

GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME (DOUBLE) CONSCIOUSNESS: LITERACY, ORALITY, PRINT, AND THE CULTURAL FORMATION OF BLACK AMERICAN IDENTITY IN HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL* AND OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

Read alongside the generic construction of slave narratives, the history of 19th-century American print culture recounts the cultural formation of the soon-to-be African American consciousness. Given literacy's presentation as a crucial means of liberation for antebellum slaves and, just as critically, as the catalyst for positive identity formation (albeit, primarily in *male* slave narratives), the acts of reading and writing were inherently political, just as print culture itself was and still is a fundamentally politicized field that intersects with and participates in the maintenance of hegemonic power structures. In fact, it has been argued that "Literacy provides manifest testimony of the mind's ability to extend itself beyond the constricted limits and conditions of the body... to enter into literacy is to gain important skills for extending oneself beyond the condition and geography of the body" (Barrett, 1995, p. 419). In this light, it would seem that literacy has been construed as the mark of meaningful subjectivity for Blacks—who have historically been confined to the "condition and geography of the body"—since America's inception. The highly gendered reality of literacy in practice, however, undermines such universal application of the concept. For the enslaved Black *woman*, the political implications of literacy often took on a different meaning, complicated by language's simultaneously liberatory and oppressive potentialities, as well as the experiential limitations of both written and spoken language.

In truth, then, by balancing the oral traditions of Afro-diasporic cultures and the Western primacy of the written word, the generic conventions of slave narration both make and unmake the subjectivity of early Black Americans. But while male slave narratives frame the attainment of literacy as the fundamental source of Black liberation from bondage, female slave narratives, like Harriett Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), demonstrate the ways in which both spoken and written language are used to control, manipulate, and corrupt the sexuality of enslaved women. The enslaved woman, in particular, is required to write herself into being through the very linguistic structures that also facilitate and justify both her enslavement and her involuntary induction to vice. Jacobs constructs the Black female slave as *subject* (instead of object) through her narrative self, Linda Brent, and in doing so, shifts the linguistic locus of power from the hegemonic dominance of white slaveowners to the underclass of slaves, both individually and collectively narrating themselves into fully realized personhood. Nonetheless, this recognition of shared humanity and the establishment of Black subjectivity is still overwhelmingly influenced by white cultural values and traditions (in this case, namely abolitionist rhetoric). The force of white cultural influence created various

unharmonious Cartesian dualities—most notably, the formation of a double consciousness, but also the well-established dichotomies between body and mind and between human and animal—within the mind of the newly-formed Black subject, which remain present even in contemporary African American culture.

In response to the tension inherent in such dualistic constructions, the neo-slave narrative, which in many senses picks up where the antebellum slave narrative leaves off, reflects the cultural shift in African American identity formation between the 19th- and 20th- centuries, while placing a premium on the reality of slavery’s ongoing legacy across the span of more than a century to our postmodern moment. As Lindon Barrett (1995) argues in “African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority,” “A text—verbally or otherwise constructed—speaks to rituals of identity formation, to the way a multiplicity of personal and social identities are culturally maintained” (p. 417). This means that the transformation of narrative language into the rhetoric of individual identity can account for both oral and print traditions. Neo-slave narratives—which are most commonly defined as, “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (Bell, 1987); “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (Rushdy, 1999, p. 3); and narratives that “illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities” (Smith, 2007, p. 168)—revisit slavery through speculative tropes that upset the linearity of temporality and the stability of bodies, both to create and bear witness to the linguistic reclamation of Black American identity, as well as—somewhat antithetically—to insist upon the reality of slavery’s ongoing legacy in our postmodern moment. Where antebellum slave narratives focused on literacy, family, and community, neo-slave narratives make use of the postmodern, postructuralist methods of deconstruction to examine the “purity” of said values and to challenge the dominant narrative of slavery, underscoring the extent to which our social systems still operate upon many of the same racist mechanisms, ideologies, and values inherent to the antebellum chattel slavery system.

This article will examine the tension between oral culture and print culture in Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) by assessing how Linda Brent, Jacobs’s fictional self, and Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred*, manipulate or are manipulated by language throughout their respective narratives. I argue that the discursive force of abolitionist rhetoric surrounding slave narration and pervasive reverence for “The Cult of True Womanhood”¹ together,

¹ In “The Cult of True Womanhood” (1966), Barbara Welter articulated four essential virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—that a good and successful woman was historically expected to embody. Conduct manuals dating back to the 19th century emphasize the omnipresence of these virtues in American society long before Welter’s landmark article. Still, despite the clear obstacles to these standards (particularly purity) for non-white women, female slaves were stilled

inevitably instantiate the formation of a doubly split African American female subject in *Incidents*, seemingly bound on all sides by unfavorable ideological oppositions. For example, binary oppositions such as purity and harlotry were imposed upon Black bodies, attempting to supplant the development of individually determined subjectivity with racist and sexist objectification. While literacy may have signified the humanity of male slaves (at least in their own view), the English language and American print culture did not similarly empower female slaves towards positive subject-formation through discourse. I further suggest that the dualistic opposition of oral and print cultures in 19th-century America foreshadows the “veil” to which W.E.B. Du Bois would later refer in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he articulates the concept of double-consciousness—a state created by the concomitant nature of these seemingly opposed positions. Ultimately, an analysis of Jacobs’s work through the lens of book history and its power to shape cultural formation will suggest a critical imperative for the contemporary neo-slave narrative genre. The agency of contemporary neo-slave writers serves as a foil to the problematized authority granted to our literary foremothers, and in many ways, redeems the emancipatory potential of the written word.

While the neo-slave narrative does reflect our conceptual and experiential distance from slavery, allowing us to better understand the restrictions and forced decisions that determined the course of the slave’s life, the genre does have its own challenges. Chief amongst them is that neo-slave narratives must address the legacy of slavery in view of the “liberal humanist subject,” whose primary concerns are located in the maintenance and well-being of the self. Balancing this 20th- and 21st-century impulse towards the expression of individualism against the comparatively collectivist concerns of the original 19th-century slave narrative—cultivated more directly and explicitly by the horrors of slavery—novels like *Kindred* trace the evolution of Black American identity by collapsing the temporal distance, direction, and linearity between the past, present, and most importantly, the future. As Dana becomes more materially invested in the past, the linearity of time common to the realist antebellum slave narrative breaks down, thrusting her into a phenomenological/theoretical dissonance between her experience as a slave and her experiences as a free, modern subject. I argue that where the antebellum slave narrative used literacy and the rift between print and oral traditions to culturally construct the individual Black subject, the neo-slave narrative shows its consequences—a fragmented 21st-century subject still grappling with the trauma of slavery in a world not too recently hailed as “post-racial”: a world that bleeds but

pressured (by family, mistresses, etc.) to adhere to these often-unreachable goals. Jacobs appeals to these virtues (albeit, in different terms) in *Incidents*, both to underline the true depravity forced upon enslaved women, and accordingly, to appeal to white women’s sensibilities towards the abolitionist cause.

cannot acknowledge the source of the wound. As Madhu Dubey argues, “Neo-slave narratives are impelled by the conviction that the racial legacy of slavery has not yet become a matter of history” (2013, p. 346). In this paper, I argue that neo-slave narratives, as part of the continuum of slave narratives, attempt to resolve or deconstruct the dualistic myths and binarisms of Western epistemology and through interaction with speculative tropes, offer a vehicle for the creation of new meaning and healing for the postmodern African American subject. The manipulation of language serves different ends in the neo-slave narrative than it does in its precursor, but by exploring the breakdown of mind/body dualism, challenging the hierarchy of oral and print cultures, and interrogating the slaves’ acts of refusal across both works, we make visible the ways that neo-slave narratives build upon antebellum slave narratives and ultimately position us to find generative uses for our traumatic past.

GENDERED SLAVE NARRATOLOGY, LITERARY SENTIMENTALISM, AND THE AFFECTIVE DIVIDE

In the most popular male slave narrative of the antebellum period, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), the author establishes many of the conventions, both literary and literacy-related, that would come to signify the slave narrative as a discernable genre. In her essay, “‘Reader, My Story Ends with Freedom’: Literacy, Authorship, and Gender in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” Jill LeRoy-Frazier contends that

...the slave narrative necessarily refers to literacy in three ways: through the representation of "scenes of instruction" in which the narrator learns to read and write; through political admonishments against the anti-literacy laws for slaves; and through "ironic apologia" that interwove the author's conventional protestation of his or her inadequacy with denunciations of the system that limited the author's development in the first place (xviii). (LeRoy-Frazier, 2004, p. 152).

In Douglass’s well-known narrative, we can see each of these features plainly through episodes such as his childhood journey towards literacy, his commentary on the injustice of keeping slaves intentionally illiterate, and his intermittent, well-articulated but humble interjections apologizing for the author’s rhetorical shortcomings, even as he sharply condemns the “peculiar institution” of slavery. But while Harriett Jacobs most certainly adheres to the general conventions established by former slave writers, her focus on literacy is differently situated in her own *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Le-Roy-Frazier argues that for Jacobs

(or more aptly here, Linda Brent), “literacy is neither the key to her sense of identity, nor is it her lone means to freedom. Brent does not experience ‘the moment’ at which, having proven her ability to read and write like a white person, she suddenly perceives herself as a fully human being. Rather, her sense of self is quite strong long before she becomes literate...” (2004, p. 154). By unmooring her narrative from the conventional trope of literacy as liberation, Jacobs both challenges the notion that literacy itself indicates a person’s attainment of full humanity, and implicates the particularities of gender as a crucial difference in the source of liberation for the enslaved woman. While this genre-bending deviation from the standard script of literacy as liberation is primarily proposed and supported by critics of her work—rather than explicitly stated by the author herself—Jacobs’s decision to omit the typical “scenes of instruction,” skipping ahead to a casual reference about how “one day [Flint] caught [her] teaching [her]self to write” (Jacobs, p. 30), generically challenges literacy as the necessary burden of proof for her humanity. The unusually diminished relationship that she articulates (or doesn’t articulate) between *attaining* literacy and freedom imposes a gendered challenge to the widely held belief that literacy was or should have been a requirement for freedom. Jacobs is, of course, literate. But through omitting the “scene of [literary] instruction,” and treating her literacy as otherwise unremarkable for any person, enslaved or free, she disrupts the equation suggesting that Black people should be required to earn their humanity at all.

As noted by scholars such as Franny Nudelman (1992) and Carolyn Sorisio (1996), in addition to its positioning within the slave narrative genre, Jacobs’s appeal in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is framed through another literary tradition as well. The conventions of the sentimental novel—which include scenes of distress and tenderness, a focus on the oppressed underclasses, and commentary on social and moral conduct—aim to elicit sympathy through sentimental experiential transference. Nudelman (1992) describes that process as follows: “Because the body’s responses to pain externalize emotions, in pain the victim’s internal life becomes entirely visible, available to the observer. And in response to that vision, the reader suffers... Sentimental identification does not require the replication of pain but its represented approximation” (p. 949). Just as the rhetoric of sexual degradation supports Jacobs’s narrative endeavor in abolitionist discourses, so too does the graphic nature of her experience appropriate sentimentality in an effective appeal to pathos. It is meant to create identification and sympathy in the reader, even to the point of suffering, to present the victim as one worthy of pity, and the cause as dire and immediate. Therefore, when Jacobs argues in the preface that “only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations [accompanying slavery]” (p. 2), she is relying upon the unfathomable depths of the depravity in her narrative to forge a form of human connection capable of transcending race. Significantly,

What is innovative about Jacobs's narrative is not that she publicizes her sexual abuse, but that she, a Black woman and ex-slave, uses techniques typically employed by white abolitionists to tell her own story... Her first-person narration... radically alters the structure of a discourse that typically constructs the suffering slave as a mute object whose experience must be translated by an empathic white observer. Employing the conventions of abolitionist sentimentality, Jacobs reveals the logic and the limits of that discourse, and the need for alternative forms of address. (Nudelman, 1992, pp. 941-42)

While Jacobs clearly cannot directly translate the entirety of her experience in slavery into the narrative given language's limited capacity to represent trauma—particularly in an era of rampant censorship and conservative values—her belief in the power of sympathy to incite action speaks to the efficacy (even if limited in some respects) of the sentimental genre and intimates her intentional articulation of her narrative through a sentimental lens.

Despite its closer affiliation with speculative fiction, *Kindred* also makes use of sentimentalism, creating a unique relationship between the materiality of real suffering and the mediated textual experience of “feeling” slavery by proxy. Here, “Sentimentalism ‘is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss’ (Dobson 266)” (Vint, 2007, p. 244). But where Jacobs's *Incidents* use such “shared devastation” to appeal to the white women of the North, Butler's neo-slave narrative transforms the same conventions into a means by which the contemporary African American subject can identify with her ancestry of slavery for the purpose of demonstrating how alienated we've become from the past, despite the fact that “the future is not sufficiently different from the past; that, despite the Emancipation Proclamation, systemic racism persists in ways akin to the continuation of slavery” (Vint, 2007, p. 243).² *Kindred* helps contemporary readers, who are physically alienated from the affective experience of slavery, to reconcile the disorienting circumlocution of 20th-century

² The continuing systematic racism available to the reader of *Kindred* is narratively curtailed by Dana's limited amount of time in the present. In the real world, however, there are numerous developments like the prison-industrial complex and the school-to-prison pipeline that clearly demonstrate the ongoing legacy of slavery, swapping one form of enslavement for another. While many individuals escape these more overt demonstrations of ongoing systemic racism, more subtle forms, including hair discrimination, oversexualization of Black youth, and high Black maternal and fetal death rates bear witness to slavery's lingering effects. For more on the ongoing effects of systematic racism in the present, see *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) by Michelle Alexander.

constructions of freedom superimposed upon the bodily experiences of antebellum slavery. This speculative use of sentimentalism transforms the historical appeal to “genteel” white women readers into a means of self-seeking and regenerative healing between the body and mind.³ As Vint contends, “Dana...must learn that denying their embodied selves only allows the wounding of slavery to continue” (2007, p. 242). As members of the diaspora, we too must move towards a more fully-integrated sense of our identities if we are ever to overcome slavery’s lingering psychological effects.

The necessity of this mind/body integration is highlighted by Dana’s ontological and epistemological dissonance when Kevin first accompanies her on her ordinarily solitary trip to the past. She articulates the surreal dissonance between the past and present caused by time travel, and her inability to merge her “historical knowledge” from the 20th-century with her phenomenological experiences in the antebellum South. As the narrative moves forward, sentimental techniques function within this work to erode the affective distance between mind and body; but in the novel’s earlier points, Dana reflects,

...I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren’t really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting” (Butler, p. 98).

This comfortable distance from the physical materiality of slavery is not maintained for Dana, of course, as subsequent trips between past and present get longer, and she begins to suffer the true physical indignities of enslavement. But Dana’s ideological belief that she can contemplate slavery intellectually without necessarily acknowledging its physicality is quickly revealed to be a postmodern fantasy. Sherryl Vint contends that “The very form of sentimental fiction rejects a mind/body split. As Fishburn argues, identity founded on connection rather than isolation incorporates the body as part of self and sees the self-in-relation rather than the abstract mind as the model for subjectivity” (2007, p. 245). The ability to see the “self-in-relation,” a skill that Dana never fully masters in her trips across time and space, attempts to erode the image of subject as individual, abstracted consciousness. In fact, “These novels show that the desire to inhabit liberal-

³ The Western duality between body and mind is a result of Enlightenment-era Cartesian dualism, which privileges the primacy of the *disembodied* mind and subordinates the unruly physical body. Given that the enslaved were treated as little more than animals—as creatures of instinct more than of rational thought—as Sherryl Vint (2007) has suggested, healing the Western rift between body and mind may serve as an avenue for healing transgenerational trauma.

humanist subjectivity is another kind of violence enacted by slavery, and they demonstrate that healing the fractures in American culture arising from slavery might best be accomplished through a personal healing of the rift between mind and body” (Vint, 2007, p. 242). In other words, liberal-humanist subjectivity—despite its contemporary value—emerges as another obstacle to positive Black identity formation, which, by its very nature, must intrinsically be tied to the notion of an inseparable bodymind.⁴ While Dana herself maintains her relatively selfish internalization of heteropatriarchal norms until her last round trip to the past (she does abet her ancestor’s rape in the past to ensure her own existence in the future, after all), readers are meant to see and interrogate the ways in which our 20th-century focus on individualism as an American value has prevented us from bridging the gaps between mind and body, time and space, and experience and representation.

CO-OPTING THE WRITTEN WORD

In both Jacobs’s and Butler’s works, the tension between printed and oral discourses denotes a hierarchy of supremacies and inferiorities that places writing above speech. In doing so, this tension also betrays a highly racialized and gendered understanding of speech as a means of Black community-creation and the implementation of print as a manipulative intervention into white discursive formations. Oral, or spoken culture, is the African and now African American legacy—a tradition of storytelling, call-and-response artistry, and community values that seek to reclaim and reinscribe the past. But while interestingly, 20th-century poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida and Lacan would come to argue that the immediacy of speech is privileged over the deferred nature of writing in Western thought, the larger trend in American culture has historically privileged the authority of print over the instability of spoken language. Thus, the ability to read and write, as previously discussed, functioned not only as testimony to the humanity of African Americans, but also allowed participation in a sphere of notably white hegemonic discourses that sought to represent the experience of Black Americans for their own purposes. Literacy additionally helped the recently freed determine the fate of those still held in bondage, allowing those who could read and write to maintain a greater sense of community over larger distances. As Barrett (1995) convincingly argues, “Literacy determines for whom the physical,

⁴ In her 2018 monograph, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Sami Schalk, drawing upon the earlier work of Margaret Price (2015), refutes Cartesian Dualism as an ontological paradigm, proposing the “bodymind”—which “insists on the inextricability of mind and body”—instead.

the geographic, and the bodily will remain an overwhelming concern and source of identity and for whom it will remain an index of power and valuable apparent remove” (p. 421). The power behind such discourses is only accessible to those with mastery over the use and import of the English language. An examination of Jacobs’s (and Brent’s) relationship with language both narratively and meta-narratively highlights the alternately oppressive and liberatory functions and uses of language, as well as their implications for her level of agency both during and after her enslavement. Similarly, an analysis of Butler’s woman characters, namely Dana, Carrie, Alice, and Sarah, highlights the continuity between past and present taboos and restrictions on language and speech.

As Samantha M. Sommers has astutely observed in her essay “Harriet Jacobs and the Recirculation of Print Culture,” it seems that Jacobs, like her male contemporary Douglass, demonstrates a marked, although not uncomplicated, preference for print. While “under slavery she is a subject of print; in freedom she becomes an author and arranger working in the medium” (2015, p. 137), and we see evidence of this liberatory experience narratively in her various machinations with false letters sent to confuse her master. It also arises meta-narratively, through her authorial inclusion (and alteration) of her own fugitive slave ad posted by the real Dr. Flint (Dr. Norcom), juxtaposed with her intentional *exclusion* of the fugitive slave law in full text. While Jacobs exerts some control over the tenor of her story (even if it requires her own “self-abnegation”) by employing sentimental tropes and abolitionist discourses in her slave narrative, her recirculation of printed texts with significant ties to her own enslavement achieves an altogether different effect. Her experiences with print, the implications of which are fully articulated by the author herself, repeatedly affirm the power that print holds over subject formation. For instance, when Jacobs is hiding, she writes several letters “from the North” attempting to deceive her master into thinking she has already escaped to the Boston. She confesses that she “knew his cunning nature too well not to believe that [his efforts were] a trap laid for [her]; and so all [her] friends understood it. [She] resolved to match [her] cunning against his cunning” (p. 193). Before this point in the book, letters function primarily to announce the sale of human property, to gain insight on the fate of others, or otherwise, to advance the unsavory designs of the master against the slave. Once Jacobs is free (however provisionally), she begins to use the medium as a tool of deception, successfully using the master’s tools to disassemble the master’s house. Further, her “cunning” involves the inclusion of third-party printed materials, such as newspapers, which serve as additional verification of her location—a clever ruse indeed. Sommers contends that here, “While the letters themselves are part of the manuscript culture of the narrative, Jacobs relies on printed newspapers to guarantee the realism of these fraudulent correspondences and thus demonstrates a critical relationship to print materials even under slavery” (2015, p. 143). This deception empowers Jacobs

because her knowledge of print culture allows her to further secure her anonymity through a medium meant to convey stability, a strategy of resistance that is both practical and symbolic. Even more interestingly, at the metanarrative level, Jacobs's decision to strategically include and exclude various reprinted materials that evidence the conditions of her time in slavery further empower her as an author. In line with her abhorrence for the Fugitive Slave Law, her text contains no reproduction of the document, only the import of its content. On the next page, however, she *does* choose to include, and even more radically, *alter*, the fugitive slave ad announcing that she had run away. Sommers' work reveals that in the reprinting of said advertisement, "Jacobs raises the reward for her capture from one hundred to three hundred dollars, includes 'intelligent' among the descriptors used to identify her, and states that she is able to 'read and write' rather than '[speak] easily and fluently' (Jacobs 149; Blackwood 108)" (2015, p. 141). Her decision to elaborate, and then alter the master's description of her most physical characteristics is an act of textual self-reclamation that demonstrates her own valuation of her worth, even as a slave.

Despite these reclamatory uses of print culture, however, Jacobs is still critically aware of the damage that language can inflict, and I argue that these multiple linguistic dimensions further contribute to the double consciousness inculcated in Black Americans. On one hand, print is most directly used against Jacobs in the case of Dr. Flint's licentious notes and innuendos, which were intended to corrupt her sense of morality as a child and make her more receptive to his inappropriate sexual advances. This gendered and sexualized subjugation through literacy constitutes her ability to read and write as a vulnerability—a possible source of corruption—weaponizing what for male slaves is almost universally proven to be a strength. Further, institutional biases that required letters of endorsement from white patrons to verify the veracity of ex-slave stories—both male and female—reinscribed the white publishing establishment's stranglehold over Black narrative, arising as obstacles to embracing print as a universally liberatory medium. On the other hand, however, from her early verbal abuse by Dr. and Mrs. Flint to her later failed attempt at disclosing her story of suffering to her child (Jacobs, p. 283), the modality of the oral tradition is persistently suspect, perhaps explaining her ostensible rejection of oral culture as she "read[s] and write[s]" her way into being instead of merely speaking "easily and fluently." Still, "As [Jacobs] elaborates her relationship to print, we see she is able to remain in control and utilize the medium's potential to signify in multiple ways" (Sommers, 2015, p. 140). Despite its oppressive potentialities, print nonetheless represents control. When she relies upon the medium of spoken language, she persistently runs into misfortune, disappointment, broken promises, and dishonesty. While scholars such as Martha J. Cutter contend that "She opposes Flint's 'masterly' and individualistic discourse with a discourse which is communal and even 'sister-ly'"

(1996, p. 222), I contend that her persistent preference for print represents a desire, not for textual stability, but for narrative control. Instead Cutter, along with many others, points to the oppressive potential of language, but ultimately concludes that Jacobs successfully reappropriates language in service to her machinations.

Where Jacobs actively manipulates her relationship with print to gain a modicum of control over the dissemination of knowledge in *Incidents*, the protagonist of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* instantiates the materiality of slavery and its discourses through the manipulation of time itself, when Dana, a progressive Black woman from California, is pulled roughly one-hundred-and-twenty-five years into the past from her contemporary moment (1976) to the spatiotemporal realm that her mid-19th-century ancestors occupied. In the same way that antebellum slave narratives were written for the explicit purpose of articulating the suffering inflicted by slavery (but not too graphically, of course), using the affective power of conventional sentimental novels to gain credibility with their intended audience, neo-slave narratives are written as an act of reclamation, rememory, and transformation, as the experience of slavery is processed and digested through the estranging speculative tropes that the form most frequently employs. Time travel reveals the materiality of Black bodies through oral and printed language conventions that mark Dana as separate from (and often in direct opposition with) other slaves. Nonetheless, while time functions as the primary mechanism driving *Kindred* along, questions of orality, its power, and its primacy within the Black community are frequently posed throughout the book, particularly in Dana's interactions with Sarah, the "mammy" type cook, Carrie, Sarah's mute daughter, and Alice, Dana's ancestral double.

From the outset of Dana's tenure in the antebellum past, her educated speech becomes immediately problematic in the context of master-slave relations. As Nigel and Luke remind her, the knowledge represented and displayed through demonstrations of literacy mark Dana as an aberration of both gender and race. "You'll get into trouble," [Nigel] said. "Marse Tom already don't like you. You talk too educated and you come from a free state" (Butler, p. 74). Unable to comprehend the relevance of her literacy to a master who isn't her own, she asks, "Why should either of those things matter to him? I don't belong to him." In response, "[Luke] smiled. 'He don't want no niggers 'round here talking better than him, putting freedom ideas in our heads'" (p. 74). Dana's very existence in the past threatens the established social order and the maintenance of disciplinary regimes on the plantation. Further, her articulation of "white" discourses and speech patterns complicates the print/oral binary by effectively conflating the medium used by slaves (orality) with the prestige and authority of white, printed discourse. In this regard, "literacy allows [Dana] to articulate her problem, but it offers no solutions or practical knowledge, and so heightens her discomfort under slavery" (Flagel, 2012, p. 230). Only by transcending her linguistic and attitudinal

markers of class and time through receiving extreme physical punishment does her presence become less alien, signifying her full initiation into the phenomenological—and linguistic—realm of slavery.

Even more problematic than her linguistic register and “white” dialect, however, is Dana’s role as the go-between for Rufus and her fellow slaves. When Dana is sent to Alice, her many-greats-grandmother, to let her know that Rufus demands her sexual acquiescence, Alice bitterly interjects, “Do your job! Go tell him! That’s what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. That’s why he sent you to me. They be calling you mammy in a few years” (Butler, p. 167). By serving as an arbiter of oral discourses between the master and the slaves, Dana violates the linguistic kinship she shares with her fellow enslaved subjects. By performing as an instrument of cross-racial communication, she reveals her loyalty to the white patriarchal norms that continue to structure society late in the 20th century. It is fair to note, “As Missy Kubitschek claims, [that] ‘Kindred does not romanticize the solidarity of the slave community (31)’” (qtd in Steinberg, 2004, p. 470). Instead, “Dana’s quest is impelled by the nakedly self-interested motive of securing her own lineage...” (Dubey, 2013, p. 347), and it is perhaps within this arena that Dana’s role as intermediary between Black and white actors becomes most problematic. Dana’s individualist concern for her own future strips bare any sense of larger linguistic solidarity amongst enslaved Blacks and excludes her from uses of orality that function to create a Black counter-narrative of subtle resistance to the power of print and the authority accorded to traditional literacy by Euro-American subjects. This is unsurprising particularly because, as Judie Newman points out, Dana is modeled on [Douglass]. She wears pants, is taken to be male, and gains her freedom in a violent fight” (Newman, 2013, p. 32), highlighting her traditionally masculine ethos of self-sufficiency and individual determinacy, congruent with a preference for the white, male-centered domain of print over oral culture.

Lastly, Dana’s linguistic docility, which increases as the novel goes on, portrays the extent to which disciplinary regimes such as slavery use language to create and interpolate the slave as object. It is Dana’s experience of the brutality that accompanied the physical and psychological realities of slavery that elicits her compliance with dominant discursive formations. Instantiated by both linguistic and physical violence, “Corporal punishment, threatened and actual, is a disciplinary technology that produces subservience. Although the plantation does not have the elegantly symbolic architecture of the panopticon, it is nonetheless a space of surveillance and normalizing power. As Foucault observes, disciplinary power does not simply control or constrain but actually produces the subject” (Vint, 2007, p. 250). Through the creation of norms and the implementation of surveillance technologies, then, slavery disciplined the Black body, both by continually reinscribing the unresolved traumas it caused through the normalization

of slave abuse in plantation life, and by actively disrupting the effectiveness of oral communication within Black communities with the discourse of the dominant group. Eventually, “Dana realizes that slavery and its apparatus of cruelty have the deadly power to keep language literal. In *Kindred*, literal language is reinvested with significance and violence” (Flagel, 2012, pp. 234-35). Accordingly, as Dana becomes increasingly complicit in the linguistic control of other slaves, she also notices herself taking more abuse from other slaves like Alice, who she would otherwise challenge, suggesting her awareness of the consequences of rhetorical complicity, even as she tries to reconcile her 20th century identity with the life of a slave.

Beyond Dana, several other characters in *Kindred* also signify presence or absence through adherence to or diversion from the linguistic construction of slavery. Sarah, the Weylins’ cook, is characterized as an instantiation of the mammy stereotype, or “The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter” (Butler, p. 145). Her alignment with the archetype is confirmed through her aversion to literature produced by free Blacks, which she frames as an almost unspeakable act of impropriety. While “she couldn’t read, books could be awesome mysteries to her... they could [also] be dangerous, time-wasting nonsense” (p. 145). This stereotypical rejection of Black cultural productions in favor of white narration perhaps, more than anything else, suggests Sarah’s alignment with a more anachronistically compliant state of being. The implication here seems to be that Black people “can get along,” or move through life better when not agitating for freedom. In many ways, Sarah’s construction mirrors that of Brent’s grandmother in *Incidents*. While her resilience is awe-inspiring, her suffering has created a docility that seeks to avoid upsetting the status quo because she is too afraid of the consequences to seek change. Through critiques of characters such as Sarah, “Butler challenges an audience who may have become contemptuous of ‘insufficiently radical’ Black ancestors. Through visceral violence and Dana’s response to it (she learns that embodied experience can erase her sense of rebellious subjectivity) Butler shows that disciplinary power produces slave mentality” (p. 249). It is for these same reasons that Dana ultimately burns both her future history book and her map at Rufus’s behest. He uses his authority as a white man, and therefore the authority of the written text, to manipulate her by promising to help her find her husband only if she abandons the material evidence of her future. While Dana condemns Sarah’s perceived complacency, she too gets “used to being submissive” (Butler, p. 220), particularly in a linguistic context, because in Dana’s case, “literacy contributes to exploitation” (Flagel 229). Until she must adopt her own “ethics of compromise” (Crossley xxi, qtd. in Dubey, 2013, p. 348), Dana is incapable of seeing beyond the legacy of Civil Rights, which fundamentally

informs her sense of liberal humanism, to consider antipatriarchal modes of resistance found through oral, or otherwise non-linguistic intervention.

As proof of the power of affective and experiential solidarity, even in the absence of reciprocal linguistic exchange, Butler constructs Sarah's daughter Carrie as a mute whose worth has been favorably undervalued. When Sarah talks about the loss of her children, she asserts that "Marse Tom took my children, all but Carrie. And, bless God, Carrie ain't worth as much as the others 'cause she can't talk. People think she ain't got no sense" (p. 76). Carrie's inability to engage in verbal signification further marks her as an object, while paradoxically, her lack of voice is exactly what contributes to her operation as a moderately autonomous subject in less fear of being sold. In other words, through Carrie, Butler challenges not only the presumed superiority of print over speech, but also the assumption that language is the only means by which experience, particularly experiences of trauma, can find expression. For instance, in one of her linguistically one-sided exchanges with Carrie, Dana expresses her anxiety about her affection for Rufus and concludes that her sympathy with him ranks chief amongst the list of reasons why the other slaves believe she is more "white than Black" (Butler, p. 223). Carrie's gestural response, which ultimately requires linguistic mediation by a non-modern subject, Nigel, answers her anxiety with a surprisingly individualistic view of public perception, rejecting the normativity ascribed by the panoptical structure of the plantation, and instead arguing that "'She means it doesn't come off, Dana,' he said quietly. 'The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are'" (Butler, p. 224). This unusually inspirational insight reflects Carrie's deep understanding of slave culture, and more importantly, suggests that her clarity is a result of her abstraction from speech. As Lindon Barrett persuasively establishes, "Written language is an abstract medium recalcitrant to mimicking or reproducing bodily experience; what literacy affords those who acquire it is precisely the ability to some extent to do away with the body (in deference to the mind and abstraction)" (Barrett, 1995, p. 423). Following this set of conclusions to its logical extreme, we might even contend that Carrie's phenomenological experience of slavery as a mute is invested with an extra-linguistic value unique to her role as a subject who already exists outside of discourse (dominant or otherwise). Barrett continues, contending that "The bodies [ex-slave writers] would reproduce in language are paradoxically the very marks of a remove from language and the life of the mind. Their bodies are concomitantly the focus of their new literacy and agency yet emblems of an apparent disqualification from literacy and self- or social agency" (Barrett, 1995, pp. 425-26). It would seem that the very act of attempting to represent the experience of slavery not only makes the physical realities of slavery "less potent" (Flagel, 2012, p. 235), but also erases the historical specificity of the Black body in favor of a life of the mind. Carrie, denied this possibility of linguistic-material transcendence,

must represent her experience and her knowledge by other means. While her gestures are usually an effective means of communication, the mediatory services that Sarah and Nigel provide as her translators also point to the formation of positive interdependence in disability amongst slaves, and suggests the possibility of a linguistically unmoored translation from affect to effect.

Last amongst *Kindred*'s female figures of orality, I turn to Dana's great-great-great grandmother, Alice, to observe her physio-linguistic inability to refuse the sexual advances of and ultimately rape by, Rufus Weylin. Coached by her descendent, Alice ultimately capitulates to Rufus's sexual desires. But her inability to overcome the sexual violence done against her body ultimately leads to silence and death. After the evening of the first rape, "[Alice] went to him. She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill him, but seemed to die a little" (Butler, p.168). The impulse to kill or be killed is stalled by the forced impotency of slavery. Having already tried and failed to escape from the Weylins, Alice's sexual acquiescence marks the decline of her identification and exceeds her capacity to endure. Her juxtaposition with Dana, the liberated, time-travelling, 20th-century woman, highlights the extent to which different material conditions in the 19th-century constructed seemingly stable subjects, who may, through repeatedly enduring trauma, be stripped of their fixity and reduced to incoherent, affective objects. Ultimately, the rapes and beatings that Alice endures erode her physical sense of self, a perception which cannot be sufficiently supplanted by the severely limited linguistic constructions of identity available to slaves, causing a destabilization of her whole person and a traumatic rift with which Dana will have to cope as her ancestor. As Sherryl Vint points out, "Although [Dana] could avoid being raped, the novel is premised on the fact that her very existence depends upon how her several times great-grandmother, Alice, could not" (2007, p. 253). In this way, the neo-slave narrative doubles back to its 19th-century predecessor, exchanging the 20th-century woman's liberation for her ancestor's enslavement.

"TIME IS A PENDULUM": THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ESCAPE

The non-linear exchange between past and present suffering in *Kindred* ultimately points to the last subject in this article, the politics of refusal inevitably addressed through the female slave narrative. As previously noted, Dana's ability to refuse rape comes at the expense of her grandmother's rape—which is necessary for Dana's own future birth—and suicide. Alice, meanwhile, can only react to her circumstances, which continue to deteriorate with Rufus's continual "affection." Linda Brent, Harriett Jacobs's fictional self, seems to strike a balance between the two women (Alice and Dana), employing the discourses and strategies of print technology to manipulate her subordination to patriarchal or racist oppressions. While Linda Brent, like Alice and Dana, must become profoundly crippled by the

totalizing nature of slavery in order to attain freedom, her insistence upon avoiding rape mediates the division between Alice and Dana as “One woman. Two halves of a whole” (Butler, p. 257). A comparison of the evasive strategies employed by Brent, Dana, and Alice reveals that the discursive volition to refuse, however marginally determined, signifies the agency of Black female bodies and makes the difference between cohesion or erosion of the self, oftentimes boiling down to a matter of life and death.

Dana’s ability to move through time, although out of her control, functions as her primary strategy of evasion. While she must endure various beatings and indignities, unavoidable in antebellum slavery, her refusal to accept rape sets her apart from her fellow slaves. Where characters like Alice are positioned in such a way that their refusals are negated by forcible external actions, Dana would prefer death over sexual submission, an option she must deny to her ancestor if she is to secure her future lineage. Still, her awareness of the value of her life and the means by which she can effectively use her life as a bargaining chip primarily secures her ability to refuse many things. Echoing the symbolism of Alice’s ultimate suicide, Dana contends that “If I have to have to seem to be property, if I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus’s sake, then he also has to accept limits—on his behavior towards me. He has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying” (Butler, p. 246). Dana’s deck is stacked with power denied to her ancestors both because of her temporo-geographical location (or dislocation) as a time traveler and also, because her post-Civil Rights consciousness creates severe dissonance between the reality of her circumstances and her intellectual reflections upon them. Although Dana emotionally, morally, and psychologically comes to terms with the necessity of her foremother’s rape, she sees that fate as fundamentally incompatible with her highly individuated self, and accordingly contends that her will alone—her volition to refuse—will protect her from its clutches, even if her only escape is death.

Alice, by contrast, can only express her volition to refuse through reactive suicide. After enduring years of rape and bearing Rufus four children,⁵ he later sells their surviving son and daughter on one of Dana’s trips back to the future and she returns to find that Alice has hung herself. Despite her meek, initial protestations in Rufus’s defense, she ultimately blames him for inflicting the type of suffering that is worse than death. While Dana realizes that “...unless he wanted to keep me chained, he couldn’t prevent me from taking one route or another out of his world if that was what I wanted to do. He couldn’t control me. That clearly bothered him” (Butler, p. 253), Alice’s suicide did not serve an instrumental or volitional purpose. Although it was a voluntary escape from suffering, Alice was limited in her exercise of volition by the circumstances of her race, her birth, and her particular position as

⁵ The first two of which died in infancy due to inadequate medical care (Butler, p. 210).

Rufus's property. Unlike Dana, she cannot threaten death to get what she wants, both because she does not have another place to escape to (meaning that her interaction with suicide, rather than functioning as a threat, will be her final action of any sort) and because the values of Christianity and community within slave culture frowned upon sins such as suicide, and more broadly, upon any actions that seemed to privilege the self at the expense of one's children and one's communal bond. Dana's liberal humanist individualism makes suicide a more palatable escape than was Alice's because she, having rejected the Baptist teachings of her upbringing, seems to value the voluntary cessation of suffering over the "pie in the sky" ideology that promised the enslaved paradise in Heaven after death. Restricted by the implications of her actions on her children and her fellow slaves, Alice was more culturally bound to her time and the community that formed within it than was Dana. Dana was fundamentally shaped by her 20th century belief in voluntary action, growing up under the—albeit hypocritical—ethos that one should fight for liberty or otherwise fight for death. For instance, when Alice asks Dana if Rufus ever beds her, Dana contends that "he doesn't want [her] and [she doesn't] want him" (Butler, p. 228). Perplexed, Alice inquires, "what you think your wants got to do with it?" highlighting the fundamental differences between the individual produced under slavery and the post-Civil Rights individual whose existence is intertwined with the politics of revolution and equality. With the addition of time travel, Butler is able to explore a politic of refusal that offers dignity in death. The inability to refuse, which characterized the experiences of enslaved men and women, in particular, creates a self that resists individuation. Without said liberal humanist values, suicide seemed a more practical option for Alice than for Dana because, absent the integral belief in one's fundamental equality and worth as an individual human being, which is common to most contemporary Western subjects, suicide, like the devaluation of oral culture under the purview and disciplinary power of print, functions as the last, and therefore most powerful, resort.

Between the two extreme methods of escape epitomized through time travel and death in *Kindred*, we can position Linda Brent, Jacobs's fictional self, somewhere along the spectrum, eliminating the binary opposition between liberty and death. Jacobs, who pursues several intentional subterfuges to avert her master's sexual advances, and who is bound by both space and time, manages to carve out a liminal space between life and death from whence she can exercise her uniquely established form of discursive power. While she cannot move freely (or even involuntarily) through space-time, Jacobs distorts the linearity of the traditional slave narrative through her protracted stay in her "loophole of retreat." As she lies in the crawl space above her grandmother's shed, Jacobs contemplates the necessity of her escape in light of Dr. Flint's pursuit, realizing that "[she] had always been kindly treated, and tenderly cared for, until [she] came into the hands of Dr. Flint. [She] had never wished for freedom till then" (Jacobs, p. 174). Unlike Dana, whose

being is centered upon the principle of freedom, Jacobs was born into slavery; without Dr. and Mrs. Flint's cruelty, she might have otherwise been content to remain enslaved. Still, Jacobs's volitional refusal of rape comes at a great physical cost, and like Dana, who loses her arm to the persistent trauma of temporal rememory, Jacobs becomes disabled from her long tenure in her loophole. "I hardly expect that the reader will credit me," asserts Jacobs, "when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul" (Jacobs, p. 224). Jacobs's "escape" represents freedom in the narrowest terms as her refusal to submit to one kind of indignity forces her to choose another. This ability to choose the lesser of two evils, however, created by her enduring love for her children and a strong belief that she deserved freedom, differentiates her fundamentally from Alice. While both Brent and Alice are pursued by a sexually violent slave master and terrorized by his constant surveillance, Brent's escape, however close to "home," represents an internal valuation of self which recognizes no cost for a human life. Her separation from her children, unlike Alice's, is more endurable both because they are, at least remotely, visible to her, and because she believed that through her actions, she was securing their freedom as well. While we are denied Alice's final moments due to Dana's periodic absence from the past, her desperation goes unabated, casting her as Dana's wholly enslaved ancestral double. With no print experience, Alice is still successfully alienated from the world of literacy and self-determination through language where Jacobs, through her upbringing and positioning, is able to make use of literacy to advance the cause of her own liberation.

CONCLUSION

The bifurcation of language into the oral and printed spheres carries with it many discursive and ideological problems, particularly within the generic boundaries of the slave narrative and its postmodern antecedent, the neo-slave narrative. The combination of slave narration and speculative fiction, however, reverses the impact of many discursive quandaries. Interrogating the act of representation itself, "...both novels critique the limitations of realist forms and 'objective' history to convey African-American history and thus can be considered examples of what Timothy Spaulding calls the postmodern slave narrative, a form that 'force[s] us to question the ideologies embedded within 'realistic' representation of slavery in traditional history and historical fiction' (2)" (Vint, 2007, p. 241). If the generic conventions of realism can be scrutinized, and its ability to represent phenomenology is called into question, then it is only a small leap to the speculative lens and its accompanying time travel trope, which serve as an ideal outlet for the

“formulation of free will versus determinism (dramatized as freedom versus slavery)” (Flagel, 2012, p. 225), common to SF. Speculative fiction’s “rejection of verisimilitude contributes to the conceptualization of history as accessible primarily by way of narrative representation, and, by using the fantastic to metafictionally highlight history as representation, these novels decenter putatively ‘official’ narratives of history, particularly those that marginalize Black subjects” (Tucker, 2016, p. 251). In perhaps the most positive instantiation of dualism amongst the multitudes of conceptual binaries explored here, the genres of slave narration and speculative fiction complement one another well, and in the case of narratives like *Kindred*, “seem to bear out the critical consensus that its fantastic elements assist the project of historical recovery, reinforcing rather than subverting the realist conventions of antebellum fugitive slave narratives” (Dubey, 2013, p. 351). In other words, while the speculative impulse, whether actualized through time travel or another methodology of estrangement, serves as a mode of critiquing the limitations of realist representation, it nonetheless functions to bolster our feelings of identification with the protagonists of both Jacobs’s and Butler’s works.

When taken together, the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative represent crucial generic conventions responsible, at least in part, for the ultimate culmination of Black individualism in the American ethos. Further, the combination of the aforementioned genres also provides a framework through which we can contextualize the strengths and limitations of the antebellum slave narrative against the exigency of speculative neo-slave narratives. Both generically and conceptually, *Incidents* and *Kindred* together underline the ongoing prevalence of rationalist, heteropatriarchal ideologies across all domains of postmodern cultural production, most specifically tackling the double-consciousness created by the division of print and oral cultures along gendered and racialized lines of demarcation. Cutter (1996) reminds us that “To speak in the ‘master’s language is to remain trapped within a system of discourse which denies... subjectivity... (99)’... if language is an instrument of oppression, simply taking hold of it will not lead to liberation, nor will it lead to a dismantling of the master’s house” (p. 209). If language itself is a tool used both for oppression and liberation, then the division of oral and print cultures only serves to further obscure our double-consciousness of language’s multiple practices. Just as Jacobs uses the conventions of sentimentalism to mediate the opposition between degradation and purity present in abolitionist discourses, she also uses language itself to mediate the deceptive and liberatory aspects of both oral and print cultures in the antebellum South. Similarly, Butler interrogates the social construction of racialized and gendered reality by appealing to the estranging elements of speculative fiction. Her neo-slave narrative answers the unsung call that antebellum slave narratives initiated, blending the realities of two different times in history and initiating the dualistic mimesis between Dana and Alice to uncover deep-seated prejudices and internalizations of

Western culture. Ultimately, taken together, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Kindred* emphasize the continuity of slavery's cultural presence from past to present, and together, form a sort of call and response that engages the historicity of African American oral culture juxtaposed alongside the Euro-American primacy of print.

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