, a slave girl called CORA; of
> ordinary height and dark brown complexion;
> has a star-shape mark on her temple from
> an injury; possessed of a spirited nature and
> devious method. Possibly answering to the
> name BESSIE.
> Last seen in Indiana among the outlaws of
> John Valentine Farm.
> She has stopped running.
> Reward remains unclaimed.
> SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY.
> DECEMBER 23 (*Underground* 304)

Distinguishing between the "legal" and the "rightful," the ad insists on the difference and potential incompatibility of the law with ethics. The phrase "Last seen among the outlaws of John Valentine Farm" implies not only Cora's outlaw status, but also that she is now out of sight, having left the tracks on which she was expected to stay. Fittingly, unlike the earlier ads, there is no year and location on the ad; her movement is

timeless and placeless—untrackable. The ad contains no owner's name, of course, because "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY."

Harnessing the unlyrical style of the classified ad as a generic form, Whitehead undercuts the infrastructure the previous ads provide. Through the phrase "She has stopped running," the ad suggests that Cora's passage through her tunnel is not running, whereas her earlier travels were. There is no fleeing slavery, but Cora's movement constitutes a kind of flight that is not simply fleeing; it is a generative movement in service of creating a new collectivity, rather than simply movement away from slavery. Her unsentimental, tangible, and straying movements refuse the hold of antiblackness and settler colonial capitalism, as well as the realms of ownership and of the "proper" in all its forms, including the sentimental imperative to "feel right" (Stowe 495).

CHAPTER 2

Visibility: Blake Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears*

In 2016, HBO's science fiction drama *Westworld* premiered to widespread acclaim. *Westworld* revolves around a western-themed amusement park filled with android "hosts" built to entertain wealthy humans, in large part by allowing these humans to murder, rape, and otherwise brutalize the androids as part of a "wild west" adventure. The show's central plotline involves the hosts discovering and grappling with their sentience. Alongside other staples of American westerns, such as cowboys, outlaws, and madams, the Westworld park includes a fictional Native American tribe called the Ghost Nation. In season one, the show depicts the Ghost Nation as a mass of fierce savages, faces covered in war paint and stamped with their signature bloody handprints. In *Westworld*'s second season, the plot appears to thicken: an episode called "Kiksuya"—written mainly in Lakota, the language that the Ghost Nation was programmed to speak—focuses on tribal leader Akecheta, revealing a moving backstory and rich interiority. The episode has received mainstream praise, including for the way that it critiques "the sweep of American history," during which white settlers have justified brutality against Native people and other racialized groups by "[making] them seem less human" (Gilbert). The episode also seems to comment on and challenge hegemonic narratives that depict Native Americans with simplistic clichés, whether as brutal warriors or spiritually enlightened beings. Critics have also praised the showrunners for casting Lakota actor Zahn McClarnon as Akecheta and for hiring Larry

Pouier and Cordelia White Elk to serve as cultural and language advisors because "[the showrunners] wanted to get the language especially right" (McClarnon quoted in Wigler).

The "Kiksuya" episode calls attention to the limits of liberal historical narratives rooted in recognition and inclusion. While "Kiksyua" appears to critique the ways that white settlers have represented Indigenous people, the episode features no actual Indigenous characters—only simulations like Akecheta, a member of a fictional tribe (the Ghost Nation) invented by a white man named Robert Ford, the creator of the Westworld Park. Moreover, Akecheta's story quickly becomes absorbed into *Westworld*'s existential musings and its robot uprising plot. In other words, *Westworld* seeks to make Native people *visible* (literally through the hiring of a Lakota actor and narratively through its foregrounding of putatively Native characters), but it is not invested in decolonization. It is also significant that the showrunners' focus on cultural sensitivity, evidenced by their use of consultants, does not prevent the show from using consumable images of Indigenous people to power its narrative—a narrative driven by the desires of non-Indigenous characters and intended for a largely non-Indigenous viewership. *Westworld*'s settler capitalist imperative, however, is packaged as a progressive critique of hegemonic U.S. narratives. This imperative is authenticated with an Indigenous actor and Lakota cultural/language consultants.

Westworld exemplifies a common problem of narratives involving Indigenous people that are created *by* settlers or primarily *for* settler audiences. It is all too easy for such seemingly progressive critiques of U.S. history—which attempt to make visible

Indigenous presence, overturn hegemonic narratives, and depict Native people in "culturally sensitive" ways—to align with the violent methods settlers have used to forward the project of conquest. Several years before the premiere of *Westworld,* Cherokee writer Blake Hausman takes up this problem in *Riding the Trail of Tears,* a novel that uses the trope of technological simulation for different ends than HBO's series. Hausman's novel centers on a virtual reality (V.R.) experience called the Tsalagi Removal Exodus Point Park (TREPP), which allows tourists to experience the Cherokee Removal as a user-friendly, entertaining, and educational experience. Customers purchase an identity, select a desired level of violence, and strap into VR "Chairsuits" to enter the world of the Trail. The goal of the game is to make it from Georgia to Indian Territory in Oklahoma alive. The novel's protagonist, Tallulah, who is enrolled in both the Eastern Band of Cherokee and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma (Hausman 39), works as a tour guide tasked with helping players navigate the journey. The "thrilling struggle to survive" is "meant to be fun for the whole family" (Hausman 58), as well as an opportunity to share Cherokee culture with tourists who might "broaden their horizons" (15) through the experience. Hausman deploys the trope of VR to ask: What are the stakes of making a history of atrocity against Indigenous people more visible to settlers? Can such a history be rendered tangible but not consumable? Most importantly, what is the relationship between *learning* or *teaching* about the history of settler colonialism and *acting* in the service of decolonization?

Whereas chapter one charted the domesticating workings of sentimentality, this chapter theorizes issues of visibility in the context of contemporary debates about historical memory, reconciliation, and recognition. I examine *Riding the Trail of Tears*

as a literary case study that speaks to these issues. The published scholarship on *Riding the Trail of Tears* is very slim.[34] I seek to augment this scholarship because Hausman's novel is especially relevant in a time when many North American institutions—from museums and universities to mainstream media organizations like HBO—are making efforts to grapple with the legacies of Indigenous genocide. These institutions efforts' often take place within a framework of reconciliation and multicultural inclusion that seeks to make Indigenous histories and cultures visible—and, often, palatable or consumable—to settler audiences. As Indigenous studies scholars like Glen Coulthard, Audra Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Elizabeth Povinelli argue, the politics of recognition often revamp colonial power rather than destabilizing it.[35] Moreover, setter institutions can use the discourse of multicultural inclusion to deputize Indigenous people into positions of complicity. The imbrication of settler colonialism with capitalism's drive to commodify Indigenous life heightens these dangers. Turning away from forms of historicizing that seek to make visible, Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears* explores the political potential of invisibility and illegibility as tools for decolonization.

[34] See Brown Spiers for the only article that takes up Hausman's novel as its main subject. Anderson and Taylor, Lewis, and S. Teuton include brief discussions of the novel in essays on other topics, while Frazier includes an analysis of it in her MA thesis.
[35] These varied critiques differ in terms of their tribal and national contexts, their methodological frameworks, and the specific contours of their arguments. What they share is the premise that the cultural and/or political recognition of Indigenous peoples by settler nation-states can strengthen colonial power.

Historicizing and the Problem of Visibility

Native visibility is double-edged. Since the first European settlers discursively marked the Americas as *terra nullius*, unimproved and unoccupied, Indigenous erasure has been a condition of possibility for settler nation-states.[36] However, countering erasure is not merely a matter of highlighting Native presence. As Louis Owens puts it, "In order to be recognized—to claim authenticity in the world—*in order to be seen at all*—the Indian must conform to an identity imposed from the outside. As Hollywood and every savvy Indian fundraiser know, there is nothing like traditional regalia and a drum to get the cash flowing" (12-13, emphasis original). Many Native writers write with the awareness that "to be readily recognized (and thus sold) as authentically 'Indian,' their art must be figuratively dressed in braids, beads, and buckskin"—and, as in the case of Mourning Dove, their publisher might even adorn the book cover with an "Indian-looking" photograph against the wishes of the writer (Owens 14).

The pressure for Native people to present themselves in a circumscribed way results from the settler investment in creating and consuming what Gerald Vizenor calls the *indian*.[37] Images of Native people appear in marketing for products including shoes, perfume, motor oil, beer, and, of course, sports teams; in the colonial imaginary, Native people can represent "strength and courage," the "simple innocence of nature,"

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[36] Through what Jean O'Brien calls "firsting and lasting"(xiii)—a narrative and representational process that "insisted that non-Indians held exclusive sway over modernity, denied modernity to Indians, and in the process created a narrative of Indian extinction that has stubbornly remained in the consciousness and unconsciousness of Americans" (xiii)—settlers have "failed or refused *to recognize Indian peoples as such*" (xv).

[37] Vizenor uses the lower-case, italicized word *Indian* as an "ironic name" (*Fugitive Poses* 15) for simulated images of Native people created by Europeans.

"ferocity," "agility," and more (Francis 147). Products and mascots featuring "Native" imagery tend to be widely beloved among settlers, but they have deleterious consequences for Indigenous people. As such images circulate, "Tribal realities are superseded by simulations of the unreal, and tribal wisdom is weakened by those imitations, however sincere" (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* 8). Colonial images buttress ideas about Native authenticity, present Native people as vanishing or vanished, and obscure the complexity of Indigenous societies.

Indigenous activists have fought the appropriation of "Native" imagery and logos for many decades, and in recent years some of these efforts have borne fruit. In 2020, Land O'Lakes Butter decided to remove the "Native American maiden" (nicknamed "Mia") from its products—a move that, tellingly, generated controversy among some white settlers, who threatened "to boycott Land O'Lakes products that don't showcase the image" (Wu). Just weeks later, the owner of the Washington Redskins football team finally retired the team's racist name and logo. However, these two stories are not entirely symmetrical. Whereas the Redskins have no connection to actual Indigenous people, the Land O' Lakes logo was partially designed by Red Lake Ojibwe artist Patrick DesJarlait. As Kevin Dragseth explains, "[DesJarlait] pulled from his own life experience to put Mia in a real Minnesota place: The Narrows, where Upper and Lower Red Lake connect. He refined her character, updating her visage and attire, including Ojibwe beadwork designs on her dress" (Dragseth). When Mia was removed from the logo, DesJarlait's son, Robert, expressed mixed feelings about the decision, saying, "I know my dad didn't intend to create a stereotype… [He was] trying to show more the beauty of Native women" (Dragseth). Whereas some Indian logos are

caricatures, DesJarlait's design incorporated cultural knowledge and context; it showed an Ojibwe woman on her ancestral lands. Nonetheless, his image was received as a stereotype. DesJarlait's story indexes the complexity that Native creators face in making art for non-Native audiences, particularly in the context of marketing.

What might be called the trap of visibility goes beyond questions of stereotypical representation. "To see," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, can mean "to foresee or forecast" or "to understand" (See, v.), and the sense of sight has long been associated in Euro-American philosophy with epistemological mastery. *Riding the Trail of Tears* connects seeing and knowing when Tallulah uses excessive visual metaphors with her tourists to cover up her *lack* of understanding—"she's defaulting to visual clichés precisely because she can't see!" (Hausman 91). To see is to know, and to be visible is to be knowable and thus subject to particular formations of power. As Audra Simpson puts it, "Knowing and representing people within [colonial] spaces required more than military might; it required the methods and modalities of knowing—in particular, categorization, ethnological comparison, linguistic translation, and ethnography" (*Mohawk Interruptus* 95). Simpson draws a connection between knowledge and representation, and between these and violence; "military might" and "modalities of knowing" can both be tools of colonial dominion.

Indigenous thinkers are well aware of the dangers attached to visibility under the settler gaze. Simpson calls for "an improved ethnographic form within Indigenous North America," invested in "the making of claims and the staking of limits" (*Mohawk Interruptus* 102)**.** Such "ethnographies of refusal" require an "ethnographic calculus" that considers "what you need to know and what I refuse to write" (A. Simpson,

Mohawk Interruptus 105). Simpson comments on the challenge of writing academic ethnography while keeping her people's (the Mohawks of Kahnawá:ke) sovereignty at the forefront. As she interviewed them about the Indian Act, Simpson's informants often deliberately withheld information, and she limited what questions she asked, knowing that her work would be read by people who are not invested in promoting Mohawk sovereignty. For many Euro-Americans, the idea of limiting information is "dangerous" and "a violation of shared standards of justice and truth" (A. Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal" 74). Elizabeth Povinelli uses the term "liberal diaspora" to describe "the colonial and postcolonial subjective, institutional, and discursive identifications, dispersions, and elaborations of the enlightenment idea that society should be organized on the basis of rational mutual understanding" (6). For Indigenous people, the refusal to reveal information about lifeways, traditions, and other aspects of Indigenous community is an important protective mechanism. As Daniel Heath Justice puts it, "to insist that all things should be available without limit to everyone is to exercise a particularly corrosive kind of universalizing colonialist privilege; claiming entitlement to all peoples' knowledge is, after all, just one of the many expropriating features of settler colonial violence" (25). Being epistemologically knowable can tether Native people not just to settler stereotypes but also to settler society's political and social structures.

Hausman's novel suggests that even when it is accurate and well-intended—sometimes even when enacted by a knowledgeable Indigenous person—historicizing can become entangled with problematic acts of making visible and collude with settler colonial processes of incorporation that ultimately seek to eliminate Native people. The

origin story of the TREPP is telling on this point. The technological basis for the TREPP was invented by Tallulah's grandfather, a Cherokee inventor named Arthur "Art" Wilson, who worked out of his basement. The original technology, called "Surround Vision," was "a big red Jeep Cherokee with television windows" (Hausman 32). The driver and passengers could watch digital Cherokees walk the Trail on the screens. Since the narrator refers to Art as a "cultural emissary of the Cherokee Nation" (Hausman 145), it is reasonable to guess that Art invented the TREPP to present the history of the Trail of Tears from a Cherokee perspective.[38] The technology would allow tourists to see—literally, on eight TV screens all around them—the "mass of bent and broken bodies that stretched up to a mile long at the beginning of the trip" (Hausman 33). Presumably, making this history visible would both educate viewers and cultivate empathy for Cherokee people. Upon Art's death, the Museum of the Cherokee Indian inherited Art's inventions along with their intellectual property rights (Hausman 34) and eventually sold the rights to a non-Native businessman named Jim Campbell. Campbell's foundation developed the TREPP from the Jeep Cherokee prototype into the immersive VR tour experience.

The sale of the TREPP to Campbell has a real-life analog. The Museum of the Cherokee Indian, located in Cherokee, GA, is run by the Eastern Band of Cherokee and opened in 1976. In 1998, during a major remodel, the museum's directors hired a "Disney affiliate to design and film the animated parts of the exhibit" (Beard-Moose 106) in order to make it more engaging for tourists. According to Christina Beard-

[38] Similarly, critic Miriam Brown Spiers speculates that the ride was originally meant to "present Cherokee worldviews to a mainstream audience" (61).

Moose, who studied the museum before and after the remodel, Disney's involvement resulted in entertaining but simplified and sometimes inaccurate portrayals of Eastern Cherokee life, omitting critical aspects of the history such as "the matrilineal, matrilocal, and matrifocal systems that the Cherokees lived with prior to and after removal" (115). The museum's design gives visitors the impression that Cherokees are little different from white settlers, erasing the specificity of "culturally Cherokee lifeways" (Beard-Moose 115). It is important to note that it is not my intention (nor is it Beard-Moose's) to condemn the Eastern Band for permitting the Disneyfication of the Museum. Indeed, Beard-Moose argues that Cherokee *private* life resists incorporation into settler colonial structures, even though public attractions run by the Eastern Band or by individual Cherokees often play purposefully into settler stereotypes. That said, the museum's representations of Cherokee life, calibrated for the settler gaze, remain concerning because they reinforce colonial ideas about Indigenous people and have the potential to impact Cherokee youth who view them (Beard-Moose 116).

Another situation involving tourism to Cherokee country is equally indicative of the complexity of Indigenous life within settler colonial capitalism. In September 2012, the Tribal Council of the Eastern Band of Cherokee approved proposed plans for an amusement park and resort on tribal land. To be created in partnership with the development firm Iconica, which has spearheaded other parks such as the African-themed Kalahari Resort, the proposed park is intended to turn Cherokee country from a "pass through market" into a "high overnight stay destination" (McKie). Tom Pientka, the CEO of Iconica, told *The Cherokee One Feather* that the marketing of the park would be easy because "Cherokee culture is the brand, and we'd build around that"

(quoted in McKie). Tribal Council representative Adam Wachacha noted that the park would bring in much-needed revenue for the tribe and diversify revenue streams, which are currently dependent on gaming. Wachacha added: "I like the idea that it is going to be more Cherokee-themed. That's what this town needs" (quoted in McKie). While, as of the time of this writing, the amusement park has not been built, Hausman would probably have been aware of these plans when he wrote *Riding the Trail of Tears*. The language used to describe the TREPP seems to allude to the proposed amusement park. For instance, within a few years of opening, the TREPP "became a destination for summer travelers and adventure seekers" (Hausman 14) whose "reputation had spread across oceans" (14). Drawing a slew of overseas travelers to under-touristed northeast Georgia, the TREPP certainly uses (a version of) Cherokee culture as its brand, with Tallulah herself having played "a major role in the boom" (Hausman 14).

In short, *Riding the Trail of Tears* comments on the double-edged impacts of tourism and the challenges of presenting Indigenous history and culture to settlers. The incorporation of Art Wilson's well-intended invention into settler colonial capitalism (through the transformation of his original prototype into a mega-attraction geared towards settler visitors) suggests that making Indigenous history visible to settlers does not inherently serve the decolonial interests of Indigenous people. Jim Campbell's foundation paid Tallulah's rent and part of her college tuition and involved her in developing the ride as a "cultural consultant" (Hausman 172). Tallulah is well compensated for her efforts: "Her insurance never troubles her about paying for massage therapy. Her hybrid Honda sedan is entirely paid off. She is a homeowner in her twenties. Her refrigerator is always stocked. If she ever got pregnant, she could take

four full months off" (Hausman 15). Considering the high poverty rates that impact Native Americans—over twenty-five percent live at or below the poverty line, compared to around eight percent for white Americans—Tallulah's material comfort is significant.[39] However, to gain these economic benefits, she must help make "Indigeneity" visible in troubling ways. On a physical level, the TREPP presents Indians as having essential phenotypical qualities, defining Indigeneity through visible characteristics. Tallulah is prominently featured in the TREPP promotional photos, which "accentuate her hair. Indian hair. The most Indian of her features" (Hausman 361). She becomes a kind of "mascot" (Hausman 27) for the TREPP, her image used to disseminate static, biologically-based notions of what it means to be "Indian."

Even more disturbingly, tourists receive phenotypical features associated with Indigeneity when they are inside the ride. In a high-tech iteration of what Philip Deloria calls "Indian play," they come to look "noticeably Indian. The white folks are darker, Michael Hopkins [a Black man] is a shade lighter, and the Johnson twins are roughly the same. Everyone's cheekbones have grown a touch higher" (Hausman 79). [40] As soon as tourists enter the First Cabin, a looted Cherokee home that serves as the beginning of the Trail, there is a broken mirror conveniently available so that they can spend a few moments "celebrating their new skins" (Hausman 79) among the wreckage. As Deloria argues, consumerist Indian play requires Native people to "make a material performance of their Indianess—one that visibly [defines] native people's racial

[39] These numbers are based on data from 2018. See Muhammad et. al.
[40] The concept of "playing indian," as theorized by Philip Deloria, is a practice of white settlers enacting constructed images of Indigeneity through disguise in order to negotiate U.S. American identity.

difference" (149), even as it, paradoxically, "relies on a culture-based blurring of social boundaries" (149)—a blurring that the TREPP makes especially potent by changing the tourists' phenotypes. In other words, the TREPP blurs the lines between settler and Native person while also defining Indigeneity through Euro-American racial criteria rooted in notions of phenotype and, presumably, in blood quantum.

On another level, the ride and Tallulah as a tour guide purposefully play into stereotypes of Native authenticity—the kind of authenticity that "could be bought and sold in material forms" (Deloria 148)—to make "Indigeneity" recognizable to settlers. For example, at one point when her tourists are becoming discouraged while walking the Trail, Tallulah "reaches her hands up high, reaching slowly as if each second were an endless vision, reaching for the blue ceiling as if she were the incarnated indigenous holy ghost" (Hausman 87), giving the tourists the strength to keep walking through her "spiritual performance" (87). Though for Tallulah, such simulations are conscious—she sees herself as "a performance artist" or, more cynically, "a history whore" (Hausman 27)—they nonetheless buttress settler colonial stereotypes. Tallulah's most vital role as a tour guide is to lead her tourists to Indian Territory, but to do so, she models and encourages surrender to the virtual soldiers, who will kill any resisters. As Brown Spiers puts it, the game "encourages them to surrender in order to survive" (69). When Tallulah models passivity, she enacts (and encourages her "Indigenized" tourists to enact) the trope of the "stoic Indian" who is resigned to settler incursions.[41] Tallulah's

[41] This is the image of Native Americans popularized by the photographs of settler ethnologist Edward S. Curtis in the early twentieth century, and it is a trope that continues to live on in film and TV, so it would be familiar to Tallulah's tourists.

experience highlights what Povinelli describes as the "impossible demand" multicultural settler states impose on Indigenous people: "namely, that they desire and identify with their cultural traditions in a way that just so happens, in an uncanny convergence of interests, to fit the national and legal imaginary of multiculturalism" (8). As Tallulah shares "authentic" Cherokee culture with the tourists, she reinforces tropes that render Indigenous people as vanished, with no continuing claims to land. If she were to represent Indigeneity in any other way, settler tourists would likely question her authenticity.

It is important to note that stereotypical performances of Indigeneity by Native people such as Tallulah should not always be read as accommodationist. Christopher Pexa convincingly argues that similar performances by nineteenth-century Dakhóta intellectuals were actually ways of hiding Dakhóta relational ethics within liberal discourses so that "ciphered Dakhóta knowledge" (94) could be passed onto future generations of the Oyate. Pexa refers to the intellectuals he discusses as "unheroic decolonizers" because they were not enacting individualist, overt acts of revolt, but rather quietly "reconstructing a peoplehood based in ethics of the thióšpaye" (xiii) while appearing harmless to settlers.[42] In short, Pexa suggests that sometimes performing to settler expectations can be a way for Native people to sustain and rebuild their communities. This kind of rusing is "less explicit than refusal" (Pexa 12) but has similar

[42] "Thióšpaye," literally meaning "camp circle," denotes "extended family as lived through relationships with and among tribal bands" (37). Pexa uses the term "Thióšpaye ethics" to refer to Dakhóta relational norms about behavior towards humans and other-than-humans (including land).

goals. Tallulah's work for the TREPP raises the question of whether she too is an "unheroic decolonizer."

The novel offers some evidence for such a reading of Tallulah. While she works for a settler-controlled company, she maintains personal ties with Cherokee people, including her Grandma Lee (Art Wilson's widow), who lives at the Qualla Boundary, and her boyfriend, a Cuban Cherokee man named John Bushyhead. Furthermore, as a tour guide, she sometimes engages in the kind of teasing characteristic of unheroic decolonizers. For instance, when asked if she is named after actress Tallulah Bankhead, she likes to quip, "Actually, Tallulah Bankhead was named after me" (22), calling attention to Tallulah Falls and to the fact that "it all comes back to Cherokee words and ancient rivers and things that lived here long before the Old South began to imagine itself as Old" (Hausman 23). The "reversed causality" (Hausman 23) of her joke places Native lands and people at the center of U.S. history while preventing her tourists from becoming too uncomfortable.

However, even as the novel is cognizant of and sympathetic to Tallulah's complex social positioning and the choices it leads her to make, Hausman also highlights the pitfalls of these ambivalent forms of decolonization. Despite Tallulah's subtle jabs, the TREPP makes Indians visible, recognizable, and knowable in order to incorporate them into institutions of settler colonial life. Carol Warrior illuminates how this process works when she argues that the act of freezing often precedes the act of consumption. Native people who are "fixed through treaty, law, policy (and the internalization of settler-colonial discourse) can be more readily commodified and incorporated into the colonial, or 'wrong,' national body" (Warrior 385). By forcing

Native people "to take one form, to stop moving, and to fulfill one reduced purpose" (Warrior 385), settler institutions render Native people "controllable, dominatable, and ultimately, consumable" (386). Hausman's novel suggests that some methods of performing history can make Native people visible, but they do so precisely by freezing them (in space, in time, in particular representations) so they can be incorporated into settler colonial society. The TREPP reduces Cherokees to literal "stock characters," and Tallulah herself performs her Indigeneity in ways that feed into settler colonial expectations. However, I argue that in her interactions with two groups of Native characters—the Little Little People and the Misfits—Tallulah learns about the decolonial value of illegibility and comes to enact an explicit form of ethnographic and material refusal.

To understand Tallulah's transformation, which I will discuss in more depth later, we must first examine the novel's meditations on visibility and legibility. Addressing the dangers of visibility, the novel theorizes the liberatory possibilities of obscuring some kinds of Indigenous knowledge. Though the malfunction of the TREPP remains a mystery to the novel's characters, readers eventually piece together that beings from Cherokee oral tradition have taken up residence within the ride and are changing its programming. The narrator of the novel is one of these beings.[43] The narrator states that "according to the books you can access from a reputable library," the Cherokee oral tradition is commonly accepted to contain "two main categories of Cherokee characters who look like humans" (Hausman 5): the Little People and the

[43] I will refer to this narrator with the pronoun "they" since we do not know what the narrator's gender is, or whether the Little Little People even have genders.

Nunnehi. However, the narrator belongs to a third category of beings, which, for convenience, they refer to as the "Little Little People." The narrator explains that the Little Little People were cut from Cherokee oral narratives several hundred years before colonization, during a revolution when the Cherokees overthrew their class of priests.[44] During this revolution, the narrator claims, the oral tradition mutated, and the Little Little People were forgotten. Furthermore, because the Little Little People are "smaller than [human] tear ducts" (Hausman 3), they elude vision, and their existence is unknown to humans.

If *Riding the Trail of Tears* were invested in making erased stories visible, we might expect that the narrator would want to return the Little Little People back into the historical archive. But while the novel constitutes an account to the reader, the narrator shows ambivalence about this project of revelation. This ambivalence makes sense considering the dangers of presenting tribal histories to a non-Native audience. Craig Howe explains that tribal histories are created and intended for particular communities and that their purpose is to "recount events that in some fundamental sense [relate] [Native communites] to their surroundings—to other humans, to plants and animals, to landmarks and constellations" (163). When presented to the non-tribal public, it can be

[44] The story of the revolt against the priests, a class called the Ani-kutani, is part of the Cherokee oral tradition. As Christopher B. Teuton writes: "Though the Cherokee have seven clans today, the old ones say we once had eight. The Ani-Kutani were the eighth clan, sacred medicine people who wielded tremendous power…But their power corrupted them, and they began taking greater and greater liberties with their fellow Cherokee … The Cherokee rose up against the priests, and a civil war ensued. The Ani-Kutani were destroyed, every remaining member of the clan killed" (3). The story of the Little Little People that the narrator tells in *Riding the Trail of Tears* typifies Hausman's playful treatment of the oral tradition.

challenging to keep the non-tribal institution, such as a museum, from "appropriating what it needs and then going away and doing with that information what it wants" (Howe 174). The narrator in *Riding the Trail of Tears* notes that stories from the Cherokee oral tradition appear in books that one can borrow through a "reputable library" (Hausman 5). This accessibility poses dangers since, as Daniel Heath Justice puts it, "[Indigenous] textualities and interpretative traditions generally require particular kinds of extensive specialized training that are most often limited to specific community members … Outsiders who approach them as simply a different form of writing are likely to misread them, or worse, misuse them, with often quite negative results" (23). I am not suggesting that it is impossible to share Indigenous oral traditions and knowledge with outsiders in ethical ways—indeed, Justice, Howe, and others have done just that—but rather that misappropriation and misuse are real concerns.[45]

These concerns might partially explain the narrator's ambivalence, especially their statement that "the benefit to being outside the stories is that no one knows about you" (Hausman 6). They continue: "The point is that documentation gives people a profile, and humans are both seduced and terrified by profiles" (Hausman 6). I suggest that the narrator resists making the story of the Little Little People fully knowable because concealment makes the process of appropriating Indigenous knowledge to incorporate Native people into settler societies more difficult. Moreover, invisibility enables a turn from colonial recognition, allowing for political strategies that more

[45] For instance, Justice's *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* is published through a university press and written for a broad audience that includes non-Native readers. Howe has worked extensively with non-tribal institutions such as the Smithsonian and also founded The Center for Native American Research and Native Studies (CAIRNS).

effectively counter the violence of settler colonialism. Hausman's novel repeatedly demonstrates the benefits of invisibility, both literal (being hidden from the eye) and metaphorical (being epistemologically illegible). These forms of illegibility enable characters in the novel to materially refuse and dismantle colonial structures through covert movement and direct action that flies under the radar of settler surveillance.

A Glitch in the System

The concept of direct action traditionally has strong links to visibility. Commonly conceptualized as "unconventional, nonviolent political action that is undertaken when conventional politics is unavailable or inadequate to effect significant change" (Terchek 937), this set of political tactics seeks "to place items on the public agenda, mobilize groups, penalize intransigent officials, publicize problems or misdeeds, and work for transparency in public matters" (937). Although the term is admittedly "slippery and imprecise," the "basic vision of direct action outlined by Dr. King in his letter from a Birmingham jail has shaped its use ever since" (Kauffman). For King, marches, sit-ins, and other acts of civil disobedience work "to dramatize the issue [of racial oppression] so that it can no longer be ignored" (M.L. King).

In recent years, Indigenous studies scholars have addressed the importance of direct action as an alternative to the politics of colonial recognition. Their work calls into question the idea that direct action inherently requires visibility. Glen Coulthard argues that direct action is productive not necessarily because it publicizes Indigenous issues but because it is a tangible mobilization of Indigenous people's resentment, or politicized anger against the colonizer. Resentment is the starting point for an

"alternative politics of recognition"—one where Indigenous people recognize each other, rather than being recognized by settler states—that entails both negation and affirmation. For instance, blockades, like those used by Idle No More protestors, negate capitalist exploitation of Indigenous lands by "block[ing] the flow of resources," and they are simultaneously affirmative because they "embody an enactment of Indigenous law" (170).[46]

In a broader conceptualization, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson contends that "Placing Indigenous bodies on the land in any Indigenous context through engagement with Indigenous practices is direct action" (236). Simpson gives many examples of such "everyday acts of resurgence" (236) that function as direct action, including

> a freedom schools in Kanien'kehá:ka territory, a blockade against deforestation in Nishnabeg territory, a bush university in Denendeh, an alternative justice system for sexual offenders in Hollow Water, a Cree language house in a city, Native youth providing peer-to-peer support related to sexuality, gender violence, and addictions, or thousands of moccasin vamps traveling Turtle Island." (237)

These instantiations of direct action are not enacted for settler consumption; settler involvement is not required at all. In many cases, such forms of direct action create

[46] Idle No More is an Indigenous protest movement in Canada. Coulthard summarizes the development of the movement: "What originally began in the fall of 2012 as an education campaign designed to inform Canadians about a particularly repugnant and undemocratic piece of legislation recently passed by the Canadian federal government—the Jobs and Growth Act, or Bill C-45, which threatens to erode Indigenous land and treaty rights—had erupted by mid-January 2013 into a full-blown defense of Indigenous land and sovereignty" (24).

alternatives to settler institutions, like the Hollow Water alternative justice system. Like Coulthard, Simpson argues that to refuse colonial institutions is to "generate something different" (17). This generative refusal is the core of direct action as a practice of radical resurgence.

In short, for both Simpson and Coulthard, direct action is not meant to "dramatize" oppression; instead, direct action constitutes a turn towards Indigenous modalities of living. This kind of direct action does not require Indigenous people to make themselves knowable or understandable to settlers. Furthermore, both Simpson and Coulthard emphasize that in the context of Indigenous resistance, so-called "negative" or "reactive" political stances are inextricable from "affirmative" ones. This insight is vital because one common criticism leveled against activists eager to tear down oppressive systems is that such a political stance is merely negative and thus unproductive. Coulthard, discussing Idle No More, summarizes this line of critique as

> a neo-Neitzchean concern over the largely *reactive* stance that such acts of resistance take in practice. On the surface, blockades in particular appear to be the epitome of *reaction* insofar as they clearly embody a resounding "no" but fail to offer a more *affirmative* gesture or alternative built into the practice itself. The risk here is that, in doing so, these *ressentiment*-laden modalities of Indigenous resistance reify the very structures or social relationships we find so abhorrent." (169, emphasis original)

Put simply, this line of critique holds that Indigenous people only reify their dependency on their oppressors by framing their politics as a response to settler actions.

However, Coulthard points out that Indigenous disruption is frequently affirmative in its negativity. As Coulthard puts it, within the *no* of the "explicitly disruptive oppositional practices" of Indigenous communities there is also "a resounding 'yes': they are the affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world" (169). The rupture of settler colonial world-making practices creates a new world, one that is not simply a return to a frozen and idealized past but is nonetheless rooted in Indigenous values, such as "ancestral obligations to protect the lands that are core to who we are as Indigenous peoples" (Coulthard 169). The kinds of direct action Coulthard and Simpson describe entail turning away from the settler gaze in order to engage in Native-centered worldmaking.

Hausman's novel theorizes the possibilities of direct action, supplementing the insights that thinkers like Simpson and Coulthard offer by concretizing how invisibility and illegibility can work in the service of direct action. The narrator of *Riding the Trail of Tears* enacts a refusal in the very telling of the story. As I discussed, the narrator refuses to reinsert the Little Little People's story back into Cherokee tribal history since that would also risk making the story more fully accessible to people that may not have a right to this knowledge. Nor is the narrator particularly interested in making visible a genealogy of erasure: aside from the brief account about the priests, the narrator reveals nothing about why precisely this revolution would have caused the erasure of the Little Little People from Cherokee oral narratives. Finally, the narrator does not reveal *how* precisely the Little Little People impact the program, nor *what* their presence in human bodies does. Readers only know the effects: that the techs can no longer control the

game, or that some tourists begin to "hole up." The novel never resolves or clarifies these various opacities. Refusal and illegibility undergird the novel's aesthetic form.

Moreover, the narrator and the other Little Little People use their invisibility to enact concrete, material change. We learn that the narrator had been living on Tallulah's body, "lodging [themself] into the kinks between the bones where her eyes and nose converge" (Hausman 7) and traveling daily between the organic world where Tallulah lives and the digital world where she works. The narrator is the first to make this leap outside of the program. Some of the Little Little People did not believe it was possible to live outside of the TREPP: "We were programmed to believe that things digital could never fully enter the consciousness of things organic" (Hausman 2). The narrator proves that this belief is wrong, giving support to those Little Little People who argue that "[they] were by nature built to move, that invisibility is a right worth exercising" (Hausman 7). While some of the narrator's fellows at first fear the organic world, they are seduced by the narrator's stories and seek to free themselves from the confines of the TREPP. They "[start] planting themselves inside the tourists" (8), which is when the most apparent malfunctions in the program begin. Invisibility enhances the Little Little People's mobility, and, as numerous Indigenous scholars have argued, mobility is central to decolonization.[47]

It is because they are both imperceptible to the human eye and "outside the stories" (Hausman 6) that the Little Little People can infiltrate the VR system. The

[47] For example, see Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*; Warrior, "Indigenous Collectives" (especially 387-389); and Martineau and Ritskes, "Fugitive Indigeneity."

novel suggests that their movement between organic and virtual reality causes the TREPP's computer program to malfunction: Technical Control can no longer control tour levels, tourists begin to lose consciousness within the ride, and one tourist, Irma Rosenberg, is transported to the wrong location within the VR world. Several characters, all of whom are unaware of the Little Little People's existence, speculate that the game has been infiltrated. Tallulah "wonders if Tour Group 5709 contains an insurgent customer, someone who has brought a virus into the system" (Hausman 180), whereas another character, the Chef, theorizes that "There's a glitch in the system. Something intrusive" (Hausman 205). Significantly, the Little Little People do not "rewrite," per se, the computer code that controls the TREPP—just as they do not seek to correct the historical record of their own erasure. Instead, their covert movement within and beyond the TREPP's bounds arguably causes the ride's programming to glitch. The Little Little People's tactics map onto arguments Indigenous studies scholars have made about the centrality of material change to decolonization. Leanne Simpson, for instance, argues that because efforts to counter stereotypes about Indigenous people do not require substantive actions (such as the return of land to Indigenous peoples), they are "acceptable to the oppressor, and they only give the illusion of real change" (113). Direct action, however, does create real change—often by preventing a settler colonial system from functioning (like a blockade would do). In *Riding the Trail of Tears,* the Little Little People perform a kind of direct action that *relies* on invisibility. They do not publicize the violence of settler colonialism or change narratives about themselves but instead act to increase their mobility. Through their surreptitious

movement, they introduce a virus into the program that is coloniality, causing the system to glitch.

Unlearning the Programming

There is also a second group of Native characters who use surreptitious movement to enable direct action. As I have mentioned, the novel revolves around the TREPP malfunctioning; this malfunction splits a tourist named Irma off from the rest of the tour group. Irma enters a mysterious realm unknown to either Tallulah or the TREPP programmers. This realm is a liminal space between what the novel refers to as "causality loops," temporal loops within VR that allow multiple tour groups to hook into the ride simultaneously without meeting each other on the Trail. To someone within VR, this realm looks like a stockade resembling the military camps that confined the Cherokees and other Native tribes during the Indian Removals. The V.R. stockade contains hundreds of digital Cherokees clothed in garb from many different centuries of history (buckskins, ribbon shirts, military uniforms, feathers, sports jackets). Their attire and behavior also include references to Euro-American misconceptions: they drink black tea, alluding to Europeans' original conflation between the country of India and the Americas, and each of their seven elders wears a distinguishing baseball cap marked with the logo of a different sports team, such as the Atlanta Braves and the Cleveland Indians. Both Irma and the narrator refer to these characters as "the Misfits." I interpret the Misfits as *indians* who have become aware of their simulated existence and gone fugitive.

Irma learns that the Misfits take pains to conceal themselves from the tourists and guides. They speak in riddles and refuse to tell Irma their names, even though she repeatedly asks for them. The Misfit elders claim that they "don't have names" (Hausman 115) because "one cannot be a target if one has no name" (117). The Misfits are hunted by another mysterious group whom they call "the Suits." Indians Hat (one of the elders) says that the Suits "don't have names either" but that they "gave [the Misfits] names in order to single [them] out" (Hausman 117). When the Suits make an appearance in the stockade, looking for Irma, they shoot several of the younger Misfits before a mysterious character called the Chef, who lives among the Misfits with his two sons Ish and Fish, distracts the Suits with food. Though the novel does not definitively reveal who the Suits are, they could be interpreted as embodiments of the mechanisms that settler societies use to track, contain, and brutalize Native people. These mechanisms, including the legal system and corporate capitalism (both of which involve many people who wear suits), are violent. However, the violence is veiled—for example, with bureaucracy or even with the language of inclusive multiculturalism that so often gives corporate capitalism a progressive face. As one of the elders explains, the Suits "always wear suits" because "blood doesn't show on power suits" (Hausman 118). The Suits "don't have names" precisely because settler colonial violence is dispersed across many institutions and often enacted in such a way that it *appears* not only benign—the blood is hidden by dark power suits—but also nameless and non-agential. In reality, though, all settlers act as its agents, taking part in the institutions and behaviors that dispossess Native people of their lands and self-determination.

To escape the Suits, the elders have hidden their names, and they are teaching the younger Misfits in the stockade to do the same. In response to Irma's concern that without names, the younger Misfits will not "know who they are," the Misfit elders reply that "They don't want to be someone" because "*Someone* can be conquered by our enemies…But once you have become *no* one, they can no longer conquer you" (Hausman 118). In addition to helping them survive the Suits' attacks, hiding their names, the elders say, allows the Misfits to "understand [their] programming" and "unlearn the things they were programmed to do" (Hausman 118). The Misfits are programmed to remain within their liminal space within the game, represented by the stockade. The elders say that "we cannot leave while we still think we're the people we were programmed to be" (Hausman 119). Visually, the stockade looks and feels like a rigid physical structure: "The walls were built of tall logs anchored together, the tops of the logs carved into sharp points that had an ominous tone…the structure did not move. It was firm and all too solid" (Hausman 165). The stockade represents the settler colonial structures that confine and immobilize Native people, such as reservations that arbitrarily divide land as well as institutions of confinement such as boarding schools and prisons. Hausman depicts the material manifestations of settler colonialism.

The Misfits are programmed not only to remain confined but also to hurt themselves physically. After the appearance of the Suits, the Misfits "gave themselves a collective beating…They grunted and screamed and cried and wailed and made themselves bleed" (Hausman 165). The concept of programming functions as a metaphor for how Indigenous people internalize colonialism, racialization, and their traumatic effects. The idea that social and health problems in Native communities are

effects of the history of settler colonialism is widely documented.[48] Hausman's novel gestures towards this body of work on trauma in its depictions of the Misfits and their "programming." However, Hausman's novel does not lean on either of the dominant Euro-American theories of trauma: the medicalized approach or the psychoanalytic approach. Both of these approaches intersect with questions of visibility.

Dian Million argues that medicalized discourses of trauma intersect with neoliberalism, international human rights discourses, and settler colonialism in ways that make such discourses double-edged for Indigenous people and can stifle Indigenous nation-building. For example, healing is often framed by settler nation-states as a prerequisite to self-determination (Million 105), and medicalized understandings of trauma elide the tangible ways that Indigenous people remain dispossessed by settler colonialism, which depends on settler ownership of tribal land (106). It is vital to note the double-edged quality of bringing stories of suffering into the settler public sphere by way of medicalized trauma discourses:

> In the struggle to authorize trauma's discursive truth, Native voices authorize trauma, putting it into motion in their affective testimony. These Native voices become "public" only after their intensity is framed within languages authorized in social programs, ones that were designed to elicit self-examination, psychological evaluation, and testimony for legal domains on *victimization*. They become empowered by trauma's discourse at the same time that they become its subjects." (Million 94)

[48] See, for example, the influential studies of BraveHeart and DeBruyn and Evans-Campbell.

Another way of putting this is that Indigenous people must make their suffering *visible* and *legible* within Euro-American frameworks to have that suffering recognized. When Indigenous people fail or refuse to do so, their stories are received as "unbelievable" because they are not "in correspondence with the narratives of white academics and bureaucrats on what their own experienced was *supposed to be*" (Million 94).

Questions of visibility and historical inscription are also central to psychoanalytic trauma theory. Popularized by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, this body of theory foregrounds the importance of witnessing, listening, and inscribing traumatic experiences into history. In this theoretical framework, empathetic witnessing of the "unclaimed experience" of trauma can lead to a kind of relief or reparation. Trauma theory holds that witnessing does not require understanding the trauma—indeed, a hallmark of trauma theory is that trauma escapes comprehension—but it does necessitate a making visible of the trauma. A traumatic event has happened empirically but has been psychologically "missed" by the event's survivor and thus not been inscribed into history. Dori Laub describes the Holocaust, a paradigmatic collective trauma, as an "*event that produced no witnesses*…the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims" (80, emphasis original). The event of the Holocaust could "become receivable only *today*; it is not by chance that it is only now, *belatedly*, that the event begins to be grasped and seen … these testimonies were not transmittable, and integratable, at the time" (Laub 84). Laub emphasizes the "importance of endeavors like the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale" which "[open] up the historical conceivability (the retrospective condition of

possibility) of the Holocaust witness." The Video Archive serves as a "historical retroaction'" (85) which allows the survivor to "[repossess] one's own story through giving testimony" (85). In other words, the work of historical recovery—the inscription of the trauma into history—creates witnesses and leads to the "resumption of life" (Laub 91). However, the attempted genocide of North America's Native peoples is not a "missed experience" of the sort that psychoanalytic trauma theorists describe. Hausman's novel depicts settler colonialism as a structure with a physical shape (the stockade) that impacts people's daily lives (the concept of programming). This structure is not an experience that can be "missed." It is insistently present and concrete.

Whether psychoanalytic or medicalized, dominant theories of trauma cannot apprehend Indigenous people's experiences of dispossession. Responses to Indigenous trauma must be rooted in Indigenous knowledge and an awareness of the ongoing, material reality of dispossession. *Riding the Trail of Tears* articulates such an approach. We should recall that the elders' refusal of naming is linked to the unlearning of the violent "programming" that keeps the Misfits confined within the stockade and causes them to hurt themselves. The elders have unlearned their programming, so they are neither injured by the Suits nor prone to the self-injury that the other Misfits suffer. In other words, the elders "resist [their] programming" (Hausman 169) by embracing illegibility and turning to Indigenous communal practices that are not sanctioned by or understandable to settlers. For example, in response to the escalating self-inflicted violence, the elders "began to sing…Their songs affected the crowd, but progress was slow" (Hausman 167). To speed up the process, Ish and Fish wheel out a cannon and set it off, so that "the reverb blast shook the entire stockade and silenced the masses"

(Hausman 167). At first glance, this is a curious, perhaps even perverse act: rather than encouraging the suffering Misfits to speak, to narrate or otherwise express their trauma, Ish and Fish silence them with the cannon blast. The elders begin to sing again, this time with a new refrain: "Remember ourselves, remember nothing" (Hausman 168). This refrain is admittedly cryptic and paradoxical—it is, indeed, an example of the productive uncertainty that the novel frequently inculcates—but I suggest that one way to read it is as a call to embrace a kind of illegibility that works in the service of re-instating Native self-determination and cultivating collectivity.

The elders' call to "Remember ourselves" might invoke something like the Anishinaabemowin concept of *Biskaabiiyang*, translated as "returning to ourselves," which scholar Grace Dillon describes as "a healing impulse and a manifesto for all peoples, whether Indigenous or just passing through, about discarding the dirty baggage imposed by the impacts of oppression, and alternatively refashioning ancestral traditions in order to flourish in the post-Native Apocalypse" (9). Leanne Simpson describes *Biskaabiiyang* as "a flight out of the structure of settler colonialism and into the processes and relationships of freedom and self-determination encoded and practiced within Nishnaabewin or grounded normativity" (17). While the elders are Cherokee rather than Anishinaabe, *Biskaabiiyang* might still be an appropriate concept for describing the political thrust of their call to "remember ourselves," especially since Grace Dillon understands it as a portable idea. But what does it mean to "remember nothing," the second part of the elders' refrain? It is notable that earlier the elders had insisted that it is beneficial to be "no one" rather than "someone": "no one" cannot be targeted, tracked, or "conquered by [their] enemies." To be "someone"—or,

alternatively, to be "something"—is to claim a visible, empowered subjectivity, but it is also to be detectible. And that which is detectible is liable to be captured, contained, and violated. The two imperatives are bound together: the call to "remember ourselves," to "refashion ancestral traditions in order to flourish," as Dillon puts it, and the call to "remember nothing," to escape the kind of subjectivity that confines precisely through making visible. Whereas Euro-American theories of trauma, whether medicalized or psychoanalytic, demand that Indigenous people make their trauma visible, an approach rooted in Indigenous theory makes no such demand. On the contrary, it is through a kind of illegibility that the Misfits address their community trauma.

As with the Little Little People, the Misfits' illegibility enables their movement, and they are eventually able to leave the liminal space between virtual loops where the stockade is located. The elders believe "that the Suits have placed [them] here in order to keep [them] out of the mountains" (Hausman 198), the original homeland of the Cherokees. Led by the elders, the Misfits make their way back to the Smoky Mountains, meeting with Tallulah and her tourists on the way there. Together, they reverse the direction of the Trail of Tears in an act of "reclamation" (Hausman 199). This reclamation becomes possible both because of the Misfits' cultivated illegibility and because of the nourishment that the Chef provides. As Brown Spiers has noted, the Chef, Ish, and Fish resemble characters from the Cherokee oral tradition; the novel makes this connection explicit when Tallulah thinks of the Chef as Kanati and his sons as the Good Boy and the Wild Boy. The necessary response to trauma is neither witnessing nor medicalized care, but rather a kind of direct action that literally nourishes Indigenous community.

In short, the Misfits, especially the Chef and his sons, represent the persistence of the oral tradition even amid the simulated *indians* crafted by settlers. The oral tradition is adaptable and ever-changing, and it nourishes the Misfits, functioning as an antidote to trauma rooted in Indigenous practices. That is precisely why the Chef and his sons cook elaborate community meals in their fantastical kitchen—as well as fruit salad that temporarily distracts the Suits and prevents them from wreaking even more havoc on the Misfits.[49] The Chef is a provider of fugitive nourishment, nourishment within the degradation of removal and confinement. He is also a trickster figure who refuses definition and, in the process, helps his people reconnect to their land and community and destroy the artificial constructions created by settlers. It is no coincidence that Fish shoots Deer Cooker, "the tragic Cherokee" (Hausman 271) and one of the TREPP's widely used stock characters, or that the "blood bubbles from Deer Cooker's body like water boiling over the edges of a full pot" (271). The destruction of *indian* simulations is connected with food, a tangible form of nourishment and community. Indigenous ancestral knowledge and communal practices of care become the driving forces of direct action, helping the Misfits take back their land. Even as Hausman's novel takes down stereotypes, it is not primarily about creating more "authentic" or "culturally sensitive" representations of Native people. The novel's project is distinct from the representational bent of *Westworld*'s "Kiksuya" and similar

[49] Community events organized around food are significant in Cherokee culture and cooking, traditionally done by Cherokee women, is "a source of individual and family prestige" (Beard-Moose 8).

works. For the Misfits, material acts of decolonization, like sustaining Native community and retaking land, take center stage.

The Question of Solidarity

While *Riding the Trail of Tears* emphasizes Indigenous resurgence led by Indigenous people—out of the reach of the settler gaze—it does not let non-Natives off the hook. In particular, the novel levels a critique of non-Native people who might think of themselves as "progressive" or as "allies" to Indigenous people. None of the tourists on Tallulah's tour are openly racist or anti-Indigenous, nor are they depicted as ignorant about U.S. history. For instance, "Tour Group 5709 readily agrees that Columbus did not discover America" (Hausman 65). Many tourists seem legitimately interested in learning about Cherokee history and culture, evidenced by the earnest questions they ask Tallulah throughout the novel. They are a multiethnic and transnational group, including a Black British man, a white Jewish woman, twins who are implied to be mixed-race, and several characters whose racial background is unstated. However, the tourists frequently engage in problematic, albeit well-intentioned, behavior. For example, Nell Johnson, a schoolteacher who announces she was once married to a "Lumbee Indian," hopes to set up a "regular school field trip to the TREPP" in order to educate her students about colonialism (Hausman 48), but she also frames settler colonial violence as past, making statements like "It's just awful what they did back then" (79). Carmen, a college student, often spouts off information about Indigenous people from her anthropology and sociology classes, her intellectual demeanor justifying troubling questions such as whether Tallulah is "full-blood" (Hausman 61).

Tour Group 5709 serves as a critique of non-Natives who might think of themselves as "allies" but fail in enacting true solidarity with Indigenous people.

Irma's experiences with the Misfits offer an interesting case study about solidarity. Irma is generally portrayed as a sympathetic, if clueless, character. Because she is a Jewish woman whose family members died in the Holocaust, she believes she shares something in common with Native people. And yet, her behavior replicates the tracking activities of the Suits. She is insistent on learning the Misfits' names or even on naming them herself. As Irma puts it, "This is all very unsettling. When can I start naming you?" (Hausman 121). Irma's desire to name the Misfits resonates with Carol Warrior's contention that settler colonialism subjects Native people to "immobilization and incorporation" when Native "bodies, lands, religions, relations, and aesthetics are defined in such a way as to foreclose political dynamism, constraining action to a limited set of options that become increasingly unattractive as the world around us changes" (Warrior 385). Warrior describes this process as a kind of "naming and claiming" (386)**.**[50] Refusing to be named is one way that the Misfits resist the immobilizing force of epistemological mastery, through which settlers define Indigenous people in the limited ways Warrior describes. Irma's desire to discover the Misfits' names—or, worse, to impose names upon them—reflects a desire for colonial mastery that is only thinly veiled by her sympathy or empathy with the plight of the Misfits. The Misfits' refusal, then, is indeed "unsettling": it makes Irma uncomfortable

[50] Along the same lines, Julietta Singh argues "The concept of [Biblical] dominion clarifies how mastery is tied to language, and how in its power to name the human also gains authorization to particular forms of masterful consumption: because I have named you, I can consume you" (12).

precisely because it disrupts her attempts to render them legible: they escape her grasp just as they do the grasp of the Suits.

Irma's desire for (and expectation of) mastery is also apparent in other ways. When the elders speak in Cherokee, she exclaims: "And when you talk around me like that … it only reminds me that I'm not supposed to be here" (Hausman 125). As a white settler, Irma expects inclusion and comfort in any space she enters. Moreover, while Irma follows the Chef's orders, helping him and his sons cook food and distribute it to the other Misfits, she seeks to be rewarded for her help with information. She demands: "I dished up your corn chowder and fed your whole Misfit tribe. Now you owe me an answer" (Hausman 191). Irma's demand aligns with the ways that white settlers who claim to be "allies" often expect recognition or compensation for anti-racist and anti-colonial efforts. With the Chef's response to Irma—"Owe you?" he asks pointedly—the novel draws attention to the inappropriate nature of Irma's demand. In short, Irma's identification with the Misfits and desire to understand them do not ensure effective solidarity with them.

However, there are also moments when Irma does act in solidarity with Indigenous people. One instance occurs when the elders are singing their song to the rest of the Misfits. The elders' song calms many of the Misfits, but it does not work on all of them: one young man continues to hurt himself, eventually "slamming his body into the wood [of the stockade] like a butterfly into a windshield" (Hausman 168). As this boy falls to the ground, Irma sees "a nearby teenage girl" who is violently slapping herself after "[throwing] herself back-first to the earth" (Hausman 169). At first, Irma tries to remember the training she received when she worked for a domestic violence

hotline but cannot recall the script she was taught. Instead, Irma "grabbed the girl's arms, holding them gently and firmly, calmly forcing the girl to resist her programming. Irma held the girl's hands with a steady resolve, and the girl clawed, venting. But she began to slow" (Hausman 169) and eventually "grabbed Irma's hands and stood up, a reluctant but thankful grin forming on her face" (Hausman 170). This intervention does not require the girl's specific suffering to be legible to Irma. Nor does Irma partake of Euro-American medicalized notions of trauma like those she would have been taught at the domestic violence hotline. She does this, notably, without knowing anything about the girl and without giving in to her earlier drive to decode the Misfits' behavior or motivations. Moreover, she follows the Misfit elders' lead, but she does not try to sing along with them, which would have positioned her as one of them rather than as an outsider contributing to—rather than appropriating—their efforts. Her ability to act relies on her willingness to let go of her demands for legibility from Native people, as well as her desire to feel like she is "supposed to be [there]."

It is not Irma's shared humanity, empathy, or parallel history as a descendant of genocide survivors that matters here, but the tangible actions she takes against settler colonialism. In their introduction to a 2016 special issue of *Theory & Event* titled "On Colonial Unknowing," Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein draw on indigenous feminists to state that

> Colonialism cannot be dismantled through acts of recovery, reconciliation, or more inclusive regimes of colonial knowing … decolonization is necessarily a process of questioning, contemplation, play, and study, specifically indigenous study. We understand

> indigenous study as a practice of *thinking with*, not as a process of overcoming or mastery (especially in an academic field sense), but instead as a process in perpetuity, a process of becoming that is also an unbecoming, always entangled in the shaping and relational violences of imperialism. (Vimalassery et al. 8)[51]

Hausman's novel suggests the need to reorient this concept of decolonization so that it is not only a *thinking with*, but also explicitly an *acting with*. Irma momentarily disrupts the workings of settler colonialism when she acts as a co-resister.

Unfortunately, Irma's solidarity is inconsistent, and she interferes with the Misfits' efforts more than she aids them. For instance, as the Misfits are preparing to leave the stockade and the Chef is preparing ration packets of dried fruit, meat, and nuts, Irma is more interested in learning cooking skills from him than she is in helping prepare the Misfits for their dangerous journey: "What I'd really like to do before I leave is learn how you make your trail mix and dried fruits" (230). Irma wants to benefit from Indigenous knowledge, like many settler culture-seekers, including tourists on the virtual Trail of Tears. Irma quickly follows up her statement with a contradictory claim to allyship: "I only want to help you people" (Hausman 230). The Chef asks her to prepare ration packets for the upcoming journey, but she continues to ask the Chef for more information about the Misfits' plans and claiming she wants to understand

[51]The editors of this Special Issue are critical of "settler colonial studies" as a field formation. I quote them here not necessarily for the purpose of criticizing this field, but rather because I think they articulate an important reminder about the dangers of seeking academic mastery in the context of Indigenous thought. For a response to the editors' characterization of "settler colonial studies," see Alex Trimble Young.

them until he finally tells her, “That’s the beauty of it. You don’t need to understand” (Hausman 231). Irma’s role in the Misfits’ efforts is not to understand them or siphon off their knowledge. If she is truly to work in solidarity with them, her role is to do the material but mundane work that will support their reclamation effort.

“Her braids were now invisible”

While Tallulah initially supports the functioning of settler colonialism, her interactions with the Misfits and (unknowingly) the Little Little People ultimately allow her to enact resurgence. The narrator's physical presence in her body and her encounter with the Misfits, especially the Chef, have transformative consequences. After meeting the Chef during her journey to North Carolina with the Misfits, Tallulah has a dream in which she encounters a bear she believes to be “her father’s spirit” (Hausman 222). Her interactions with the bear play out as a formulaic scene (perhaps produced by the VR machine) of mourning, forgiveness, and reconciliation—“Tallulah recognized the cliché, but it was just the cliché she needed” (Hausman 328). When she awakens, the techs finally pull her out of the ride and back into the organic world. She learns that Nell, one of her tourists, has holed up, and as a result, she is interviewed by two nameless Homeland Security agents—notably, they wear “solid black suits” (Hausman 343). Tallulah tells them about the Misfits and the elders in the baseball caps, but she does not tell them about the Chef or his sons. After her interview, she spends some time continuing to speculate about the strange events and coming up with possible explanations for them; then suddenly, “it strikes her. She knows what she needs to do” (Hausman 353). She goes to the TREPP’s kitchen—where, notably, she is friends with

the restaurant chef and his two assistants—and asks for a pair of scissors, which she takes into the massive walk-in refrigerator. Amid the boxes of frozen chicken and fish, she cries and cuts off her hair.

Tallulah's act of cutting her hair is significant for several reasons. In some Indigenous communities, cutting one's hair is common in bereavement. Tallulah's dream about her father, however cliché, allowed her to mourn his death. In a different vein, in the Indian boarding schools of the early twentieth century, Native children's hair was cut as part of the process of assimilation. For Tallulah, though, hair has a different resonance. Her hair was perceived as "the most Indian of her features" (Hausman 360), and the TREPP marketers highlight her braids in their promotional materials. Cutting off the hair, in this context, is a move to invisibility—"while Tallulah could never hide her cheekbones, her braids are now invisible" (Hausman 361). In an ironic reversal of boarding school tactics of assimilation, Tallulah was being incorporated into settler colonial structures precisely by highlighting and commodifying a visible symbol of her Indigeneity. Cutting off her own hair represents her unwillingness to be recognized by settlers within the violent terms of biologized, commodified Indigeneity. It is an act of what Vizenor calls a "postindian warrior" who "ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance" (*Manifest Manners* 5).

The large walk-in refrigerator in the kitchen is significant because of the centrality of food and cooking in the novel and the connections the novel makes between food, collectivity, and futurity. We should recall that earlier in the novel, Irma notes that though among the Misfits there are many elder men, there are no elder

women—save one, a woman who disappears into a large refrigerator in the Chef's kitchen soon after Irma arrives at the Misfit stockade. The disappearance of the only elder woman mirrors the disappearance of the lost child for whom the Misfits are waiting. Both threaten the disappearance of Cherokee futurity since Cherokee culture is matrilineal, and thus women are essential for the passing down of culture. When Tallulah walks into the refrigerator at the end of the novel to cut off her hair, she "disappears" in a certain way as well—she becomes less visibly *indian*—but this disappearance from the settler colonial line of sight marks a new kind of futurity. Cutting off her hair, a move towards illegibility, precedes an act of reclamation. She quits her job at the TREPP and travels to the Qualla Boundary in North Carolina, where her grandmother lives. In other words, Tallulah's decision to cut off her hair foregrounds the emergence of Native futurity—tied to but not confined by tradition—that is intertwined with invisibility to the settler gaze and to settler ways of knowing. Quitting her work at the TREPP is an act of refusal and resurgence.

By living on her body, the narrator helps Tallulah break her destructive pattern of literally reliving the Trail of Tears daily. When she travels to her grandmother's home, she returns to the ancestral homeland of the Cherokee, completing the journey that the Misfits began within the TREPP. Rather than "rewriting" the history of the Trail of Tears, both the Little Little People and Tallulah enact something more essential. Tallulah inhabits the history of settler colonialism writ large, a history that is not simply past but temporally non-linear and materially present. Another history also inhabits her, that of the Little Little People, a history that is unwritten, untold, hidden, and yet materially present. It is not an erased history of suffering that returns in this novel,

demanding to be recorded, witnessed, and inscribed; the Little Little people do not unearth new stories of the Trail of Tears. They are instead the carriers of a history of Native adaptability, collectivity, and fugitivity. That history takes residence, quite literally, in Tallulah's body.

The novel ends with the narrator, too, embarking on a new journey, though not an entirely willing one. When Tallulah gets home, having quit her job, she and her boyfriend John Bushyhead have sex in the shower. During this process, the narrator gets thrown off her body and washed down the bath drain. This revelation illuminates the novel's opening, where the narrator tells us they are living in the underground sewer system. Though the narrator seems somewhat concerned about this fate, there is also a sense of potentiality as they bob along in "endless water, underground, moving somewhere" (Hausman 370). As Anderson and Taylor put it, Tallulah and the narrator "both make their way toward some sense of a world elsewhere" (90).

The fact that the novel ends with the narrator in the water is significant. Water is a recurring motif throughout the novel. The TREPP tour guides carry walkie-talkies shaped like water beetles; the Misfit stockade is located on an island surrounded by water, and the Chef notes that the Misfits are afraid of water; Tallulah and Bushyhead have sex in the shower. There are also several references in the novel to one version of the Cherokee creation story, in which a water beetle creates the earth from mud gathered from the bottom of a body of water. The ending suggests that the narrator is something like this water beetle—the creator of a new world.

It is also intriguing that the novel ends not only in the water but underground, and specifically in the sewer system. As I discussed in chapter one, the underground

space can be considered a space of radical relationality, movement, and action. Alongside Cora in *The Underground Railroad*, who goes "off the tracks" and participates in hands-on practice of worldmaking, we might think of the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: a novel whose chords resonate at the end of *Riding the Trail of Tears*. A brief excursion into Ellison's novel helps us hear these resonances. If the end of Whitehead's novel, which shows Cora and her new friends participating in the westward movement of settler colonialism, highlights the disjunctures or potential incompatibilities between Black and Indigenous liberation, *Riding* offers a note of consonance.

In the Prologue to *Invisible Man*, the unnamed Black protagonist, living in an underground bunker beneath an all-white building, declares that he is an "invisible man" because "people refuse to see [him]" (Ellison 3). Having once been concerned with being seen, the protagonist has now embraced being invisible; he steals electricity from the building above to power the 1,367 lights he has strung up around his bunker. He listens to Louis Armstrong, who has 'made poetry out of being invisible" (Ellison 8), on a radio-phonograph and writes his life story, the story of how he discovered his invisibility. In the first half of the novel, the Invisible Man tells of his various attempts to win the respect of white people and become successful through living by their terms (which includes, for example, participating in a "battle royal" in order to get a college scholarship) as well as of his journey from the Deep South to Harlem, where he hopes but fails to find a less racist environment. The second half of the novel focuses on the Invisible Man's involvement with a communist organization called the Brotherhood. Though seemingly integrated and accepting, the Brotherhood turns out to be just as

racist as the rest of society, using the Invisible Man as a tool for their own political purposes. Simultaneously, the Invisible Man is also in conflict with Ras the Exhorter (later Ras the Destroyer), a Black Nationalist who sees him as a traitor. At the end of the novel, the Invisible Man rejects the Brotherhood, Black Nationalism, and society as a whole (at least temporarily) and takes up residence in his underground bunker.

For the narrator, to be underground is akin to "Plunging outside history" (Ellison 377, 435). Fittingly, the Invisible Man contemplates the fate of his murdered friend Clifton on a subway platform. As he listens to the "roar of trains" (Ellison 438), he wonders: "Why had [Clifton] turned away? Why had he chosen to step off the platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose into plunge into nothing-ness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history?" (Ellison 439). History, at this point for the Invisible Man, is "the known, the seen, the heard, and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their powers by" (Ellison 439). It is the official record, created through Euro-American society's dominant ways of knowing and usually created by white people in the service of maintaining white supremacy. To plunge outside of history, then, is to plunge out of this record and into the unknown: off the platform's safety and onto the dangerous tracks. The Invisible Man soon sees some Black men on the platform near him:

> Everyone must have seen them, or heart their muted laughter, or smelled the heavy pomade on their hair—or perhaps failed to see them at all. For they were men outside of historical time, they were untouched, they didn't believe in Brotherhood, no doubt had never heard of it; or perhaps

> like Clifton would mysteriously have rejected its mysteries; men of transition whose faces were immobile." (Ellison 440)

Unlike himself or the numerous other Black characters trapped in the seemingly inescapable machinations of white supremacy, these Black men, the Invisible Man thinks, "were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand" (Ellison 441). To be underground is to be off the record, a fugitive dodging the "forces of history" that seek to subject, destroy, or use Black people as tools. To be underground is to resist dominant ways of knowing and being known—to be "outside" and in "transition."

The Invisible Man eventually becomes a "man of transition" himself when he takes up residence in his underground "hole." After leaving the Brotherhood, he is pursued by Ras the Destroyer's henchmen and escapes by jumping down a manhole: "But I was in a strange territory now and someone, for some reason, had removed the manhole cover and I felt myself *plunge down, down; a long drop that ended upon a load of coal that sent up a cloud of dust, and I lay in the black dark upon the black coal no longer running, hiding or concerned*, hearing the shifting of the coal, as from somewhere above their voices came floating down" (Ellison 565, emphasis mine). In the darkness of the manhole, surrounded by black coal, the narrator finally stops running and hiding and, like Clifton, "plunges" (it is no coincidence that Ellison uses the same word here) out of history—the official record, that which is subject to dominant ways of knowing. In his bunker, he is a fugitive, taking up residence in an all-white building, clandestinely siphoning electricity from Monopolated Light and Power,

listening to Louis Armstrong, and daydreaming in an "underworld of sound" (Ellison 12). And yet, in the novel's Epilogue, we learn that he plans to surface, to "shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (Ellison 580), to return to society and take up a "socially responsible role" (580). His hibernation, in other words, is a period of preparation and may soon come to an end.

Hausman subtly riffs on *Invisible Man* throughout *Riding the Trail of Tears*. The narrator of *Riding* is another kind of unnamed, "invisible" being (though one too small to be seen by human eyes, rather than one whom others refuse to see). Like the Invisible Man, the narrator of *Riding* tells the entire story from his position in the sewer. Furthermore, like Ellison's narrator, the narrator of Riding is "outside" of history since the stories of the Little Little People have been excised from the record. Finally, both the Invisible Man and Hausman's narrator are fugitives who take up residence in places not made for them. They use their invisibility in generative ways. My intention here is not to argue that this represents a coalition between Black and Indigenous people. The fact that Hausman alludes to Ellison is not itself an act of material solidarity. However, this allusion does imply a consonance between the ways Black and Indigenous people can resist systems of oppression through the strategic deployment of invisibility.

Even the language used to describe the narrator's journey down the drain is suggestive of such a consonance. The narrator swirls down the drain and plops into the sewer: "And then—blackness" (Hausman 370). In one sense, the narrator refers to the darkness of the sewer—its literal lack of light. But, reading with Ellison and with Black studies thinkers, we might interpret "blackness" here as more than literal lightlessness. If Blackness, to draw on Moten, is "the air of the thing that escapes enframing…an

often unattended movement that accompanies largely unthought positions and appositions" (Moten, "The Case of Blackness" 182), then the narrator of *Riding* is in Blackness indeed. Not unlike Ellison, Hausman claims the sewer—so full of "strange things, mucus-textured but active and alive" (Hausman 370), as a space of generativity. By exercising their invisibility, the Little Little People generatively disrupted the TREPP's programming. The fact that the narrator is washed down the drain and into the wider world suggests that they could create similar disruptions in the organic reality as well. Maybe the narrator's time in the sewers is actually not the end, as they worry, but its own kind of hibernation. The novel closes with the potential for material action, grounded in Indigenous philosophies and aligned, in perhaps surprising ways, with Black fugitivity.

Reading for Limits

In chapter one of this dissertation, I considered the role of empathy and identification in the reading process. A central contention of that chapter is that although literature is sometimes touted for its supposed ability to enhance readers' empathy—an assumption key to the U.S. tradition of sentimental literature and to the neo-slave narrative tradition—feeling cannot ultimately serve as the ground of an abolitionist politics. *The Underground Railroad* offers an alternative to sentimental treatments of slavery and thereby encourages the reader to read antiblackness as a mundane infrastructure for the nation-state. This chapter has considered another analytic, that of visibility, a concept that sutures occularity with epistemological mastery. In this conclusory section, I will argue that Hausman's novel, like

Whitehead's, uses its narrative form to teach the reader how to engage with it. I argue that *Riding the Trail of Tears* is written in a way that enacts ethnographic refusal and short-circuits the reader's mastery of the novel. If the Little Little People can leave the virtual reality and enter organic reality, including the minds and bodies of Tallulah and her tourists, then it holds that they can also leave their fictional world. I argue here that one of these Little Little People, the narrator, enters the reader's consciousness. The goal of this inhabitation is to disrupt colonial practices of interpretation.

By colonial practices of interpretation, I mean methods of interpretation, whether those arising from literary criticism as a discipline or from other contexts, that emphasize interpretative mastery. Carol Warrior names the "structural and formal analyses" so often emphasized in professional literary studies as potentially problematic methods of this sort. Such methods inflict the "gaffer effect" on a text. In glassblowing, a gaffer must "learn how to control the glass blob completely" so that "it would hold a shape that serves [the gaffer's] purpose" (Warrior 372). Similarly, critics often attempt to confine the movement of literary (or other) texts to produce cohesive interpretations. Like a piece of blown glass, "the end product can be aesthetically pleasing" (Warrior 372), but that pleasure comes at a cost because "such control also feels like domination" (372)—a kind of domination that mirrors the dominating behavior of settler colonialism and that is especially troubling when applied thoughtlessly to Indigenous literatures. Along the same lines, Julietta Singh argues that

> there is an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous. To be characterized as the master

> of a language, or a literary tradition, or an instrument, for instance, is widely understood to be laudable. Yet as a pursuit, mastery invariably and relentlessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something—whether human or inhuman, animate or inanimate." (9-10)

Warrior and Singh both draw attention to the role of domination and control inherent in many academic practices. While neither of them rejects literary criticism or interpretation, they argue that traditional hermeneutical practices must be supplemented and, in some cases, supplanted with other ways of reading. Following their insights, I argue that literary criticism is linked to visibility—literary critics seek to make a text fully legible, unraveling its ambiguities and making manifest its meanings. Such acts of interpretation are attempts to "settle" a text. Hausman's novel leads us to a different mode of reading.

The novel seems invested in a practice of refusal: a refusal to reveal all. In the novel's opening pages, the narrator directly addresses the reader several times, saying, for example: "I have this nagging hunch that you're all similar to Tallulah Wilson. Similar, but different" (Hausman 2). Though the narrator insists that they want the reader's attention, they also do not seem overly concerned about clarity. They throw out many confusing terms: the Misfits, the Little People, the Little Little People, the Nunnehi, the immortals, the Suits, and the Chairsuits. They also talk about a woman who "holed up" (Hausman 8), some "terrible recalibration agent," (9) and a strange recurrent dream that Tallulah has about a mountain and a bear. As the novel continues, some of the references became clearer—the novel does, for example, definitively reveal what the "Chairsuits" are—but others became muddier. The sections where Irma is in

the Misfit stockade are especially challenging to interpret. At the same time, the novel seems to have a plot. While some novels, often characterized as "experimental," are so overtly challenging that the reader comes to expect feeling lost, this is not the case with *Riding the Trail of Tears*. The novel gives the reader a sense that they are on the brink of discovering something—that one more bit of information from the narrator would unlock the book. As a result, upon finishing the book, readers might feel disappointed. Some of the key plot questions are never clarified—what was the "recalibration agent" that the narrator keeps talking about? Who are the Suits? The last section of the novel also seemingly sets up a new storyline, with Tallulah learning that one of her tourists, Nell, has "holed up." That plotline is abandoned as the novel comes to an end.

The narrator's simultaneously readable yet ambiguous narration is a key part of the novel's project. *Riding the Trail of Tears*, through the narrator, tempts readers to close read it in order to understand how it works, but it also disrupts the process of close reading. The novel that resists deciphering is not a new idea—it is a postmodern commonplace. But the stakes are different here. *Riding* is not pointing out the subjectivity of truth or the excess of signification. Hausman disrupts close reading because, to put it in the strongest terms possible, the overzealous close reader can function as a colonial figure. To this end, *not* understanding is a recurrent trope in the novel. Both Irma and Tallulah frequently do not understand or cannot decipher things, and their confusion is palpable. As I already discussed, Irma is frequently confused by the Misfits and frustrated by their refusal to give her clear information. Also, Irma herself seems to make things happen within the VR without knowing how she does it, such as opening the passageway between the Misfit stockade and the causality loop that

Tallulah's tour group is located in: "Even though she apparently had something to do with opening the double doorway when they charged down the hill, Irma is not sure how she did it or how to do it again" (Hausman 288). Tallulah, too, is frequently at a loss when the TREPP begins to malfunction, and Irma inexplicably vanishes from the tour. She "knows the protocols" (Hausman 91) for dealing with all manner of problems, but there is no protocol for a missing tourist. Tallulah is forced to act without a protocol and finds it deeply "unsettling" (Hausman 91). Later, when she meets the Misfits towards the end of the novel, "Tallulah cannot decipher what they say" (Hausman 279). Their language is opaque to her. The Chef, in particular, is evasive when Tallulah asks him questions (Hausman 311).

We might recall Audra Simpson's argument that it is essential to pay attention to limits when seeking knowledge. Through its plethora of details that appear to be "clues" but that refuse to coalesce into a stable interpretation, the novel disrupts the reader's attempts to exert complete control over the novel and reading process. The novel does not wholly reject hermeneutics—some aspects of the plot are straightforward, and the form of the novel is not overtly experimental—but instead cautions us that responsible interpretation sometimes requires recognizing limitations. The novel inculcates reflection about what can and cannot be known, what knowledge should or should not be sought. Recognizing when to *stop interpreting*—when the limit has been arrived at, as Audra Simpson put it—is part of responsible reading. Learning to read without the expectation of mastery means unlearning the practice of colonial interpretation. It means we read for limits: without altogether abandoning interpretation, we pay attention to the moments when the text refuses our attempts to settle it.

Both Irma and Tallulah are most successful in their attempts to work towards decolonization when they set aside their respective desires for epistemological mastery. When they stop trying to decipher the Misfits, both of them, in different ways, contribute to a decolonial project. Irma helps the Misfit girl and opens the gateway for the Misfits, and Tallulah quits her job at the TREPP and returns to North Carolina. As both of these characters show, responsible interpretation must be paired with action based on an awareness of positionality and relationality. Irma and Tallulah have different roles in decolonization because they are differently positioned in relation to settler colonialism. Their limits and responsibilities are different. However, both ultimately engage in forms of direct action. I am suggesting, in other words, that the novel is not as concerned with revising received history as it is with transforming the reader's relation to history. Our relation to history cannot be a relation of observing or of making visible. After all, if, as Tallulah thinks at one point, "nothing ever ends," (60), then the history of settler colonial violence continues into the present, but it also means the history of the future has not been determined. The Suits are generating one version of that future, but Tallulah and the narrator are generating another. The novel leaves us with the question of which future we will help create.

CHAPTER 3

Recovery: Octavia Butler's *Fledgling*

An interesting aside appears in one of the notebooks Octavia Butler filled during her life. Amid notes for two novels, Butler scribbles a few obscure medical terms, including this one: "Egregorsis (Egersis) intense wakefulness" (Butler, OEB 3116). The relevance of this note to her literary pursuits is not apparent; Butler's boundless curiosity led her to research everything from rare medical conditions to black holes (Butler, OEB 3116), and her "positive obsession" (Butler, *Bloodchild* 123) with writing means that readers today have ample records of her efforts, though not always of her intentions. Whatever reason Butler had for jotting down this term, the concept of "intense wakefulness" in this notebook from 2004—as she was working on *Fledgling* as well as celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Kindred*'s publication—strikes a chord. Chapter three takes Butler's seemingly random notation as an invitation to chart what "intense wakefulness" might index when we hear its reverberations throughout *Fledgling*.

Fledgling tells the story of Shori, a young girl who awakens in a cave alone and with no memory of her past or identity. Throughout the novel, she slowly gathers information about herself. Shori turns out to be a 53-year-old member of a blood-drinking species called the "Ina." The Ina bear little resemblance to the vampires of human lore: an ancient, long-lived species evolutionarily related to *homo sapiens*, they survive by forming complex relationships with "symbionts," humans who live with the Ina and serve as feeding sources in exchange for optimal health, longer life, and a

unique form of sexual and emotional pleasure. The Ina are nocturnal and burn instantly in sunlight, which is one of their main weaknesses, keeping them from participating more fully in human society and making them vulnerable to attack during the day. To allow the Ina to stay active during the day, Shori's scientifically inclined family mixed Ina DNA with a Black human woman's DNA to produce Shori, an Ina-human hybrid with dark skin. Shori's family was subsequently murdered by bigots repulsed by Shori's Blackness and her human DNA. As Shori physically recovers from the attack that killed them, incinerated her community, and left her with a severe head injury, she struggles to regain her memory and to protect herself from further attacks by her enemies. Central to *Fledgling* is Shori's literal intense wakefulness—she can stay awake during the day. This quality, closely linked to her epidermal blackness, which keeps her from burning in the sun, is both a great strength and the reason she is being persecuted.

I argue that *Fledgling* attends to slavery in ways not premised on retrieving the past nor fully recuperating from it. Throughout *Fledgling*, Shori gradually regains certain kinds of memories—specifically, factual information about objects in the world, Ina society, and language. However, what she can never recover is her affective memories of her identity and her relationships with others. Her affective memory has been as thoroughly wiped out as her community, which was left a burnt ruin, impossible to rebuild. As she says of her family, "It's terrible to me that I can't recall them even enough to mourn them … for me, it's as though they never lived" (Butler, *Fledgling* 242). Mourning is impossible for Shori, and so, for that matter, is melancholy. Through the trope of amnesia, the novel highlights what occurs when recovery is not viable. *Fledgling* pushes its readers to ask: What does it mean to tend to history without

turning to mourning, melancholy, or any other concept that relies on memory? How does one live "in the wake," to use Sharpe's terms, when redress is impossible?

I begin this chapter with the concept of awakening because of its resonances in the context of Black radicalism. Christina Sharpe articulates the wake as "the conceptual frame of and for living blackness in the diaspora in the still unfolding aftermaths of Atlantic chattel slavery" (2). The wake of a ship or boat is tangible; observers can see, hear, and feel the waves of recirculating water that a vessel leaves behind it as it moves forward. Sharpe coins the term "wake work" to describe the work done to survive in the wake, "to still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake" (11). Beyond Sharpe, there has long been a connection between the concept of "being awake" and political action. Though now often used ironically, including in right-wing memes, the phrase "staying woke" originates in African American Vernacular English and was used in Black communities, especially among activists, long before "woke" became a synonym for "progressive." The phrase was used as early as the 1920s to signify political consciousness.[52]

More broadly, "To wake" is "To be stirred up or aroused; to be put in motion or action" ("Wake, v."). Speculative fiction is often conceptualized as a genre concerned with dreaming—both in the sense that it offers fantastical visions akin to dreams and that it is about imagining otherwise, beyond what already exists in our "real" world. *Fledgling*, in its wakefulness, inflects speculative fiction with a different undercurrent:

[52] See Romano's essay in *Vox* for a history of the concept of "wokeness."

speculation is also about awakening: the act of waking up and getting to work. *Fledgling* models what it looks like to be "stirred up" or "put into motion or action." Shori is constantly in motion, both evading those who persecute her and assembling a new community around herself. The quotidian lived practices she deploys—such as turning to the law for limited reparations, moving surreptitiously, and engaging in mutual relations of care with others—enable her to grapple with a history she cannot remember. Whether or not Butler was aware of the denotations and connotations associated with awakening and "staying woke," I argue that *Fledgling* teaches crucial lessons about living and thriving in an antiblack world. In the following sections, I explore how *Fledgling*'s central speculative trope—the amnesiac, genetically modified vampire—enables a meditation on what has been called the "recovery imperative" of Black Atlantic studies. Like Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears*, quotidian practices of tangible care, covert movement, and community building take center stage as responses to structural violence. *Fledgling* thus articulates historicizing as an emergent practice, a practice as concerned with making new worlds as with understanding those that have existed in the past.

***Kindred, Beloved,* and the Paradox of Recovery**

The analytic of recovery has been at the heart of Black studies for decades, if not centuries. Scholars note that "As early as the eighteenth century, black activists and intellectuals believed that recounting examples of black achievement in both antiquity and modernity would form a bulwark of counterevidence against deeply entrenched ideas about black inferiority" (Helton et al. 1). In the 1920s through the 1940s, scholars

like Eric Williams, W.E.B. Du Bois, and C.L.R. James wrote groundbreaking studies of Black history (Helton et al. 3). Meanwhile, Arthur Schomburg—who argued for the necessity of historical recovery in "The Negro Digs Up His Past"— and other Black collectors such as Charles L. Blockson, Arna Bontemps, and Hubert H. Harrison "bolstered the value of collecting the black past through their singular archival sensibilities" and "helped clear the way for the establishment of Black studies in the 1960s" (Cloutier 46).

At the same time, though, dominant understandings of slavery among white historians and the white public dismissed both slavery's violent impact on Black people and its role as an engine of U.S. economic growth. Ulrich Bonnell Phillips was perhaps the most influential historian to spread these racist views. In *American Negro Slavery*, he argues that "the institution of slavery made the negro population much more responsive to new industrial opportunity than if it had been free" (203). Phillips emphasizes that plantation owners treated the enslaved well—that they were "solicitous" (263) in the care of the sick, generally ensured that "rations issued to the negroes be never skimped" (265), saw to it that "the negroes kept clean in person," (267) and refrained from "rigid coercion and complete exploitation" (293). Enslaved life was so gentle, Phillips contends, that "the white youths found something to envy in the freedom of their [black] fellows' feet from the cramping weight of shoes and the freedom of their minds from the restraints of school" (313). Phillips also questions the

impact of slavery in driving the U.S. economy, incorrectly suggesting that it was not a particularly prosperous institution.[53]

Views like Phillips's went largely unquestioned in white-dominated academic circles until the 1960s, when efforts to bring to the fore evidence of enslaved agency, resistance, and achievement reshaped the historiography of slavery. As Black studies became an institutionalized field and "postconsensus" (also known as "New Left") history took hold in universities, scholars challenged prevailing assumptions about the beneficent nature of slavery, emphasized the agency of the enslaved, and studied previously ignored subjects, such as the lives of enslaved women. Kenneth M. (Stamp)'s *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum* South tore down some of the romanticized Southern mythologies promoted by those like Phillips. Eugene (Genovese)'s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* explored the rich cultural production that enslaved people created. Angela (Davis)'s "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" began to shift the near-exclusive focus on enslaved men. John W. (Blassingame)'s *The Slave Community* pushed back against the commonly accepted idea that enslaved people passively accepted their captivity. Blassingame's study is especially notable because it extensively drew on slave narratives, which were considered at the time to be unreliable sources of historical information. Despite the controversy surrounding it, *The Slave Community* helped legitimize slave narratives as legitimate sources of information about the past.

[53] See especially chapter XVIII of American Negro Slavery, "Economic Views of Slavery: A Survey of the Literature."

Considering these developments in historical scholarship, it is not surprising that literary critics have also identified the late 1960s as the period when the neo-slave narrative genre rose to prominence. Though an early iteration of this genre, *Black Thunder* by Arna Bontemps, was published in 1936, it was Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966 that marks the beginning of an outpouring of historical fiction about slavery. Many texts in the genre offer realist representations of slavery that are primarily concerned with "fill[ing] such gaps in the official historical record" (Dubey, "Neo-Slave Narratives" 334). The writers of these novels "explicitly set out to correct the blind spots and misrepresentations of dominant historical texts and narratives" (Dubey, "Neo-Slave Narratives" 334). Such novels are "centrally concerned with the question of voice as a measure of authentic historical recovery" (Dubey, "Neo-Slave Narratives" 335).

Indeed, most neo-slave narratives, not only realist ones, retain this concern with recovering the past, even as they register the complexities and limitations of such a project. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* was groundbreaking in its use of a non-realist trope (time travel) to explore the impact of slavery on twentieth-century Black people. The novel tells the story of Dana, a Black writer living in 1976 who is mysteriously pulled back to an antebellum Maryland plantation, where she must repeatedly preserve the life of Rufus, her white plantation-owning ancestor. Having pieced together her family history, Dana realizes Rufus raped an enslaved woman named Alice, who then gave birth to Dana's ancestor, Hagar. Dana's grim task is to keep Rufus alive long enough to ensure her own future existence. Studying nineteenth-century slave narratives—including those of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and lesser-known authors such as Annie Young Henson, Rev. Silas Jackson, and Page Harris—featured centrally in

Butler's research process (OEB Folder 8, Box 289). Butler also spent many weeks at the L.A. Public Library, reading academic research on slavery, including books by Phillips, Blassingame, and many others, as her call slips indicate (OEB Folder 12, Box 310). But her research went far beyond library sessions. She also took a cross-country Greyhound bus trip to Maryland to gain a stronger sense of the novel's antebellum setting. She studied records at the Maryland Historical Society, toured and took careful notes at Mt. Vernon (Butler, OEB 3215), and meticulously investigated Maryland's wildlife, vegetation, food, geography, and architecture, as well as nineteenth-century methods of travel and even animal husbandry (OEB Folder 8, Box 289). This research speaks to Butler's desire to recover an accurate image of the past into which her protagonist would be pulled. She sought not only to understand the facts but also to immerse herself experientially.

The final product of Butler's labors, *Kindred*, thematizes recovery in the term's dual sense as retrieval (of information) and as redress (of injury). Set during the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the novel foregrounds the dark underbelly that mythologies of U.S. freedom and progress occlude. As Dana becomes increasingly involved in plantation life, she learns a difficult lesson: even as a free Black woman from the future, with all the knowledge that entails, she cannot escape brutality. This truth is particularly evident in the novel's climax when Rufus attempts to rape Dana. Her futurity assured following Hagar's birth, Dana kills Rufus in self-defense. His death allows her to return to 1976 permanently. However, her escape comes at a cost, as her arm is torn off at the spot where Rufus's hand had been gripping her, symbolizing the tangible, dismembering hold that slavery has on the present. The

novel is a classic "palimpsest narrative," Ashraf Rushdy's term for a neo-slave narrative that explores the connection between past and present by way of a character who grapples with a "family secret involving an antebellum ancestor" (5). Such novels use the protagonist's "bitemporal perspective" to explore "the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery" (5). *Kindred* ends with an epilogue where Dana, back in her own time, travels to Maryland to find out what happened to Rufus's plantation and the people who lived and died there, including Alice and her children. While Dana learns that the plantation burned down and finds out the fate of a few enslaved people, others are lost to her: she finds "no records" of them (Butler, *Kindred* 264). Even for a time traveler, the time of slavery is not fully accessible, nor does archival recovery bring healing. *Kindred,* then, simultaneously attempts to enact recovery and highlights its impossibility.[54]

A similar paradox structures Morrison's *Beloved*. Proffering "re-memory"—memory that is collective, persistent, and embodied—as a framework for relating to slavery, *Beloved* popularized the figure of the ghost as a conceptual metaphor for a history that refuses to recede. As I discussed in chapter one, one of Morrison's stated goals for the novel was to fill the gaps that the original nineteenth-century slave narratives left, highlighting the pained interiority of enslaved subjects. As Morrison explains in an interview, the act of writing *Beloved* "is a way of confronting [slavery] and making it possible to remember" (Morrison and Darling 248). In response to the

[54] My reading of *Kindred* as a recovery narrative, albeit an ambivalent one, differs from that of Madhu Dubey, who argues that *Kindred* raises concerns about the viability and political usefulness of historical recovery ("Octavia Butler's Novels" 351).

interviewer's question about where the "healing" in the novel comes from, Morrison says that "the collective sharing" (248) of information about slavery is healing. Morrison uses sentimental conventions to encourage the reader "to yearn for their company, for the people who are gone, to know what slavery did" (Morrison and Darling 250). The reader enters into what Jacques Derrida would call a hauntological relation: "to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts" (Derrida xviii). To live with ghosts is not just to tolerate them: it is to care for them, to live in their company, to be in conversation with them, and to live alongside them as companions. In demanding such an ethic, *Beloved* might be considered a consummate recovery narrative, and indeed many critics have interpreted the novel this way.[55]

But it is notable that Morrison's characters never quite learn to live alongside Beloved. Sethe tries to tend to Beloved but finds the task all-consuming as Beloved "ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller with it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 295). As a result, the local community sees Beloved as a "devil-child" (Morrison, *Beloved* 308), and thirty local women gather to exorcise her. The leader of this group, Ella, finds Sethe's killing of the infant Beloved abhorrent, but she also wants the past to stay past: "The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out" (Morrison, *Beloved* 302). After a ceremony held

[55] For such readings, see, for example, Perez, Rody, and Rushdy, "Rememory." In contrast, Aida Levy-Hussen suggests that through the character of Denver, Sethe's daughter who was never enslaved herself, Morrison theorizes not the cohesiveness between past and present but rather the "the unbridgeable distance that separates the participant from the one born after" (Levy-Hussen 204).

near Sethe's porch, during which Sethe nearly attacks a light-skinned man she mistakes for schoolteacher, the ghostly Beloved apparently disappears. This ending could be interpreted as a healing reversal of past wrongs: Sethe attacks the perceived enemy instead of her baby, the community comes to Sethe's aid, and Beloved leaves. However, the novel's epilogue tells us that Beloved is "disremembered and unaccounted for," that "They forgot her like a bad dream," (Morrison, *Beloved* 323) even though "her footprints come and go, come and go" (324). Paradoxically, though Morrison speaks of the novel as performing individual and collective healing through remembering, the epilogue suggests that such healing will always be incomplete, perhaps because the task of remembering is too consuming to be sustainable, as it was for Sethe. Like in *Kindred*, then, recovering the history of slavery—what Morrison sets out to do and what the novel demands of the reader—proves to be an impossible one.

While both *Kindred* and *Beloved* are invested in the recovery imperative, each novel runs up against its limits. When there is no way to gain complete knowledge about the past, as *Kindred*'s Dana finds, how can one still grapple with it? In contrast, when the weight of the past is too heavy, as it is in *Beloved*, how is it possible to continue remembering? These questions reflect a crucial reality of grappling with the archives of slavery. As Saidiya Hartman puts it in her essay "Venus in Two Acts": "The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery as well it creates subjects and objects of power" (Hartman, "Venus" 10). Hartman sets out on what she admits at the outset is an "impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a

biography of the captive and the enslaved" ("Venus" 3). As she attempts to narrate the stories of an enslaved girl aboard a ship called *The Recovery*, she

> advanc[es] a series of speculative arguments and exploit[s] the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities), in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I [intend] both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. ("Venus"11)

Put simply, the archive does not allow for recovery. Rather than recovery, Hartman turns to a speculative reading method she calls "critical fabulation" ("Venus" 11), taking for granted the archive's silence. [56] Instead of retrieving the girl's story, Hartman highlights the very ways that slavery's violence makes such retrieval impossible. She makes explicit the paradoxes of *Kindred* and *Beloved*, the "straining against the limits of the archive" (Hartman, "Venus" 11) that characterizes both novels.

[56] Hartman's *critical fabulation* is one of number of methods that historians, archivists, and other scholars have deployed, especially in the last decade, to grapple with the archives of slavery. In a special issue of *Social Text* called *The Question of Recovery*, the editors and authors seek to "complicate the notion of what historical recovery is" (Helton et al. 11). These methods—such as Lisa Lowe's *hesitancy*, Greg Child's *secrecy*, Britt Rusert's *disappointment*, and David Kazanjian's *speculative reading*—echo Hartman's critical fabulation in that they emphasize and *begin with* what the archive *cannot* provide without giving up entirely on the project of recovery. All of these methodological approaches are discussed in the authors' respective essays within the *Social Text* special issue.

While Hartman highlights the paradoxes of the archive while maintaining the ethical value of recovery, other scholars turn away from recovery entirely. The most extensively elaborated iteration of the anti-recovery stance is Stephen Best's book *None Like Us.* Best reappraises and ultimately rejects the "communitarian impulse" of Black studies—the assumption that there is a Black communal identity rooted in slavery. Drawing on theories of queer negativity, Best seeks to move away from Blackness as a kind of sociality created by violence and embraces "the pleasures of a shared sense of alienation understood, in the first instance, as an unfitness for the world and history as it is" (3). In other words, he suggests that there is an inherent discontinuity between past and present and that Black collectivity is something that disintegrates at the exact moment that it appears to come into being. Indeed, Best views Black studies as "burdened" by "the omniprescence of history in our politics" (2). Instead, Best argues for a relation to slavery based on non-continuity, which he engenders through a turn away from ethics and towards aesthetics.[57]

[57] Several other critics also argue against foregrounding slavery as the key to contemporary Black identity. Kenneth W. Warren's much discussed *What Was African American Literature?* argues that the Black studies is focused on the history of racial injustice while ignoring growing class disparities and the rise of neoliberalism. As Warren puts it, "a political and social analysis centered on demonstrating that current inequalities are simply more subtle attempts to reestablish the terms of racial hierarchy…misunderstands both the nature of the previous regime and the defining elements of the current one" (5). Along the same lines, Douglass Jones argues that "we cannot fulfill the political projects of the slave past because they arose from, and maintained cogency within, a historical conjuncture that is no longer our own" (43). Jones argues for a reading practice that "reanimates the past in a way that does not seek affective of psychic redress of slavery's injuries, for such repair is impossible" (D. Jones 43).

Hartman dwells in impossibility as an ethical act; Best argues that dwelling is not ethical, and indeed that ethics should not be the goal of engagement with history. However, these are not the only two options. I argue that it is possible to hold onto a politics rooted in ethical, collective grappling with structural antiblackness without necessarily dwelling in the space of impossibility. *Fledgling* and Butler's unpublished papers trace the contours of an alternative to the recovery imperative that still assumes a tangible continuity between slavery and the political present and remains invested in collectivity. This alternative does not require what Hartman calls critical fabulation, nor does it require Best's turn to aesthetics. It is a form of historicizing that acknowledges the archive's reticence and even the potential dangers of retrieval. This alternative is also rooted in the ethical imperative of dismantling the insistent materiality of antiblackness, which makes itself known despite the archive's silence. Historicizing becomes a practice of worldmaking invested in remembering only enough to build new forms of collectivity.

Fledgling and the History of Slavery

Fledgling, Butler's last published novel before her untimely death in 2006, does not, on the surface, engage the history of slavery. The novel does not take place in the antebellum south, nor does it explore the impact of slavery on the present by way of a contemporary character discovering and grappling with knowledge of their enslaved ancestors (as a palimpsest narrative would). Deploying the tropes of the vampire novel, which was reaching peak popularity in the early 2000s, *Fledgling* appears to be light

reading. Indeed, Butler herself was dismissive of *Fledgling*, worrying that it was "not worth the time or the paper" (Butler, OEB 3278). However, I argue that the very tropes that make *Fledgling* appear to be an undemanding fantasy enable the novel to grapple with history in uniquely productive ways.

At the level of generic structure, *Fledgling* obliquely engages many of the conventions of nineteenth-century slave narratives. Most obviously, it is written in the first-person voice, which, as I discussed in chapter one, is a common (though not universal) convention of both slave and neo-slave narratives. *Fledgling* also begins with a unique version of the origin story characteristically opening slave narratives. In this case, though, rather than relating her birth and parentage, Shori narrates a kind of rebirth, in which she awakens "to darkness" (Butler, *Fledgling* 1), slowly becomes aware of the world around her, and learns skills like walking (3). She recognizes later that "I had emerged from [the cave] almost like a child being born" (Butler, *Fledgling* 26). Since she cannot yet recall her own name, another character calls her Renée because, as he puts it, "You've been reborn into a new life" (Butler, *Fledgling* 13). The middle section of the novel is organized around an account of pursuit and escape: Shori is hunted by her enemies in a way reminiscent of how fugitive slaves were pursued by slavecatchers. Fourth, literacy plays an important role, as Shori eventually discovers that "To [her] surprise, [she] did read and speak Ina" (Butler, *Fledgling* 187), allowing her to learn about Ina creation stories and history. At the same time, she also becomes more "literate" in the ways of the Ina throughout the novel, slowly learning to decipher and interpret their actions and traditions in order to survive in their society. Like the writers of slave narratives, Shori is empowered in limited ways by these forms of

literacy, but freedom nonetheless remains elusive for her since she cannot escape racialized violence.

Beyond these conventions, the novel concerns itself with the same themes as most other neo-slave narratives: memory, origins and lineage, the search for Black freedom and futurity, and the connection between the past and present. Indeed, there are noticeable parallels between *Kindred* and *Fledgling*, perhaps arising from the fact that 2004, the year Butler wrote most of *Fledgling*, was the 25th anniversary of *Kindred*. A new edition of *Kindred* was published for the occasion, and Butler frequently gave talks on it during this time amid a flurry of promotional activity. Even before this anniversary celebration, *Kindred* was often on her mind: it served as one of her stock talk topics when she was invited to speak at bookstores and universities, and she often framed the novel as being about the "scars" of slavery. For instance, in notes for a 2002 talk on *Kindred* at Pomona College, Butler writes about "over 200 years of slavery and the daily corrosive humiliations of Jim Crow laws and customs. These things leave their scars" (Butler, OEB 3149). Physical scars in neo-slave narratives commonly signify racial violence.[58] It might be more than coincidence that one of Butler's most commonly used working titles for *Fledgling* was *Scars.*[59]

Fledgling is consistently preoccupied with both history in general and the history of slavery specifically. Repeatedly, Butler's notes describe one of Shori's central goals as "A knowledge of her history—her Personal history, her People's

[58] As Florian Bast puts it: "African American literature…frequently uses scars as tropes for the multifaceted traumas of victims of racially motivated violence" (Bast).
[59] Butler uses the title *Scars* throughout her notes and drafts; a few examples include OEB 602, OEB 609-611, OEB 617, and OEB 617-637.

history" (OEB 1155). Like most neo-slave narratives, *Fledgling* illuminates two realities of the afterlife of slavery: the way that slavery structures the present and the way it is fundamentally dismembering. The novel attends to slavery as a structuring force of the Human.[60] On the surface, the Ina as a species have built a seemingly colorblind society. Though the Ina themselves are naturally pale, they adopt human symbionts of all races. As one Ina insists to Shori, "Human racism meant nothing to the Ina because human races meant nothing to them. They looked for congenial human symbionts wherever they happened to be, without regard for anything but personal appeal" (Butler, *Fledgling* 148). The central conflict of *Fledgling*, however, undermines this claim since Shori's attackers target her because of her genetically hybrid body and dark skin. The perpetrators, a family called the Silks, believe that Shori is no longer truly Ina and that allowing her to live and reproduce would compromise Ina purity and eventually destroy the species. In one confrontation with Shori, which takes place during an Ina trial called a Council of Judgement, Milo Silk, the family patriarch, cries: "You're not Ina!...You're not! And you have no more business at this Council than would a clever dog" (Butler, *Fledgling* 238). Strikingly, the Silks often denigrate Shori not only by invoking her human qualities, like her diminutive stature and her ability to walk in sunlight, but also by invoking highly racialized animal imagery. Milo calls her a

[60] Human with a capital "H" denotes Sylvia Wynter's theorization of "our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself" (Wynter 260). After the Renaissance, Man emerged as a rational, secular, bioeconomic figure marked by whiteness and maleness.

"Murdering black mongrel bitch" and demands: "What will she give us all? Fur? Tails?" (Butler, *Fledgling* 200).

Bringing to mind the dehumanization of racialized people, Milo Silk's exclamation reminds readers of what is at stake in the novel: the issue of "Ina purity" maps, though perhaps imperfectly, onto Euro-American constructions of the Human. The main reason that the Silk family wants to kill Shori is that she has DNA from a black human woman. While the Ina are willing to use Black humans as symbionts to aid their own survival, at least some of them are horrified at the prospect of miscegenation—the idea that Black human genetic material and physical qualities could enter Ina bloodlines. The Silk's paradigm of purity separates human from Ina from animal, demarcating the boundaries of the acceptable Ina body. It is only by keeping this division that they can maintain their belief in Ina superiority to humans, even as they are dependent on humans for essential nourishment. Shori has to demonstrate her Ina-ness to the Silks and their supporters repeatedly. One of her allies advises her: "You must seem more Ina than they are" (Butler, *Fledgling* 266). The demand that Shori prove her Ina-ness to gain basic protection from bodily harm parallels how racialized people, especially Black people, must often defend their very humanity to be deemed worthy of protection from violence. Meanwhile, just as the Ina, including the Silks, require human symbionts in order to survive, Euro-American societal institutions and foundational notions of Humanity require the presence of racialized people. The Silks articulate how antiblackness structures concepts of belonging, rendering those outside "the present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human," otherwise

known as Man, (Wynter 260) exceptionally vulnerable to social, corporeal, and civil death.

Fledgling also foregrounds the fundamentally dismembering quality of slavery and its wake—the way it tears apart both communities and archives. Black families have long been physically dismembered by the slave ship, the coffle, the prison cell, the early grave. Moreover, as Nancy Bentley reminds us, "kinlessness," the transmission of genetic but *not* familial life, is a central condition of slavery. Reproduction stripped of kinship was "crucial to a modern biopolitics of race" (Bentley 272). Slavery also lives on in the diasporic consciousness of untraceable origins. Dionne Brand, who recalls attempts to prompt her grandfather to remember their family's African origins, describes his failure of memory as a rupture, not only in her relationship with her grandfather but, as she says, "in history," in "geography" and in "the quality of being" (5). Shori also experiences this rupture. At one point, she looks into a mirror and is shocked that she does not recognize her own face (Butler, *Fledgling* 18). This rupture is even more evident when Shori tries to recall her human mother: "I shut my eyes and tried to find something of this woman in my memory—something. But there was nothing. All of my life had been erased, and I could not bring it back. Each time I was confronted with the reality of this, it was like turning to go into what should have been a familiar, welcoming place and finding absolutely nothing, emptiness, space" (Butler, *Fledgling* 132).

At one point in the novel, Shori is preparing to testify against her attackers in an Ina trial called a Council of Judgement. One of Shori's supporters tells her that to win her case at the trial, she must call on the dead: "Remember your dead…Keep them

around you" (Butler, *Fledgling* 239). This imperative holds a paradox that is also a meditation on the afterlife of slavery. How can Shori remember her dead when she literally has no memory of them? What happens in the "nothing, emptiness, space" that antiblackness creates? How does one remember when there are no records, when memory fails, when there is "no way in; no return," (Brand 1)? And finally, how can there be collectivity when communities are dismembered and kinship disallowed? While *Fledgling* grapples with the same questions as most neo-slave narratives, it approaches these questions differently and ultimately offers a different set of strategies. It is here that the notable differences between *Fledgling* and other neo-slave narratives such as *Kindred* and *Beloved* become essential.

Fledgling's central speculative device, the genetically engineered vampire with amnesia, encapsulates how *Fledgling* relates to the past in a different way than many neo-slave narratives. Most notably, *Fledgling* begins with the absence of memory—traumatic, spectral, or otherwise. Unlike in *Kindred* (where Dana is unwillingly pulled into the lives of her ancestors) and *Beloved* (where the history of slavery returns uninvited in the form of a young woman), the history of slavery does not *haunt* the present. Instead, this history might be said to *structure* Shori's present in the mundane, pervasive way that it structures Cora's life in *The Underground Railroad*. In *Beloved*, history returns and cannot be held off; the ghost signifies repetition, hauntology, the return of repressed trauma—a tear in the fabric of postbellum life. Similarly, Dana is repeatedly pulled to the plantation where her ancestors lived in a series of literalized flashbacks. Shori's situation is much different; her problem is not intrusive memory but rather lack of memory—"nothing, emptiness, space" (Butler, Fledgling 132).

Indeed, Butler's papers suggest that the theme of archival recovery would have been taken up in an even more literal way in the unfinished sequel to *Fledgling*, most commonly referred to as *Asylum*. The notes and existing fragments of *Asylum* indicate that Butler was exploring various plotlines for the sequel. All of them involve Shori's continuing search for connections to her past, making it clear that Shori's amnesia would never go away. For instance, Butler meditates that Shori would be "Looking for a past—a personal past, an individual past, dealing with members of Shori's extended family, and a general species history with and separate from humans. She wants information, personal connection, understanding. To learn her own story, she must know other people's" (Butler, OEB 75). Butler was toying with the idea of making Shori a historian of the Ina past, either an informal (Butler, OEB 1157) or a professional one (Butler, OEB 3278).

Moreover, several fragments from *Asylum* feature Shori and her symbionts traveling to retrieve an archive of records that her Ina mothers left with human friends for safekeeping purposes. Shori does manage to acquire this archive and look at some of its contents, but these do not bring her the "personal connection" (Butler, OEB 75) that she seeks. She sees a photograph of herself as a child with her Ina and human mothers, all of whom look like "strangers" to her, with her own face "no more familiar than the others" (Butler, OEB 93). Shori looks at this photo and others with a surprisingly mild, detached interest; rather than expressing any feelings of connection, she dispassionately wonders if she will be tall when she is fully grown, considering her human mother's above-average height. After a single evening of exploring the archive, she is kidnapped by the sons of the attackers who pursued her in *Fledgling*. Not only does the archive fail

to satisfy the desire for connection, but the materiality of continuing oppression once again cuts through Shori's attempt to retrieve the past.

Shori's amnesia and her resulting lack of affective connection to the past is key to understanding *Fledgling*'s complicated meditation on memory and forgetting. At times, the novel hints that there could be some benefit to a certain kind of forgetting. In the middle of the novel, when Shori meets the Gordon family and learns more about Ina life, Preston Gordon tells her that Ina-symbiont bonds are so powerful that the loss of a symbiont is devastating. When Shori tells Preston that she does not remember any of the seven symbionts she had before the fire, he responds, to her surprise, with "Good … If you remembered them, the pain would be overwhelming … unbearable" (Butler, *Fledgling* 155). Preston suggests that Shori's amnesia has a protective function. Several critics have explored the possible benefits of Shori's amnesia.[61] In my view, these critics' readings of Shori's amnesia are far too celebratory, underplaying the many ways that amnesia makes Shori's life difficult. Also, the idea that amnesia allows for objectivity or a "clean" slate, as Evans expresses, is problematic when applied to U.S.

[61] Shari Evans describes Shori's lack of memory as "strategic amnesia" and argues that it serves several purposes: amnesia puts Shori at a distance from Ina society, which allows her to see her society from a more objective viewpoint. More importantly, as Preston indicates, amnesia keeps Shori from being completely destroyed by the trauma of losing everyone in her life. Applying these principles to the readers of the novel, Evans argues that forgetting has useful functions on a societal level as well: "Strategic amnesia gives us the critical distance to remember ethically rather than vengefully. This strategic amnesia in which Butler's final novel situates us, then, leads, past forgetting, to the justice of remembering on a historic and cultural scale" (256). In a slightly different articulation, Joy Sanchez-Taylor argues that Shori's amnesia is an asset, giving her a "clean" cultural slate in her relations with humans; she does not remember the speciesm of some of the other Ina or their attitudes of superiority to humans is thus able to engage in "equitable relations between species" (486).

history. Forgetting does not create objectivity, but only an illusion of objectivity made possible through the erasure of relevant information. My view is that while *Fledgling* does not celebrate Shori's memory loss or suggest that her amnesia is for the best, the novel also disinvests in the idea that recovering memory is always necessary to overcome a history of traumatic violence—an assumption that both the neo-slave narrative tradition and twentieth-century trauma theory have naturalized. In other words, unlike psychoanalytically inspired models of trauma (i.e., Cathy Caruth's work) and texts that take up Morrisonian "rememory"—both of which emphasize the need to unearth repressed memories in order to overcome their effects—*Fledgling* suggests that remembering is not always possible, nor is it always desirable. In Shori's case, remembering her family and symbionts would give her a stronger sense of personal identity and rootedness, but it would pose the risk of overwhelming her with the magnitude of her loss. More importantly, recovering her memory would not inherently protect her from further antiblack violence. Whether she remembers her family or not, she would continue to live in a materially oppressive world.

Fledgling ultimately suggests that recovery efforts should not be pursued for their own sake or for the sake of "bearing witness." Rather, such efforts should have concrete impacts that enable people to thrive within oppressive structures, and ideally, to rupture those structures and create more livable ones. Many of Shori's successful efforts to learn about her past serve these purposes. For instance, she needs specific information about her own and Ina history in order to figure out how to build a life for herself and her symbionts in Ina society. She remembers some of this information

spontaneously as she interacts with Ina. She re-learns other information through her growing network of allies and symbionts (a process discussed in more detail later in this chapter). Other memories, like those involving her dead relatives, remain inaccessible—perhaps because recovering such memories would do more harm than good.

While amnesia enables the novel's commentary on memory, Shori's genetically modified body reconfigures narratives about Black abjection. In neo-slave narratives like *Kindred* and *Beloved*, as in the original nineteenth-century slave narratives, Black subjectivity is often linked to racial subjection. *Beloved*'s ghost comes into existence through the racial violence of the Middle Passage, plantation life, and the threat of recapture that prompts Sethe's murder of her baby. *Kindred*, in turn, uses time travel to delve into the genealogy of racialized and gendered violence that, quite literally, enables Dana's birth.[62] Both Sethe and Dana are subjects generated by a past with which they must break to be freer. The genetically modified amnesiac vampire signifies something different than either of these: a subject *indelibly marked by* but *not created through* racial violence. Consider *Fledgling*'s unique twist on the "I was born" conventional opening of nineteenth-century slave narratives. Shori's near-death from a racist attack could be read as what Hartman refers to as an "inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved" (*Scenes* 3). This attack—like the beating of Aunt Hester, an "original generative act" (*Scenes* 3) that made the young Frederick Douglass aware of his own status as a slave—leads to Shori's rebirth in the cave as a racialized subject created

[62] As Canavan puts it, "Butler's time-traveling narrator, Dana, is alive after slavery and despite slavery, but also because of slavery, a compromised and morally fraught position that forces her to make deeply unpleasant choices" (61).

through violence. But this scene of violence is not Shori's only birth, even if it obliterates her memory of her old life. As an Ina-human genetic hybrid, Shori literally defies linear genealogy because she is the product of multiple mothers and fathers of different species. Her human, African American mother, who named her "Shori" after "an east African crested nightingale" (Butler, *Fledgling* 132) and passed on her Black skin, represents a tie to transatlantic slavery, but also to Africa. Shori also had three Ina mothers (a set of three sisters who mated together, as is typical for the Ina) and an Ina father (most Ina have multiple fathers, but as Iosif had no living biological siblings at the time he mated and did not adopt any, he was Shori's only male parent). The male and female sides of her Ina family represent two additional sets of origin stories. The Ina mothers spliced together Shori's human and Ina DNA, creating her unique being. Shori's Blackness is not a marker of abjection; it is a marker of her rich, multifaceted history and of the love of her many parents.

Turning to the Law

Shori lives in a world where she is racialized. The surveillance and policing of her body are mundane and quotidian. How might Shori survive in such a world? Like Whitehead's Cora (who uses the underground railroad for her own purposes) or Hausman's Little Little People (who infiltrate the VR machine, causing it to glitch), Shori at times deranges and at other times evades racial logics to enable her survival. As Shori flees continued persecution by the Silks and strives to build a life for herself, *Fledgling* offers its own set of quotidian lived practices—strategies for living within an antiblack world when attempts at recovery fail. These intertwining practices might be

summarized as follows: Shori appeals to the law to gain provisional protection against further harm, though not redress; she eludes her pursuers by using their assumptions against them; she builds a community through mutually beneficial acts of care; and she uses this community to gain knowledge about the world around her that would not otherwise be available to her.

I will begin with what I consider the least effective but nonetheless important of these strategies: Shori's appeal to the law. During the last third of *Fledgling,* after learning her murderous pursuers' identities (the Silk family), Shori and her Ina allies, a family called the Gordons, organize a traditional Ina trial called a Council of Judgement. The Council is to determine officially whether the Silks are guilty of harming Shori and, if they are, to seek an appropriate resolution. The Council is judged by a panel of elder Ina, and each side has an "advocate" that advises them, though there are no "lawyers" per se—Shori's advocate is an older relative, whereas the Silk advocate is a woman named Katherine Dahlman, who shares many of the Silks' beliefs. Gerry Canavan finds this narrative turn in *Fledgling* "deeply unexpected: what begins as a vampire fantasy novel ends, weirdly, in an Ina courtroom, hashing out the peculiarities of Ina legal tradition and the complex nature of Ina citizenship" (Canavan 167). However, if we read *Fledgling* as a neo-slave narrative—a novel about living in slavery's wake—Butler's meditations on the law make much more sense. In the United States, race and the law are fundamentally intertwined. The peculiarities of the Ina Council of Judgement allow Butler to delve into the possible uses as well as the limits of the law. Unlike human trials, which the Ina consider "games to see which lawyer is best able to use the law, the jury's beliefs and prejudices, and his own theatrical ability

to win," such Councils are "about finding the truth, period, and then deciding what to do about it" (Butler, *Fledgling* 220). Because of the Ina's extraordinary sensory powers, which allow them to detect lying better than humans can, and the centuries-long lifespans that allow individual Ina to hone these abilities, Ina Councils are unhampered by imperfect knowledge and almost always immune to bias. Though Councils are wrong on occasion—"a result of friendship or loyalty causing dishonesty" (Butler, *Fledgling* 220)—such occurrences are rare. In other words, the Ina justice system has seemingly overcome many of the biases of human law. Such a justice system enables Butler to examine the promise and limits of legal redress beyond questions of discriminatory application. The Council of Justice incites readers to ask: If it were possible to design a legal system so that racial discrimination became exceedingly rare, could the law then provide justice for Black people?

This question is weighty precisely because U.S. legal history charts a history of American antiblackness. From antebellum slavery to Jim Crow laws to mass incarceration and contemporary policing, the law has long been used to structure the conditions of Black marginalization. While it is initially easy to point to legal victories for racial justice, such as the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments or even the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it is equally valid that new forms of legal subjection have quickly replaced older ones.[63] Redlining serves as a potent example. Redlining was a practice that began with the Federal Housing Authority's policy of refusing to insure mortgages in

[63] As discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* documents this trajectory extensively.

neighborhoods with Black residents; the practice soon spread through the whole housing industry and prevented Black homeownership from the 1930s to the 1960 (Coates), buffeted by a variety of other legal and extralegal practices. While housing discrimination was banned by the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the legacy of these racist practices has never been addressed, nor have legal mechanisms provided redress to victims. In 1976, the Contract Buyers League, a Chicago organization fighting racist housing policies, lost a lawsuit against contract sellers in which they demanded reparations (Coates). Furthermore, new forms of housing discrimination have taken hold. Subprime lenders would target black prospective homeowners who had limited access to other funding sources, meaning that the 2008 foreclosure crisis impacted Black people more severely than white people (Coates). For the Contract Buyers League and those impacted by the foreclosure crisis, the law failed to provide redress.

Because of the severe material consequences of racism in both its judicial and extrajudicial forms, calls for reparations also have a long history in the United States. These calls have ranged from specific demands—like that of the Contract Buyer's League in their lawsuit—to broader ones, like Ta-Nehisi Coates's call for a "national reckoning":

> What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would

> mean the end of yelling "patriotism" while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history. (Coates)

Coates favors H.R. 40, also known as the "Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act"—a proposed bill that would study possible reparations for slavery and other antiblack injustice. Coates takes a broad view of reparations and believes Congress should take charge on this issue because "A crime that implicates the entire American people deserves its hearing in the legislative body that represents them" (Coates) and that "wrestling publicly with these questions matters as much as—if not more than—the specific answers that might be produced" (Coates). Representative John Conyers of Michigan initially sponsored the bill, introducing it every year from 1989 until he died in 2017. Representative Shirley Jackson Lee of Texas has since taken up the mantle. Lee emphasizes that reparations cannot take the form of payments to individuals alone; instead, Congress must focus on "remedies that can be created in as many forms necessary to equitably address the many kinds of injuries sustained from chattel slavery and its continuing vestiges" (Lee).

If we understand reparations in this broad way—as potentially including monetary recompense, but more importantly, as a way of "wrestling publicly with these questions" that leads to "spiritual renewal," as Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it, the Ina Council of Judgement could be understood as an attempt to provide reparations to Shori, a

victim of sustained racialized violence. That is, the Council represents an instance of the legal system being used as a vehicle to recognize the impacts of past violence (the murders of Shori's community, the loss of her memory, and the repeated attacks against her) and lay the groundwork for a more just future, one where Shori can build a life for herself free of persecution. Seen this way, *Fledgling* offers a commentary on using the law to achieve redress for historical and ongoing racial oppression.

How effective is the Council in achieving these aims? A full third of the novel is centered on the Council's activities—the selection of the members, the choosing of advocates for each side, and testimony from Shori, the Silks, and their respective supporters. The sheer number of pages that Butler spends describing the Council of Judgement indicates that she does not entirely dismiss the law's potential to bring justice. Furthermore, the Council does, in the end, rule in favor of Shori. The majority of the Council members recognize the harm that has been done to her. Beyond this individual harm, the Council members note the detrimental effects of the Silks' actions on Ina society. If the Council adjudicates violence against Shori as permissible by ruling in favor of the Silks, Ina society is put at risk. As one Council member puts it, "If we ignore these murders, we invite people to settle disputes themselves, and we risk exposure in the human world" (Butler, *Fledgling* 296). The Silk family is promptly punished by being "dissolved," (Butler, *Fledgling* 299) meaning that the family's children are adopted into other Ina families and, when mature, required mate under their new last names, effectively ending the Silk family line. Most importantly, Shori is, at least theoretically, protected from future harm by the Silks. The Silks must promise,

under threat of execution, that "there will be peace between the Silks and the Mathews, peace between the Silks and the Gordons, peace for a period of at least three hundred years from today" (300). Thus, it appears that the Ina legal system results in a kind of justice or redress.

However, this redress is limited. On the novel's last page, Shori, still unable to recover most of her memory, reflects:

> They were all gone. The person I had been was gone. I couldn't bring anyone back, not even myself. I could only learn what I could about the Ina, about my families. I would restore what could be restored. The Matthews family could begin again. The Petrescu family could not." (Butler, *Fledgling* 310)

Shori concisely articulates the limitations of what the law can provide. The Council of Judgement has given Shori the promise of protection from further harm, but it has not restored what she lost. Nor was the Silk family required to provide any restitution to Shori. This latter fact is explained in the novel as a quirk of Ina life, as Daniel Gordon explains: "Levying fines would be meaningless. It's too easy for us to get money from the human population" (Butler, *Fledgling* 224). Within the world of the novel—where Ina venom makes it easy to take advantage of unsuspecting humans—this logic makes sense, but it is still curious that the Ina, an exceedingly intelligent species, have not found any other ways of offering restitution to victims of harm. For Shori, the only reparations that are possible—since her memory and community cannot be restored by

the legal system, and she will not be offered any sort of material restitution—is the promise of protection from further harm.

Unfortunately, even this protection is not guaranteed. In fact, in her notes for *Asylum*, Butler experiments with the idea of the younger members of the (former) Silk family coming after Shori despite their promise to stay away from her. Butler brainstorms that this version of the novel would revolve around two Silk brothers who are "attempting to force Shori to mate with them" (OEB 1171). *Fledgling*'s sequel would be "the story of a woman who, as she tries to rebuild her life after major losses, is pursued, harassed, stalked, by two of the children of those who caused her original losses" (Butler, OEB 1171). Butler imagines that Shori's safety at the end of *Fledgling* would not last; the Silks' descendants could break their promise not to pursue her. It is telling that Butler envisioned Shori being subjected to sexual assault as well as harassment and stalking. These forms of violence are deeply gendered, impact Black women at disproportionately high rates, and the perpetrators of such crimes are rarely prosecuted since Brittany C. Slatton and April L. Richard succinctly put it, "The U.S. legal institution was not designed with the intention to protect Black women" (3). Black women's allegations of assault are often treated as "not worth pursuing" or placed under extra scrutiny, especially when [the woman] "does not show visible signs of trauma" (Slatton and Richard 4).[64] Though Shori's allegations in *Fledgling* are about physical

[64] Of course, women of all races experience sexual assault at high rates and are often disbelieved or ignored by the legal system. However, Slatton and Richard provide evidence that Black women are subject to especially high rates of assault and more legal scrutiny than white women.

rather than sexual assault, the dynamic of increased scrutiny plays out even there; she is advised to walk a fine line between appearing injured enough to warrant punishing her attackers but not so injured that she will be seen as unreliable. The fact that Butler imagines further violence against Shori in the sequel—this time, sexual violence—does not bode well.[65] In other words, the Council of Judgement cannot protect Shori from misogynoir. The Council provides an imperfect way of *reducing the chance of continuing harm* rather than redressing past harm or offering guaranteed protection. Notably, it is only a fantastical justice system that can offer these limited benefits. Even in her fantasy novel, Butler cannot imagine a legal system that will genuinely protect Black women.

My point here is not that Butler completely rejects the legal system. Rather, I am arguing that Butler's novel conceptualizes redress, especially as enacted through the legal system, as necessary but insufficient. We should recall Fred Moten's distinction between a project of "debt collection" and a project of "complete overturning" (Moten, in Harney and Moten 151), which I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. Moten connects the logic of recovery (correcting the record, acknowledging the unacknowledged) to that of reparation; both, he suggests, rely on a kind of debt collection that is ultimately invested in maintaining the current world rather than building a new one. Critics like Wendy Brown and Rosi Braidotti have rejected

[65] I should note that not every version of *Asylum* involves this grim plotline where Shori is pursued by relatives of the Silks. Based on the quantity of notes and draft pages mentioning some version of this plotline, however, it did seem to be Butler's most prominent idea for the sequel.

reparations for similar reasons.[66] But it is notable that Moten, unlike Brown or Braidotti, does not disavow reparations even as he points out their limitations. In a similar vein, *Fledgling* illustrates the need for redress, including that which might be accessed through the law, even as it highlights the way that legal redress is an ultimately insufficient means of undoing racial injustice.

Covert Movement

Fortunately, in addition to enlisting the law, Shori uses other strategies to seek protection for herself and rebuild the life that was destroyed by white supremacy. Shori's Blackness is why she faces persecution in the first place, but the qualities linked to her Blackness also enable her survival. As I already discussed, Shori's Blackness is not depicted as abjection. The novel maps how antiblackness, including misogynoir, operates, but it does not portray antiblackness as absolute. Shori's Blackness is a source of radical creativity and surreptitious mobility. In making an argument for Blackness as resistant, I risk a problem against which Therí Pickens warns: viewing Shori's Blackness and disability (amnesia/madness) as radical in a simplistic way. Pickens points out that for Shori

[66] Brown argues that reparations bring a false sense of closure to events that have no end: "Once guilt is established and a measure of victimization secured by an apology or by material compensation, is the historical event presumed to be concluded, sealed as past, 'healed,' or brought to 'closure'?" (140). In a similar vein, Braidotti contends that reparations operate under the incorrect assumption that "financial settlements could provide the answer to the injury, the pain endured, and the long-lasting effects of the injustice" (11).

> Black madness cannot be agentive or radical or resistant by itself. Shori's mere presence cannot bear the weight of reorienting the narrative all on its own, nor can her behavior automatically shift the ideologies that govern her circumstances or change the people who helped create and sustain them." (38)

While Pickens is right to caution against making Blackness "the radical space for white liberalism to mount its critique of ableism or racism" (Pickens 34), I suggest that Shori uses the qualities of her unique human-Ina body to evade capture, use her pursuers assumptions again them, and assemble with co-resisters. Thus, *Fledgling* does not merely use Blackness as a purportedly radical space from which to mount a liberal critique but instead sidesteps liberalism to model strategies for fugitive survival and thriving amidst ongoing violence.

Whereas Blackness is sometimes portrayed as overdetermined by carceral geographies that limit Black peoples' movement, *Fledgling's* speculative imaginary links Blackness with increased mobility. The novel does not overlook how antiblack institutions circumscribe Black people's movement through public (and often private) space. For example, Shori cannot travel or even move about in her daily life without the constant threat of attack. Bodily safety, her own and that of her human symbionts, is a significant concern throughout the novel. Notably, however, the novel does not *solely* portray Shori's Blackness as a form of heightened vulnerability; her Black skin and the genetic material she received from her Black human mother also allow her to overcome the Ina's two weaknesses. Unlike all other Ina, Shori can stay awake during the day and

withstand sunlight. Other Ina express envy about these qualities. “I wish William could do that. I would feel safer if he could at least wake up if we need him,” says a symbiont about her own Ina, who does not have Shori’s day-walking abilities (Butler, *Fledgling* 160). Because Shori can sleep when she chooses and go outside during the day, her allies, like the Gordon family, see her as a great asset to their species.

Shori’s wakefulness allows her to escape capture multiple times since her pursuers often strike during the day, expecting her to be incapacitated. For example, when the Gordon homestead, Punta Nublada, is attacked, “except for [Shori], all Ina [are] asleep” (Butler, *Fledgling* 167). It is because Shori is awake and immediately catches the sound of the intruders’ cars pulling up that she can alert others, give them time to arm themselves, and thus prevent the intruders from burning down the community with little effort. The human symbionts in the house, though awake, cannot hear the intruders because their hearing is not as sensitive as Shori’s, while the other Ina are all asleep. The novel makes clear that Shori’s ability to stay awake is what enabled the community to survive, even though the intruders were heavily armed: “Somehow, most of the invaders went down in that first barrage. They were used to taking their victims completely by surprise, and shooting the desperate who awoke and tried to run” (Butler, *Fledgling* 168). The abilities associated with Shori’s Blackness allow her to evade attack by turning her attackers’ expectations against them.

In short, as it highlights Shori’s unique status among the Ina, the novel enacts a clever overturning of expected ideas about Blackness. On the one hand, Shori’s unique body indelibly links Blackness with humanness. While antiblackness characteristically

relies on exiling Black people from the category of the Human (the capital H, again, demarcating the hegemonic ethnoclass exemplified by what Wynter describes as Man), *Fledgling* turns this logic on its head: Shori is Black precisely *because* of her human DNA. Since there are no dark-skinned Ina, the only way Shori's family was able to create an Ina being with more melanin was to harvest DNA from a human. In this way, the novel allies Blackness and humanness. At the same time, *Fledgling* does not simply attempt to welcome Black people into the category of the Human in a way that props up the legitimacy of this category. The novel's more radical move entails aligning Blackness and humanity and *also* disturbing the category itself. Shori has human DNA, but as the Punta Nublada episode indicates, her human DNA does not result in the dilution of her Ina-specific traits (her Ina hearing is not diminished). In fact, the DNA splice paradoxically amplifies these traits. For instance, Shori has unusually potent venom. After the murder of her father, Iosif, she takes over his symbionts, keeping them from dying, a task few Ina can accomplish, as Brook explains. Shori's venom can also overcome the effects of the venom of other Ina. When she interrogates a human, Victor, whom the Silk family weaponized against her by biting him, she uses her own venom to enable him to answer her questions. Daniel Gordon exclaims that no other Ina could have done such a thing without killing Victor (Butler, *Fledgling* 184). While the Silks seek to destroy Shori because they fear that her families' gene-splicing experiments will mean the end of Ina uniqueness, which will be corrupted by human DNA, the opposite is actually the case. Shori is an Ina with supercharged abilities (venom, strength) as well as human qualities other Ina do not have (diurnal sleep patterns, dark skin that

withstands burning). She is ultimately a new kind of being, perhaps representing the alternate variations of the human that Sylvia Wynter calls on us to imagine.

Even with these special abilities, Shori cannot escape the impacts of antiblackness, but she can navigate within it in ways that open new possibilities for her. Thus, without shifting attention away from the impacts of racist violence or idealizing Shori's abilities (which would have made the novel a liberal story about Black exceptionalism and uplift), *Fledgling* highlights Blackness as an unruly and generative force—one that cannot be captured by racist discourses that revile Black humanity or "progressive" (read: liberal) ones celebrate it. Shori's existence disrupts the logics of racialization that are a clear though denied (since the Ina claim they do not care about race) part of Ina life.

Affiliation through Tangible Care

Shori's central goal throughout the novel is to form a new family—to "assemble a household," (Butler, *Fledgling* 135) as one Ina explains to Shori. That means she has several tasks. Having lost her original seven symbionts in the arson-caused fire that destroyed her mothers' community, she must collect a new group of human symbionts who will sustain her. She also has to reintegrate into Ina society so she can eventually unite with an Ina mate. Finally, she needs to protect this new family of Ina and symbionts from harm, knowing that she is still being pursued and could be attacked again at any moment. In *Fledgling*, then, communal ties are central to both the novel's plot and its political project. Like in *The Underground Railroad* and *Riding the Trail of*

Tears, affiliation in *Fledgling* is not crafted primarily through ties of identification, biological kinship, or legality, but rather through acts of tangible care. The symbiotic quality of the Ina-human relationship and the communal nature of Ina communities are both evidence of this fact. I have extensively discussed the racism and species of Ina society, so it might seem jarring or contradictory to discuss care within this society. But this is not inherently contradictory because *Fledgling* is ultimately a novel about living within a structurally oppressive world. In such a world, care exists alongside violence and, like other radical practices, can enable the creation of a different world.

Care is inherently connected to wakefulness. It is connected, first, because antiblackness necessitates tending to those victimized by it. As Sharpe puts it, "To tend to the Black dead and dying … It means work. It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living" (10). Sharpe describes, for instance, the efforts her family and friends had to make to keep her brother Stephen comfortable as he died of mesothelioma, knowing that "medical and other professionals treat Black patients differently" (10). *Fledgling*, as a novel that begins with a grievously injured protagonist—alone and possibly dying—immediately brings the question of care to the forefront of the reader's mind. As Shori recovers from her physical injuries, she remains in need of various kinds of care because of her memory loss, but she also discovers her own abilities to offer care to others as an Ina who can stay awake during the day. If care requires vigilance, as Sharpe describes, Shori can offer a unique kind of care to the communities she joins, since she can literally hold vigil when other Ina are incapacitated. *Fledgling* also theorizes care on a broader level that does not require

injury—that is, quotidian care that sustains communities. The Ina-symbiont relationship represents this kind of care. Through this complex relationship, the novel asks readers to consider what it means to provide tangible care and the stakes of providing it.

As I have mentioned, for the Ina, ties with symbionts are biologically crucial for species survival. Most obviously, symbionts serve as a source of nourishment by allowing their Ina to draw blood periodically. Since one Ina typically has between five and ten symbionts, they do not drain enough blood from any single human to kill them or cause other adverse effects. Like in *The Underground Railroad* and *Riding the Trail of Tears*, offering nourishment functions as an act of tangible care. Indeed, hunger and feeding are central motifs in *Fledgling*. Hunger is the first sensation Shori recognizes when she wakes up in the cave: "I was hungry—starving—and I was in pain. There was nothing in my world but hunger and pain, no other people, no other time, no other feelings" (Butler, *Fledgling* 2). Alexander G. Weheliye argues that hunger can articulate the cravings, both bodily and political, of racialized subjects. Hunger marks a desire for nourishment within degradation, articulating a desubjectified being as a desiring presence. Finally, through the request for sustenance, hunger can create new relational assemblages (Weheliye 121). In the opening passage of *Fledgling*, Shori awakens without memory, identity, or what is conceptualized in Euro-American philosophy as intellect. But alongside pain, the fleshly sensation of hunger marks Shori as a desiring presence, one who is illegible in the liberal-humanist rubric of personhood. In some ways, this hunger is desubjectifying and horrifying, and it drives Shori to kill a human as she searches for fresh meat to help her heal from her injuries. But hunger also generates affiliation since Shori is quickly drawn to Wright, who will become her first

symbiont and later to other potential symbionts. It turns out that Shori's hunger goes beyond the need for literal nutrition. The sensual and emotional ties between Ina and symbionts are as necessary for survival as blood. The novel reveals that Ina who take blood from humans but do not form any lasting connections cannot live for very long. As Joan, one of the Ina explains simply: "We either weave ourselves a family of symbionts, or we die" (Butler, *Fledgling* 270).

Touch evokes care in a different way, playing a significant role in Ina practices of kinship. When Shori becomes distraught, Joel, one of her symbionts, tells her that "Ina need to be touched, especially young Ina." (Butler, *Fledgling* 240). Celia also reminds Shori that she needs to touch her symbionts more often. One way of reading this emphasis on touch is by way of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's notion of "hapticality." I understand hapticality, or "the touch of the undercommons," (98) to be a way of creating resistant collectivity within spaces of confinement and subjection. Harney and Moten tell us that "Skin, against epidermalisation, senses touching" (98). If the flesh is forged in the hold, hapticality is also enabled there since "the hold's terrible gift was to gather dispossessed feelings in common" (Harney and Moten 98). The touch of the undercommons rips through epidermalisation—that which traps racialized subjects within their skins. In *Fledgling*, by contrast, the skin is a site of relationality and ultimately collectivity. In other words, touch enables affiliation that works *in reverse* to bare genealogy—which, to recall Nancy Bentley, is the transmission of genetic but not familial life—because it allows Shori to create a family that does not depend primarily on genetic reproduction.

Humans receive care from the Ina in addition to providing it. While humans as a species are not dependent on the Ina, individual humans gain significant benefits from joining with them. Iosif explains to Wright that he will likely live for one hundred and seventy to two hundred healthy years: "Your immune system will be greatly strengthened by Shori's venom, and it will be less likely to turn on you and give you one of humanity's many autoimmune diseases. And her venom will keep your heart and circulatory system strong" (Butler, *Fledgling* 63). Humans also gain heightened senses from continual infusions of Ina venom; Brook, for example, is revealed to have night vision (Butler, *Fledgling* 134). Symbionts become physically stronger than regular humans, and they can run faster. Joining with an Ina can even help symbionts overcome significant psychological trauma. In a draft of *Asylum,* Shori meets a new symbiont, a woman named Darya who suffers from intense nightmares after being subjected to childhood sexual abuse by her stepfather and his friends. Shori promises Darya that "Soon, the nightmares will be gone permanently" (Butler, OEB 77). She explains that once Darya is fully bound to her, Shori will be able to "talk [Darya] out of the worst of the nightmares" (Butler, OEB 77). In short, joining with the Ina would be tempting for any human since it results in a very long, healthy life in a physiologically enhanced body.

Aside from these various health benefits, the process of feeding an Ina is highly pleasurable for human symbionts. Wright comments that "What you do ought to hurt, but except for that first instant when you break the skin, it never does" (Butler, *Fledgling* 86). Any human can experience the gratification resulting from an Ina bite, even if they are not permanently bound to an Ina, but it is especially intense for

symbionts. As Brook explains, “They take over our lives…And we let them because they give us so much satisfaction and…just pure pleasure” (Butler, *Fledgling* 161). Brook suggests that the pleasure symbionts gain from their ties with Ina offset the freedoms they give up in service of the relationship. Symbionts often liken the sensations of feeding the Ina to a particularly intense form of sexual gratification. In addition, Ina and their symbionts also have sex during or after feeding times, though, being separate species, they cannot produce children together; the only purpose of sex between them is pleasure.

The fact that the Ina-human relationship is mutualistic, however, does not mean that there are no drawbacks for both parties. *Fledgling* makes explicit the challenges inherent in practicing tangible care. Humans make significant sacrifices to join with the Ina. The venom of an Ina is “a powerful hypnotic drug” (Butler, *Fledgling* 73) that makes the human “highly suggestible and deeply attached to the source of the substance” (73), meaning that they will obey any direct command given by their Ina and will become emotionally distraught when separated from the Ina for too long. It is this suggestibility effect of the venom that would enable Shori to talk Darya out of having nightmares in *Asylum*, which shows the double-edged nature of the effect. Even more significantly, the physiological benefits of Ina venom have a flip side: while the human’s body becomes stronger and healthier, it also becomes physically dependent on a substance in the venom. If their Ina dies (a rare but possible occurrence, as we learn when Iosif and Stefan die, leaving several symbionts behind) and another Ina does not successfully adopt that symbiont, the human will die as well (Butler, *Fledgling* 74). Furthermore, humans who join with the Ina must live relatively nearby to feed their Ina

regularly, and their relationships with non-symbiont humans necessarily become more distant since they are required to keep the existence of the Ina a secret. In particular, the symbionts' slow-aging bodies can be a giveaway, causing other humans to become suspicious of the fact that symbionts never seem to look older.

The Ina, too, are constrained by the nature of their relationships with symbionts, though these constraints are less noticeable. Since the Ina require blood to live, they must always travel with at least a few symbionts; thus, it is not only the symbionts' freedom of movement that is limited by this unique relationship but the Ina's as well. More significantly, the death of a symbiont causes significant distress, as Preston Gordon tells Shori: "Child, you have no idea how much it hurts when they die" (Butler, *Fledgling* 155). As a result, most Ina will go to great lengths to protect their symbionts, even at risk to themselves, as Shori's actions repeatedly demonstrate when her symbionts are under threat. Finally, the venom-based ties between Ina and humans go both ways, and although Ina do not have to obey their symbionts, they are influenced by the humans' physical and emotional states. As Shori says of her symbiont Theodora: "She had some hold on me beyond the blood" (Butler, *Fledgling* 137). Though this hold becomes strongest when a human is bound permanently to an Ina, even a casual bite can make a difference. When Shori bites Victor, a human she wants to question about the attack on Punta Nublada but does not intend to adopt as a symbiont, she realizes that "the bites made me feel connected to him and at least a little responsible for him" (Butler, *Fledgling* 184).

Some scholars of *Fledgling* have argued that the Ina-symbiont bond is inherently parasitic rather than mutualistic, with the humans giving up more than the Ina

for less significant gains.[67] In early notes about *Fledgling,* Butler highlights the potential for abuse of humans by Ina: before inventing the Silk family and their racial motivations, Butler considered making Shori's persecutor a human former symbiont who felt "used, enslaved" and killed Shori's family as an act of resistance against Ina who "force humans to love, feed, and defend those who parasitize them" (Butler, OEB 187). Butler abandoned this version of the vengeful symbiont plotline. In the final version of the novel, a symbiont named Martin echoes the sentiment in these early notes, recalling how, when he was first approached by an Ina, he thought the arrangement "sounded more like slavery than symbiosis" (Butler, *Fledgling* 204). However, Martin follows up his comment about the Ina-symbiont relationship as a form of slavery with the recognition that he eventually joined the Ina because he "wanted to be with them" (Butler, *Fledgling* 204). His life at Punta Nublada is satisfying enough that his adult son, Joel, who was raised in the Ina community, also wishes to become a symbiont and courts Shori with the hope of joining her growing family. In short, *Fledgling* and Butler's drafts and notes, while not downplaying the risks humans take to join with the Ina, consistently present the relationship as mutualistic.

[67] For example, Florian Bast argues that the "complex and ethically problematic relationship" between Ina and humans "questions the desirability of agency by asking and refusing to answer whether the highest degree of agency is per se the most preferable state of being" (Bast). Taking an even stronger stance, Gerry Canavan contends that the Ina are "predators" (166) who engage humans in a "one-sided parasitism" (167).

An essential quality that makes the Ina-human bond mutualistic rather than parasitic is the mutual consent involved. The process begins with the Ina's instinctual need to find appropriate symbionts. Once an Ina is attracted by the scent of a potentially appropriate symbiont, they will bite the symbiont once or twice in order to "taste" them. The human will not become dependent on Ina venom after only a few bites; before proceeding to incorporate them permanently into their family, the Ina is supposed to explain the consequences of becoming a symbiont (both the positives and negatives) and allow the human to leave if they so desire. As Brook later explains to Shori, "Iosif [her original Ina, Shori's father] told me what would happen if I accepted him, that I would become addicted and need him. That I would have to obey. That if he died, I might die" (Butler, *Fledgling* 161). Brook is nonetheless intrigued by Ina society and tempted by the idea of an extended, disease-free life. She becomes a symbiont willingly: "I wasn't hooked when he asked…I could have walked away, or run like hell" (161). According to the norms of Ina society, as Brook explains, a human is free to accept or to reject an Ina's request to become a symbiont.

Butler's drafts of *Asylum* emphasize this point about consent. While traveling with her symbionts on the West Coast, Shori meets a woman, Sharon Lawson, who was once courted as a symbiont by Shori's eldermother, Dorota, but eventually turned down the offer to join the Ina because she wanted "a more conventional life" (Butler, OEB 93). Sharon notes that Dorota bit her three times but did not pressure her to join. After taking two months to consider the offer, Sharon turned her down, though the two remained friends until Dorota's death. Sharon and Dorota's story shows the process of

selecting symbionts working as intended—with consent on the part of the human and without undue pressure.

Notably, unscrupulous Ina can take advantage of humans by addicting them to Ina venom without informing them of the consequences, and other factors can also prevent a fully consensual union. For instance, Shori's amnesia initially prevents her from giving Wright the information he needs to decide whether he wishes to become a symbiont or not. However, a few days after meeting Wright, as she begins to piece together information about herself, she realizes that "the bites tie [Wright] to [her]," (Butler, *Fledgling* 48) and that if he does not leave her soon, he will be bound to her permanently. As soon as she recognizes this fact, she tells him to leave her if he wants to: "Freedom, Wright. Now or never" (Butler, *Fledgling* 49). Wright chooses to stay, and though his decision was likely influenced by the number of times he had already been bitten, it is also clear that Shori, even in her compromised state, offers Wright the opportunity to decide if he wishes to stay with her. Shori's decision gives credence to Brook's assertion that most Ina-human bonds are entered into willingly.

At its best, then, the Ina-symbiont relationship is consensual and characterized by practices of mutual tangible care. As Brook tells Shori, "We protect and feed you, and you protect and feed us. That's the way an Ina-and-symbiont household works, or that's the way it *should* work" (Butler, *Fledgling* 177, italics original). While the humans feed their Ina with blood, the Ina likewise provide their humans with nourishment; references to human food are nearly as frequent in *Fledgling* as references to blood. The first room in Wright's home that Shori sees is the kitchen, and the first thing she recognizes is a refrigerator (Butler, *Fledgling* 17). When Shori arrives in

Iosif's community, three of Iosif's symbionts—Esther, Celia, and Daryl—are cooking together (75). The novel often references what specifically Shori's symbionts are eating—such as "microwaved mugs of vegetable soup, slabs of canned ham, and dinner rolls" (138) while they are traveling or a hearty breakfast of waffles, sausages, butter, fruit, and milk (155) when they arrive at Punta Nublada. Shori is often concerned about ensuring her symbionts have enough food. Food—whether blood or human cuisine—communicates the mutual care between Ina and symbionts.

Practices of care permeate all aspects of Ina-human life. Living together in close-knit communities—several Ina of the same sex, the symbionts of each of these Ina, and the partners and children of the symbionts—these cross-species groups rely on communal labor. When Shori arrives at Iosif's home, she notes "five large, well-lit, two story houses" as well as "two barns, several sheds and garages, animal pens, and fields and gardens" (Butler, *Fledgling* 69), indicating a largely self-sufficient community. Some symbionts are employed outside the community, whereas others choose to do the work they were trained for—whether they are doctors, plumbers, or potters—only "on behalf of the people of Punta Nublada" (Butler, *Fledgling* 164). As Jill Renner, a symbiont of one of the Gordons, tells Shori, "We help support the community whether we have jobs away from it or stay here, whether we bring in money or not" (Butler, *Fledgling* 164). The novel also suggests that in addition to benefitting from communal labor, symbionts are also materially supported by their Ina, a responsibility many Ina take seriously. Iosif says that he is "wealthy enough to care for all of [his symbionts] if [he] has to" (Butler, *Fledgling* 72) and Shori promises to her symbionts that she will "do what's necessary to sustain [them]" (122).

In short, the Ina-symbiont relationship is based on tangible care that also requires dissimilar kinds of sacrifice. Many critics have pointed to how *Fledgling* brings to the fore difficult questions about agency, consent, and freedom. As I already mentioned, several such critics are skeptical about the mutualism of the Ina-symbiont relation. Seeing the symbiosis in *Fledgling* as mutualistic and as a form of care requires grappling with the ethical complexities around the sacrifice of agency and consent. How can a relation of care be mutual if the parties involved must each make sacrifices—and, in some cases, sacrifices that do not seem fully equivalent or reciprocal? For instance, while both Ina and humans feed one another, the "food" involved is quite different, with humans giving their blood to Ina regularly, thus comprising their own bodily autonomy. Moreover, the kinds of freedoms that each entity sacrifices to be with the other are quite different as well. The Ina are dependent on their symbionts for survival as a species, but they do not give up personal agency in the same ways that their human symbionts, who are physically addicted to Ina venom, do.

What *Fledgling* shows us is that that tangible care sometimes (perhaps even often) requires sacrifice, which can include giving up some measures or forms of agency. This fact, indeed, is perhaps the central challenge of tangible care. It is not always wholly reciprocal; people give and receive care based on their specific social position, just as the Ina and humans give and receive care based on their specific positions within the vampire-symbiont relation and within their communities. Equality, consent, and agency should be considerations in any society—and these are certainly ideas that both Ina and symbionts reflect on throughout the novel—but *Fledgling* shows us that none of these alone can be the sole measure on which ethical affiliation is based.

Black Study in the Archive

The strategies that *Fledgling* foregrounds and that Shori uses to survive—seeking limited protection through the law, moving covertly to escape capture, and creating a community through tangible care—constitute alternative forms of engaging with the past. Though Shori's archive of personal memory remains largely inaccessible, she forms a kind of living archive through her engagements with her symbionts and Ina friends. Notably, she learns about the Ina and her past—information that is necessary for her survival—not through any formal institution or linear system of tutelage, but through a process that resonates with what Harney and Moten call "black study," which they describe as follows:

> We are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it "study" is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. (Harney and Moten 110)

In other words, Black study happens outside of—or sometimes alongside—the more formal kind of study performed within institutions like schools. Rather than following a set course, it is built into and based on seemingly simple activities. It is inherently collective—"what you do with other people"—and characterized by activities that are

difficult or impossible to do alone, such as "playing in a band." It binds together labor (work), pleasure (dancing), and suffering, pivoting around these three modes of activity that make Black study irreducibly material rather than abstract, an inherently "activist" form of intellectuality necessitated by and issuing from the demands of daily life. Black study is processual, improvisational, open-ended—like what happens in a "workshop" or "jam session." Finally, it is a "speculative practice" in that it brings something new and unexpected into existence.

Though she does not use the term "Black study," Sharpe articulates a related notion of knowledge production and exchange; this notion takes seriously the fact that "[Black people's] knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery, is gained from our [traditional forms of] studies, yes, but also in excess of those studies; it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday, from what Dionne Brand calls 'sitting in the room with history'" (12). Put differently, while traditional archives and the disciplinary methods used to excavate them are useful, they are also limited. Attending to history requires "new modes and methods of research and teaching" (Sharpe 13) that involve "a sitting with, a gathering, and a tracking of phenomena that disproportionately and devastatingly affect Black peoples any and everywhere we are" (13). Fittingly, Sharpe crafts *In the Wake* to be its own kind of archive, bringing analysis of literature and academic theory in contact with meditations on quotidian experiences and objects: family photographs, recent news stories, and public monuments. Both Sharpe and Harney and Moten, then, suggest that conventional study (i.e., discipline-specific study using traditional research methods within the university) are inadequate for grappling with the history of antiblackness; other methods must

supplement or even supplant "legible work in the academy" (Sharpe 13). Practicing such alternate methods of study entails awakening, in its registers as a coming to consciousness and a putting into action.

We can look to Butler's fiction, and even to her life, for models of Black study. A momentary turn to biography reveals the ways Butler herself practiced Black study, learning in concert with others and outside of formal institutions. Though her interests were broad, ranging from anthropology to genetics, Butler had an especially longstanding preoccupation with history, evident in the extensive research she did for her published work as well as in her journal reflections, where she notes multiple times a desire to become an academic historian—a career path that appealed to her, but about which she felt conflicted. Butler did not particularly thrive in formal academic settings. She earned her Associate degree from Pasadena City College and sporadically took classes at California State Los Angeles; she loved learning but was often frustrated with the classroom. In a journal entry from 1981, she wrote about her desire and simultaneous reservations about continuing her formal education in history, perhaps by pursuing an advanced degree: "I don't need a stuffed head. Stuffed things don't work well at all (or at all). I need pathways opened … I fear my ignorance and keep silent when I should not … I need this—exposure to and discussion of things I might never discover otherwise" (Butler, OEB 3221). The study of history was an essential source of what she called "help" for her writing, offering inspiration, context, and truthfulness. However, she did not have any inherent reverence for particular scholars, no matter how influential, and as a result, she did not identify with any established school of thought. She reflects, for instance, that when doing research, it is the coherence of the ideas that

matter, not the status of the thinker: “Pay more attention to the point being made than to the possible sources for that point. The question is not ‘Do you believe in the theories of Marx or Malthus or other persons?’ but ‘Is the statement true? If so, why? If not, why? Is there a better statement to cover the situation?” (Butler, OEB 3103). Her lack of enthusiasm or respect for both trendy theories and canonical thinkers would have made her an outlier in formal academic settings.

Yet in another journal entry, she wrote: [quote] “How long I have been interested in history. I’m not even sure what a historian does. As much as I love libraries, I would not want to spend my life pushing through musty old volumes” (Butler, OEB 3178). If we understand Butler as engaged in black study, we could see her as a kind of undercommons historian, and her aversion to “pushing around musty old volumes” then makes sense. Robin D.G. Kelley describes the undercommons as “a fugitive network where a commitment to abolition and collectivity prevails over a university culture bent on creating socially isolated individuals whose academic skepticism and claims of objectivity leave the world-as-it-is intact” (Kelley, "Black Study, Black Struggle" 158). The way that Butler went about her work—the way she studied—was often at odds with the norms and expectations of academic work. Whereas universities thrive by “producing knowledge as a limited resource and good, a limited supply and store” (Crawley 215) Butler reveled in abundance—often quite literally, considering the sheer amount of materials she produced during her life, most of it unpublished. She was generous with what she learned and eager to learn from others, as evidenced by her ample correspondence with and mentoring of other writers.

It is ultimately this ethic of study that *Fledgling* models and applies to the project of historicizing. The novel, like Butler's archive, emphasizes the tasks of surviving and thriving collectively in a present structured tangibly by history. Shori embraces Black study in numerous ways. The Ina do not seem to have any formal institutions for education (such as schools), at least not any that are described in the novel. It appears that even under normal circumstances, young Ina and human symbionts learn about the Ina world through more informal processes. Shori learns from other people and through bodily sensations she experiences in her everyday life. She comes to recall limited factual information, including language, as evidenced when she discovers that she can read and speak Ina. One of her mentors, Hayden, gives her several books of Ina religious teachings, encouraging her to "read the books, talk to believers as well as non-believers, and make up her mind all over again" (Butler, *Fledgling* 188). Hayden also teaches her about the known history of the Ina people, from the ten-thousand-year-old writings that tell of their joining with humans to their diasporic wanderings and persecution by humans to their twenty-first-century life of secrecy alongside human society. Other people, including her symbionts, fill in other aspects of Ina history. This learning always happens informally, during daily activities, and in the context of community.

Despite her recall of some facts and objects, Shori cannot recover her old identity or any memories of her murdered family, and so she relies on her symbionts and Ina allies to give her the kind of guidance that her memory might have given her under other circumstances. During this Council, Shori relies almost entirely on other people—various distant Ina relatives, as well as her symbionts—to instruct her not only

on etiquette and strategy but also on the history of the Ina and on her personal history. Her elderfather (the Ina term for "grandfather") Vladimir explains the fine points of how the Council functions and tells Shori about her closest living female relatives, the Braithwaites (Butler, *Fledgling* 211). Daniel, one of the Gordons, advises her on strategy, explaining how she will be perceived by other Ina. Shori also makes plans to live in the Braithwaite community after the Council ends so she can learn "how to be part of the web of Ina society that obviously exists" (Butler, *Fledgling* 212). These acts do not constitute archival *recovery* because Shori never gains access to her affective memories, the memories that involve her relationships, emotions, and identity. Instead, they constitute a kind of black study that fills the space left when recovery has reached its limits.

Fledgling thus serves as a reimagining of Butler's original neo-slave narrative, *Kindred*. While writing *Kindred* in the 1970s, Butler struggled with a repulsion to what she calls "slave stories"—stories about Black abjection and suffering without redress. She writes:

> In stories, at least—my stories, there ought to be some justice … I want to write strong alive stories of action, suspense, justice. I want to write world building stories—all at once … I want to be rid of the slave story. Maybe only for now, but I want to be rid of it. If I must build a world, let it at least be a world on which I wouldn't mind living at the time the story ends." (Butler, OEB 1002)

Butler's dream of creating "a world on which [she] wouldn't mind living at the time the story ends" was not realized in *Kindred*, which ends with an epilogue that foregrounds Dana's ambivalent, lonely survival. Dana recovers the past at great cost to herself—she loses her arm in the process—and even as a time traveler, she eventually reaches the limit of recovery. We might recall Kevin's admonition as Dana continues to search for traces of the enslaved people who perished on the Weylin plantation: "You've found no records. You'll probably never know" (Butler, *Kindred* 264). As Kevin says these words, Dana touches "the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on [her] face" and her "empty left sleeve" (Butler, *Kindred* 264). An unrecoverable history still leaves its material remains. *Kindred* leaves readers alone with these remains, as Dana is left alone with her scars. While her white husband Kevin accompanied her on her antebellum travels, he was protected in many ways by his race and gender and thus did not fully share her experience. And though Dana eventually escapes the nineteenth century with her life, sanity, and marriage mostly intact, she knows, as says to Kevin, that "if we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane" (Butler *Kindred* 264). Not only is Dana left without full knowledge, but she cannot share the knowledge she does have with anyone. The story ends there. It is significant, I believe, that *Kindred* is Butler's sole novel-length work that she imagined as a standalone book rather than a trilogy or series. *Kindred* closes with collectivity foreclosed; thus, no sequel is possible or necessary.

Fledgling is quite a different kind of novel in terms of its relation to recovery. Butler's hope for a "strong alive" story that counterbalances the "slave story" is perhaps

most realized in this vampire novel. *Fledgling* tells a story about living in the wake of slavery, but it is also a story about ethics, mobility, care, and collectivity. Like *Kindred*, it thematizes the search for the past; it is about following the traces of stories, records, memories. It is also about running up against the limits of recovery, reaching the point where the archive has no more to offer. But in contrast to *Kindred*, *Fledgling* moves past those limits, modeling a relation of care towards the history and present of antiblackness.

The epilogue of *Fledgling* is illustrative of this difference. Shori regains consciousness—another awakening—after a climactic attack on her following the Council of Judgement. Katherine Dahlman, the advocate and ally of the Silk family, tries to kill her when the Council rules against Katherine and the Silks. Like Dana, Shori ends the novel physically injured (and still impacted by her ongoing amnesia), but the novel frames her future differently. She awakens with Wright, her first symbiont, near her bedside, and other friends and symbionts nearby. On the final pages, Shori has not recovered her memory, and yet she pledges: "I will restore what can be restored" (Butler, *Fledgling* 310). Wright, one of Shori's symbionts, relays to her the sentiments of Joan Braithwaite, who is offering to mentor Shori. Joan does this because "she thought you'd make a damn good ally someday" (Butler, *Fledgling* 310). The novel ends with Shori's reply, a gesture to a future where collectivity is possible: "She's right. I will" (Butler, *Fledgling* 310).

CODA

An Egg, Cracking Open

Stephen Graham Jones's *The Bird Is Gone: A ~~Monograph~~ Manifesto* exemplifies the author's love of "doing new things on the page" (Jones, "Letter" xv). The novel centers on a pan-Indigenous nation-state called the Indian Territories, created through an accident of law. Much of the action takes place in the former South Dakota, in a bowling alley called Fool's Hip, the site of a murder investigation led by Special Agent Chassis Jones and her partner, Blue Plume. Thirty-nine tourists in Indian Territory have gone missing; the prime suspect is Nickel Eye, a Fool's Hip regular. While Chassis conducts her investigation, a plethora of characters go about their business: they reminisce, take drugs, dream, travel through time, crossdress, partake in a bowling tournament, have affairs and, in the case of LP Deal, the maintenance man of Fool's Hip, write a manifesto. Because it is "clothed in the format of a detective novel" and full of "semiotic fireworks" (Däwes 123), it is not immediately recognizable as a historical novel.

As this dissertation has shown, though, historical novels often take unexpected forms, and the generic fluidity of *Bird* captures this variety. Myriad historical figures, documents, and events appear throughout the novel. In the first chapter, Mary Boy, the owner of Fool's Hip, endures a confrontation with nineteenth-century cavalrymen in what might be either a hallucination or a memory (19-20), while his daughter Courtney Peltedowne threatens to tell the patrons of Fool's Hip, truthfully or not, that her father

has been attempting to raise William Tecumseh Sherman from the dead (21). Another section of the novel parodies a Sioux winter count. Yet another chapter features a time travel sequence in which a character travels to 1492, "way before 1492" (86), 1845, and 1865. The most formally experimental of the texts discussed in this dissertation, *The Bird is Gone* weaves these historical allusions into its circuitous narrative featuring dozens of characters, many plotlines, a glossary, an appendix, several fonts, and an entire chapter written as a single unpunctuated sentence. Jones's linguistic play and reimagining of American history might allow us to read *The Bird Is Gone* as a postmodern-style historical novel, perhaps a work of historiographic metafiction, to use Hutcheon's terminology. Jones's references to obsolete technology suggest that the novel could be read as an alternate history, as Birgit Däwes (118) argues, that "reveals the ways in which history and other forms of conventional knowledge do (or do not) work" (Däwes 126). Though the novel does invite such readings, I contend that it ultimately moves beyond the postmodernist tendency to reduce history to narrative by foregrounding a building—Fool's Hip—as the novel's setting and unifying motif.[68]

Fittingly, the concept of the "frame" features centrally in Jones's novel. A frame is, broadly, "A structure that supports or encloses something" ("Frame, n. and Adj.2"). Frames are generally rigid; they undergird or uphold as well as contain. *The Bird is Gone* abounds with frames. A large portion of the story takes place in a bowling alley, and rounds in bowling are called "frames." The Indian Territories are framed by a boundary called the Border, where American anthropologists patrol, cameras ready,

[68] Däwes argues that Jones spatializes history in ways that draw on Indigenous philosophies, though she also reads the novel through postmodernist theory.

waiting to catch a glimpse of any passing Indians. Jones thus yokes the concept of a national border with the exoticizing study of Indigeneity. This linkage highlights how both national borders and settler colonial notions of Indigeneity serve as frames of different sorts—one other arbitrarily bounding land and the other defining Native identity in restrictive ways based on Euro-American knowledge systems. One character, Chassis Jones, a detective working undercover in Fool's Hip, has a name that explicitly evokes framing. The glossary at the end of the book defines "chassis jones" as "the distinct and undeniable need for a frame" (164). Jones's meditation on frames in this novel is multifaceted, touching on social, legal, political, epistemological, and narrative dimensions. All these dimensions coalesce in the physicality of Fool's Hip, which is itself within the policed and surveilled borders of the Indian Territories.

I began this dissertation with a brief reading of the mural scene in Whitehead's *The Intuitionist.* We should recall that in this scene, Lila Mae looks at a mural showing an exceptionalist narrative of American history. The mural is unfinished, and Lila Mae sees the muralist's scaffolding towering over her "like a rickety gallows." I argued that Whitehead portrays the scaffolding as threatening, more so than the mural. I end this dissertation with a reflection on framing. These two structures that bookend my dissertation—the scaffolding and the frame—invite reflection on the relationship between narrative and materiality**.** History is commonly conceived as a narrative; the narrativity of history, scholars often contend, makes literature an excellent arena to grapple with questions about how stories of the past are constructed, who is included or excluded, and which facts are emphasized or occluded. This dissertation has been an argument for asking different questions about history and literature, the most important

being: How might our understanding of what it means to engage with history ethically be different if materiality, not narrative, was the central focus? The scaffolding and the frame require us to consider the issue of "construction" in a quite literal manner. *The Intuitionist* gestures towards the potential drawback of "revising" a historical narrative without changing the material conditions that allowed that narrative to be written in the first place. Similarly, *The Bird is Gone* illustrates the danger of trying to build a more just society using the frames of an oppressive one.

In *Bird,* the land of the Dakotas has been returned to Native people, who have legal control over the new nation. But the way this return came about is telling: Congress passed a Conservation Act that required 'the restoration of all indigenous flora and fauna to the Great Plains" (164). In other words, the novel's Indian Territories were created through an accident of law because "Indians" were on the books as "indigenous fauna." Native people get their land back because of a legal loophole relying upon the colonial logic whereby Indigenous people are savage and animalistic. This logic has been used in the service of Native elimination since the first settlers arrived in the Americas. Furthermore, the Dakotas become a pan-Indian nation as Native people from all over the United States flood to the Territories in a mass migration called the Skin Parade. Although a Pan-Indian nation is not inherently problematic, the Conservation Act, notably, does not reunite most Native people with their ancestral lands and thus does not restore the land-human relationship central to many Indigenous political and ethical systems.[69] The United States continues to exist and to control the majority of

[69] As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, "We have to think of *expansive dispossession* as a gendered removal of our bodies and minds from our nation and

Indigenous land. The founders of the Territories use the logic of settler colonialism to gain limited benefits—legal control over a small portion of Indigenous land.

The legal loophole and its effects might seem like a fortuitous accident, but despite a veneer of Native self-determination, the Territories, modeled after Euro-American nation-states, adopt numerous destructive colonial practices. As John Gamber contends, the Indian Territories are not a post-colonial utopia, but rather "a dystopic world in which many of the hegemonic legal and racialized constructions of Indianness crafted about, though not by, Native people endure and come to rule, become self-rule by this newly formed pan-Indian nation" (147). Life in the Territories is highly policed, propping up constraining notions of Indigeneity based on cultural authenticity, phenotype, and blood quantum. For example, when entering the Territories, Indians receive the "Code"—a "pamphlet distributed to all Indians at the Border, as a condition of entry" which serves as "a cultural primer or guidebook on Indian etiquette" (164). Moreover, the Territories have bought into the colonial logic of blood quantum, which reduces Indigeneity to a biological phenomenon. In this case, Indians are identified through susceptibility to a specific strain of pink eye that the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services retro-engineered from smallpox. Pink eye is a visible mark of Indian identity since supposedly only those with Indian blood can contract it. The trope of pink eye as identifier links together blood quantum and phenotype, which are two problematic ways of reducing Indigeneity to biology, supporting the eliminatory

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place-based grounded normativities. It means resurgence must be concerned with the reattachment of our minds, bodies, and spirits to the network of relationships and ethical practices that generates grounded normativity" (44, emphasis original)

function of settler colonialism, since "Indian blood" is conceptualized as receding into other racial formations.[70] Pink eye's origin in smallpox, the disease that killed many Native people, is unsurprising. In the Indian Territories, as is repeated many times throughout the novel, "pink eye was all the rage." This phrase opens the novel itself (11), recurs as the first sentence of five chapters (45, 63, 101, 121, 145), and appears in the glossary (170). Allusions to Indian biological authenticity thus serve as another frame, a formal version of the literal border surrounding the Territories. In short, the Indian Territories are legally sovereign but not decolonized.

Decolonization, Jones's novel suggests, requires unmaking settler colonialism, not simply creating a new nation-state whose institutions and customs use the frames of the United States, with its genocidal foundation. Trying to build anew without first demolishing the oppressive framework is a recipe for disaster. Consequently, *The Bird Is Gone* suggests that some kinds of demolition are necessary, even constructive. Jones illustrates the generative capacity of collapse when Fools' Hip literally crumbles at the end of the novel during a lively pan-Indian bowling tournament:

> Miss America was still in the bathroom, sitting on the sink, braiding a ribbon into her hair. Double Clutch's ball slammed into his sixth frame and Fool's Hip shuddered. Miss America closed her eyes, her fingers still moving, and white powder sifted down over us, balancing on every ceramic ledge, coating all the stainless steel.
>
> "It's coming down," she said, not really interested.

[70] See Patrick Wolfe's articulation of settler colonialism as a structure of elimination.

> Already there were shafts of sunlight in the air, reflecting off the windshields of the Councilmen's cars into the side of Fool's Hip, *into* Fool's Hip. It was an egg, cracking open. (152, emphasis original)

The collapsing bowling alley does not disintegrate into a pile of rubble but instead cracks open like an egg, a symbol of generative potential. Of course, eggs can crack without producing new life as well, but the slow process through which Fool's Hip cracks open evokes an egg hatching. Since Fool's Hip is a metonym for the Indian Territories and the history that brought the Territories into existence—a history that involves physical genocide, racialization, removal from land, and the imposition of colonial governance—its portrayal as an egg is an ambivalently optimistic moment. The collapse of a colonial system—concretized as a building—creates room for something new to come into existence. There is no guarantee that this new system, whatever it looks like, will be decolonized: perhaps the egg will hatch another colonial monster. Speculation always involves risk as well as possibility.

I read this scene as ambivalently optimistic because of LP Deal's titular manifesto and because of the community that forms at the end of the novel. Like numerous other characters, LP first participates in the colonial system—a role represented by his job as the literal maintenance man of Fool's Hip—but eventually turns away from it. A section from his manifesto contains the following: "Picture a boy and he's running. The Territories set up around him like dominoes, a house of cards: a labyrinth" (141)**.** The manifesto implies that The Territories are a structure doomed to collapse, like a set of dominoes or a house of cards (an old political metaphor for a political structure built on shaky foundations); they are a labyrinth of colonial policies

and regulations. LP Deal loses faith in this colonial system, as does Chassis Jones, who leaves detective work behind and becomes a "professional nomad" and "amateur fugitive" (168). The novel ends with a nascent community, no longer bounded by the walls of the bowling alley or the colonial norms these walls represent: "This is the way it is: after the massacres and after the cigar stories, we gathered around the fire, told stories and watched each other's faces for signs of ourselves" (160). What holds the denizens of Fool's Hip together after the disintegration of the bowling alley is not a nation-state or an ideal of Indigenous authenticity, biological or otherwise, but rather the willingness to gather around the fire and tell stories. Vizenor describes Native storying as *transmotion*, or "the motion of creation, imagic memories, and totemic associations" (ix). Indigenous ontologies also emphasize the materiality of storying: the deep connection between stories and land.[71] Like the characters in *Riding the Trail of Tears,* who draw on an evolving oral tradition as a form of nourishment, the Fool's Hip regulars turn away from acts that support settler colonialism and embed themselves in storying as a sustaining communal practice.

The subtitle of Jones's novel replaces "monograph" with "manifesto." A monograph is an academic study, whereas a manifesto is an explicitly political document. The title comments on how academic knowledge production is often held at a distance from, or severed entirely, from political implications. Yet knowledge production is inherently political, and this is undoubtedly the case when history and

[71] Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* emphasizes how Indigenous history and storytelling practices are inseparable from the land where those practices are created, so that "placemaking is a way of constructing history itself" (6).

literary studies are concerned. Historical fiction has from its inception been a political genre. The renewed popularity of this genre in the twenty-first century is striking because it is happening amid multiple struggles for justice, including the Black Lives Matter Movement, Land Back, Idle No More in Canada, the actions of the water protectors at Standing Rock, and vibrant prison abolitionist activism. This dissertation has offered a new way of understanding the political stakes of historical fiction. I have argued that speculative fiction makes the histories of antiblackness and settler colonialism concrete and offers a toolbox for grappling with these histories.

The strategies in this toolbox are varied and deployed in different ways, but all are characterized by their quotidian, tangible nature; countering routinized structural violence requires routine forms of movement, care, community building, and oppositional action. The first chapter focused on the trope of the literal rail network in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. This trope enables readers to understand the history of antiblackness, entangled with settler colonialism and racial capitalism, as a tangible infrastructure for the U.S. nation-state. Cora cannot escape this history, but the novel highlights how she uses covert movement to navigate it and ultimately to create a nascent Black community with other formerly enslaved people. This community grows out of acts of tangible care—such as when Ollie offers Cora food—rather than affective identification, witnessing, legal citizenship, or sharing of interiority.

In Blake Hausman's *Riding the Trail of Tears*, characters use covert movement to infiltrate a system that was not built for them and deploy it for their own purposes, to sustain their own community, similarly to how Cora uses the railroad in Whitehead's

novel. *In Riding the Trail of Tears*, Hausman uses a virtual reality machine as a metonym for a settler colonial system that dispossesses Indigenous people. The characters that infiltrate the system teach readers an important lesson about the benefits of a certain kind of invisibility for Indigenous people: by flying under the radar of settler surveillance, Indigenous people can protect their communities through direct action. In line with the focus on direct action, the novel also comments on how non-Indigenous people can work in solidarity with Native activists.

I returned to the neo-slave narrative tradition in the final chapter, where I argued that Shori, the amnesiac, genetically modified vampire of *Fledgling*, serves as a unique metonym for the history of slavery. Unlike *Kindred's* unwilling time traveler or *Beloved*'s persistent ghost, Shori cannot remember the racialized violence that partially shaped her; nor can she recall her affective connections to people in her past. The history of slavery structures Shori's daily experience not through flashbacks or ghostly remainders but rather through continued racialized violence. Like both Whitehead's Cora and Hausman's Tallulah, Shori develops and deploys a set of strategies appropriate for grappling with such violence. She seeks aid through the law, uses her pursuers' assumptions against them, and engages in relations of mutual care with fellow Ina and human symbionts.

All the novels discussed in this dissertation revolve around continuing structural violence, but all are cut through with an optimistic, perhaps even utopic, energy. The last page of *The Bird Is Gone* captures this energy. This page contains only six words.[72]

[72] By this I mean the last page of the novel proper—before the glossary and an appendix of "artefacts."

In the center of the page is a line in italics reading "*is this how it begins*?" followed by a response, in a different font: "yes" (161). The novel thus opens to the future; the dense, meandering text gives way to the openness of the nearly blank page. It is not surprising that the novel closes with an affirmation (yes, this is how it begins). Jones orients our critical attention to what historical fiction can do beyond rearranging the political, narrative, and social configurations we already have. It can point the way to alternate worlds and to not-yet-existent ways of organizing people and things.

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