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21st CENTURY NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES AND GENRE AS TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

This dissertation argues that 21st century neo-slave narratives utilize genre as a tool to speculate freedom and alternative forms of black being in the present day. I consider genre not strictly as a means of categorization, but as a tool deployed by authors and filmmakers such as Octavia Butler, John Jennings, Marlon James, Kyle Baker, and Gerard Bush, to grapple with the continuing antiblackness that shapes existence in the afterlife of slavery. My use of the term "genre" is not limited to literary and filmic genres that seem to be more obvious in their overlap with the genre of neo-slave narratives, such as horror or sci-fi, but encompasses Sylvia Wynter's tracing of the shared etymological roots of "genre" and "gender" back to the word "kind". What kinds of black being are imagined through the blurring, rupture, and creation of genres within the form of the neo-slave narrative? While their predecessors, 19th century slave narratives, used narrative in attempts to define black people as American citizen-subjects, 21st century neo-slave narratives return to the site of the plantation to articulate alternative understandings of freedom and black being.

Over the span of three chapters, "21st Century Neo-Slave Narratives and Genre as Technology" charts multiple uses and forms of genre by analyzing a 19th century "traditional" slave narrative as an anchor text along with two contemporary works. The first chapter examines the relationship between the neo-slave narrative and horror through readings of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* and the film *Antebellum*. I assert that a sense of claustrophobic temporality drives the terror of these narratives and the need to merge what is already ostensibly horrific content (slavery) with the horror genre.

The second chapter more closely interrogates the relationship between gender and genre. Already cast out of the category of woman by what Hortense Spillers refers to as "ungendering",

enslaved black women instead perform and define alternative iterations, or genres, of gender for themselves and use them to negotiate, fight for and define freedom. I examine this through depictions of enslaved black womanhood in what I refer to as the anti-sentimental novel. While sentimentalism relies on sympathy in order to appeal to an understanding of freedom based on ideals of Christian morality and respectability, the anti-sentimental provokes feelings such as disgust and irritation while putting forth a conceptualization of freedom that is not fixed and is instead shaped by the genres of womanhood that the characters in these novels inhabit. The texts discussed in this chapter include *The Bondwoman's Narrative, The Book of Night Women,* and *The Good Lord Bird*.

The third and final chapter explores adaptation as a vehicle that allows neo-slave narratives to maneuver through and across genres and forms of media. More specifically, I analyze the ways that Nat Turner has been utilized as a "serial figure", described by Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer as a kind of stock, recurring character who is subject to various media changes over the course of its usage. The depictions of Turner that appear in text are not necessarily references to him as historical figure, but more so as a product of fiction. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* is considered the source text and read alongside the film *The Birth of a Nation* and graphic novel *Nat Turner* to address how adapted works about a single figure can have vastly different outcomes and articulations of revolution and freedom, even when they are adapted into the same literary genre.

Introduction

Fictions of antebellum slavery continue to preoccupy American twenty-first century imagination and cultural production long after Emancipation signaled its legal end. What Saidiya Hartman refers to as the "non-event of emancipation" may have ended the institution of plantation chattel slavery but did not result in actual liberation nor vast improvements in the material conditions of black people in a world built where white supremacy runs rampant. From redlining and mass incarceration to police brutality, slavery's legacy persists on American shores. According to Hartman, "This is the afterlife of slavery– skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman 6). So why do authors keep writing narratives of slavery when we as readers already know how it ends? Authors and filmmakers attempt to grapple with this reality of ongoing unfreedom by fictionalizing antebellum slavery in attempts to rework or reimagine our understandings of what freedom might mean. This dissertation argues that 21st century neo-slave narratives use genre as a piece of technology to speculate freedom and alternative forms of black being in the present day. I understand genre not strictly as a means of categorization, but as a tool deployed by authors and filmmakers to address the continuing antiblackness that shapes existence in the afterlife of slavery. At the same time, I also take Sylvia Wynter's tracing of shared etymological roots of "genre" and "gender" back to the word "kind" into account for this study. What kinds of black being are imagined through the blurring, rupture, and creation of genres within the form of the neo-slave narrative? How do various genres, such as horror or anti-sentimentalism, help produce different understandings of freedom for the 21st century?

What do slave narratives and neo-slave narratives do?

In order to understand neo-slave narratives both as a literary form and as a means of negotiating black life in the afterlife of slavery it is first necessary to understand their predecessor, the slave narrative. Molded by Enlightenment ideals of citizenship and rationality, traditional slave narratives attempted to make a case for black freedom by establishing black people as “speaking subjects” through the act of writing (Gates 141). Slave narratives functioned simultaneously as political propaganda and as works literature so that they would be legible to their white abolitionist audience. Upon opening a slave narrative text, readers could expect to encounter details of bondage, limited information about the actual means of escape, and an insistence about the authenticity of the narrative. Additionally, formerly enslaved male authors in particular used the form not only to uncover the violence of slavery in order to bring about its end, but also in attempts to gain proximity to the category of human by writing themselves as potential citizens of the American nation. Present-day readers see that this goal is futile, for even after black Americans gained the right to vote, suffrage does not guarantee rights and citizenship is always precarious. In an interview with Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman discusses the limitations of black people’s being integrated into the American project as a means for freedom. She questions, “What then does this language— the given language of freedom— enable? And once you realize its limits and begin to see its inexorable investment in certain notions of the subject and subjection, then that language of freedom no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation” (Hartman and Wilderson 185). How do we formulate different language or new ways of articulating and defining freedom that are outside of this “given language” Hartman mentions? These preexisting conceptualizations of freedom as citizenship attempted to serve a particular purpose during a particular *moment* in history: to drum up support for the

abolitionist cause, expose the horrors of slavery, and ultimately incorporate enslaved black people into the realm of the human. Living after the nineteenth century and in what Christina Sharpe refers to as "the wake" of slavery necessitates reevaluating the ways we imagine what freedom might possibly mean.

The neo-slave narrative emerged as a form during the late twentieth century as a response to both a shifting historiography of slavery and rising social movements with the goals of improving the conditions of black life, specifically the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Once again, black literary production was tethered to articulating ideas about black life and political subjectivity. According to Ashraf Rushdy, "writers of Neo-slave narratives wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" (Rushdy 7). These authors look to the moment of antebellum slavery in order to make commentary on a more recent socio-political moment. The mid to late twentieth century's black political successes (such as more access to legal voting rights, desegregation), along with the Black Power Movement's emphasis on self-sufficiency and cultural production ostensibly resulted in the emergence of newly empowered black political subjects. At least for the time being they could conceive of themselves as one step closer to the humans and citizen-subjects that their predecessors imagined freedom would entail.

Ashraf Rushdy defines the 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 4), while Bernard W. Bell characterizes them as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell 290). Though these descriptions might be fitting for 20th century neo-slave narratives, they are not quite as accurate for 21st century neo-slave narratives.

Neo-slave narratives that have been produced in the 21st century resist taking on the conventions of antebellum slave narratives and do not always tell stories of escape. Instead, what renders them neo-slave narratives of the 21st century is that their content and worldbuilding primarily rely upon slavery and an antebellum setting.

Regardless of the year or century of publication, one commonality among authors of neo-slave narratives is that they are not bound by the same restrictions as their nineteenth century counterparts. More specifically, neo-slave narratives tend to have open acknowledgement of their status as fiction, though many of them do attempt to illuminate some sense of truth about black people's experiences and imagine the scope of black humanity. There is also a shifting audience for these stories of slavery. Whereas traditional slave narratives aimed to leverage the sympathy and political power of their white readers, neo-slave narratives are not necessarily targeting the same audiences. Black literacy is no longer a crime against the state and neo-slave narratives have come to be considered more of a cultural and literary production as opposed to a more straightforward act of rebellion against the state. Neo-slave narratives employ and deconstruct different genres such as satire, magical realism, and horror, among others, to get their ideas of black subjectivity across in ways that were not necessarily accessible or useful to nineteenth century authors who were writing autobiographical narratives.

Where do twentieth and twenty-first century neo-slave narratives diverge? About her classic 1978 novel, author Octavia Butler says, "*Kindred* was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on in the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster" (Kenan 496). Butler was not alone in using the neo-slave narrative as a response to the American sociopolitical climate of the sixties. In fact, Rushdy argues that "the form evolved from a change in social and cultural conditions in the late

sixties" and that "the authors of the neo-slave narratives of the seventies and eighties are concerned with the politics of the sixties for several reasons" (Rushdy 5). Generally speaking, twentieth century neo-slave narratives take on the conventions and content of antebellum slave narratives in order to address the social issues and politics of the recent past. In other words, a neo-slave narrative published in 1980 is not necessarily grappling with slavery's impact on the 80s, but rather with the time of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. In contrast, creators of twenty-first century neo-slave narratives seem to be dealing with the present-day moment as it is happening while also highlighting the ways in which the ostensible political victories of the sixties have not necessarily resulted in substantial changes. The election of the first black president of United States did not quell the production of neo-slave narratives. This symbolic victory did not result in actual change in the lived circumstances for black Americans, as we bore witness to the deaths of Tamir Rice and Sandra Bland, the uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore, and the continued social and economic disparity that took place throughout his presidential tenure. Black people experience perpetual violence at the hands of institutionalized antiblackness, showing that freedom has yet to be fulfilled. Supposed participation in the American political system has not granted black people full humanity. Rather, we live in a world that is continually shaped by the institutions and values that are rooted in chattel slavery. These narratives continued to be produced not only as novels but as films after Obama's election and his departure from office. The year 2020 alone saw a proliferation of film and television adaptations of neo-slave narratives such as *The Good Lord Bird,* along with genre-bending works that are not necessarily about slavery but rely upon enslaved ancestors for worldbuilding and storytelling such as *Lovecraft Country.* If earlier iterations of the slave narrative were writing political subjects, then the twenty first century neo-slave narrative is writing a different kind of

existence into being. This is not to say that the subject being written or depicted is not political, but rather that the material conditions of black people have shown the necessity for imagining black being otherwise. According to Arlene R. Keizer, “rather than using representations of slavery primarily to protest past and present oppression. . . black writers have begun to represent slavery in order to explore the process of self-creation under extremely oppressive conditions” (Keizer 11). No longer are slave narratives being used as a means to bring the institution of slavery to an end. Instead, authors return to the figure of the slave to imagine and create who they and other black people can possibly be in a world built on a foundation of their ancestors’ enslavement.

Genre as Technology

What is genre? We tend to think of it as a means of categorization or grouping. For literature this typically means that we sort various works into genre categories based on their having certain traits or tropes. Wai Chee Dimock asserts that genre categories function as “horizons of expectation” (Dimock 122). Audiences and authors sort books, televisions, and movies into genre categories based on their preexisting ideas of a particular genre. It is important to note that the delineation between genre categories is not always stable. Rather, the distinction between genres can be blurred or erased, and texts can be considered part of multiple genres at the same time. However, my understanding of the word genre is not limited to literary genre or the idea of taxonomy, but rather borrows from both Sylvia Wynter’s formulations of the “genre of Man” as well as her tracing of the etymology of the words “genre” and “gender”. She writes, “the term *genre* which derives from the same root etymology, as *gender*, meaning *kind*, is here being used to denote, different, always auto-poetically instituted and fictively constructed *kinds*

of being…" Genre connotes not only multiple kinds of texts, but also multiple modes of being and imaginings of freedom that can be expressed within those texts.

In "Genre as World System", Wai Chee Dimock expands on the etymological root of genre as "kind" by attaching it to the notion of kin. More specifically, she describes genre as "not necessarily a genealogical relation, but, just as often, a remote spectrum of affinities, interesting when seen in conjunction but not themselves organically linked" and asserts, that "[w]hat matters here is not lineage, but a phenomenal field of contextually induced parallels" (Dimock 86). For the overarching form of the slave narrative, the societal conditions of slavery and antiblackness are the context that propels its existence and slavery's afterlives are what produce the conditions that make neo-slave narratives both possible and necessary. The genealogical relationship between the two forms cannot and should not be ignored. Neo-slave narratives are indeed the offspring of their predecessors, so it is important to consider the genealogical connection between the two. However, I also want to think about the conditions that brought about the parallels that exist between traditional slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Their linking is not only organic but also societally induced. The two genres are tied by nature of their genealogy and neo-slave narratives' being inspired by traditional ones, but they also come out of the condition of perpetual unfreedom. The afterlives of slavery necessitate genres of writing that attempt to adequately address the question of black freedom that has not yet been achieved.

For the purposes of this project, I do not use the term "technology" solely to refer our typical associations of it with engineering or machinery, but rather to call back to its etymological root *techne* and having what Beth Coleman refers to as "technological agency". Coleman describes technological agency as "speak[ing] to the ways by which external devices help us navigate the terrain in which we live" (Coleman 177). Slave narratives and the genres

within those narratives have technological agency that help black people navigate, imagine and articulate freedom in an antiblack world. If slave narratives themselves are a type of technology that helps us to navigate a societal terrain of antiblackness, then perhaps genre is the technology that helps authors and readers alike traverse the landscape of narrative. In this case genre is not used merely as a method of categorization, but as a tool of imaginative potential. Genre as a horizon of expectation for readers and viewers can be employed for a particular purpose, but ruptures and deviations from those expectations can also be used to accomplish an author's aims. Genre is not inherent nor incidental. Instead, it is purposefully constructed and can be adapted to suit the needs and desires of the people who are using it. Authors of neo-slave narratives incorporate or create the genre(s) that will best facilitate their articulations of how they conceptualize freedom and black being. Narrative and genre both serve as malleable technological equipment. According to Christina Sharpe, "The orthographies of the wake require new modes of writing, new modes of making sensible" (Sharpe 113). The manipulation of genre categories and creation of new ones may be considered a form of sense making from within the wake. The genre formation that happens within 21st century neo-slave narratives is new writing. Rather than conceptualizing genre as solely categorization and as something that is bound, I assert that genre has the potential to be generative. When authors merge, bend, break and blend existing genre categories or create new ones, they innovate new technology that gives us the means to imagine different possibilities for living in the afterlife of slavery and to write alternative ways of being into existence.

Neo-slave narratives ostensibly deviate from the propagandistic purposes of the original slave narratives. While they engage in similar acts of speculation about history, the potential for freedom and about what black being might mean, they have come detached from a form of

political writing that aims to formulate black people as citizens and included as part of the nation-state. Twenty-first century neo-slave narratives are not apolitical, but instead they have found the framework and language of citizenship to be insufficient for our current landscape of anti-blackness. What genres do 21st century neo-slave narratives cling to or cleave from? There is the tendency to think of neo-slave narratives as a genre in and of itself, but perhaps we should consider that there are smaller subgenres that fall under its purview. Genre might be used as a technological tool to create new ways to imagine/express freedom, futurity, or potential for escape.

Method

This project focuses on neo-slave narratives in the forms of novels, graphic novels, and films that were produced in the twenty-first century. Twenty-first century authors and filmmakers look to antebellum slavery due to its status as the foundation of racial capitalism in the Americas, perhaps with the idea that returning to it might be the starting point for rethinking genre and reimagining what freedom means. For this dissertation I consider Rushdy's assertion that black authors are using the neo-slave narrative to create a new political subject, except I assert that they are not necessarily conceptualizing subjectivity as it relates to the nation-state or citizenship. Rather, I return the site of the plantation by way of narrative to ask the question of what kinds of subjects and selves are they writing if they are not writing citizens? What does freedom look like if it is untethered from ideals of respectability and morality? Authors of traditional slave narratives used language of political subjectivity because that was the "given language of freedom" for their particular context. To be citizen-subject was to be human. After witnessing the failed project of the citizen-subject firsthand, authors must reorient their articulations of black being and freedom.

Across its three chapters, "21st Century Neo-Slave Narratives and Genre as Technology" charts multiple uses and types of genres through the use of a 19th century "traditional" slave narrative as an anchor text along with two 21st century works. Because neo-slave narratives not only refer to the historical moment of antebellum slavery but also exist in the same literary and cultural genealogy as their predecessors, I would be remiss not to examine them together. How each nineteenth century text interacts with each twenty-first century text varies depending on the genres being examined. It might be easy to assume that reading traditional and neo-slave narratives together would lend itself to a kind of "change over time sensibility". However, this approach instead uncovers the ways that genre, freedom, gender, and temporality are intertwined.

The first chapter examines the relationship between the neo-slave narrative and horror through readings of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* and the film *Antebellum*. I assert that a sense of claustrophobic temporality drives the terror of these narratives and the need to merge what is already ostensibly horrific content (slavery) with the horror genre. This chapter also discusses the violence and impossibility of black people being incorporated into the category of human. In order to combat the conditions of antiblackness that shape their daily lives, protagonists of neo-slave narrative horror instead embrace and utilize the monstrosity that is always already ascribed to them as black people for their own benefit.

The second chapter more closely interrogates the relationship between gender and genre. Already cast out of the category of woman by what Hortense Spillers refers to as "ungendering", enslaved black women instead perform and define alternative iterations, or genres, of gender for themselves and use them to negotiate, fight for and define freedom. I examine this through depictions of enslaved black womanhood in what I refer to as the anti-sentimental novel. While sentimentalism relies on sympathy in order to appeal to an understanding of freedom based on

ideals of Christian morality and respectability, the anti-sentimental provokes feelings such as disgust and irritation while putting forth a conceptualization of freedom that is not fixed and is instead shaped by the genres of womanhood that the characters in these novels inhabit. The texts discussed in this chapter include *The Bondwoman's Narrative, The Book of Night Women,* and *The Good Lord Bird*.

The last chapter explores adaptation as a vehicle that allows neo-slave narratives to maneuver through and across genres and forms of media. More specifically, I analyze the ways that Nat Turner has been utilized as a "serial figure", described by Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer as a kind of stock, recurring character who is subject to various media changes over the course of its usage. The depictions of Turner that appear in text are not necessarily references to him as historical figure, but more so as a product of fiction. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* is considered the source text and read alongside the film *The Birth of a Nation* and graphic novel *Nat Turner* to address how adapted works about the same historical figure adapted into the same genre can still have vastly different articulations of revolution and freedom.

Chapter One: The Claustrophobic Temporality of Neo-Slave Narrative Horror

"A world without antiblackness necessitates an entirely new conception of the social, which is to say a radically different world altogether"

- Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas

On the surface, it is the dark content of whips, chains, and blood that renders both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives genres suitable for using tropes of the gothic and horror. While these violent images undoubtedly strike fear and unease into the hearts of their audiences, they are not necessarily the primary foundations of the genre or the catalysts of the horror. The brutality of slavery does not work alone. What drives the horror of both slave narratives and neo-slave narratives is the altered, and more specifically claustrophobic, sense of temporality that threatens to trap the characters within this particular realm of antiblack violence. It is not just that the protagonists of these narratives are enslaved and constantly face violence, but that they face the ceaseless threat of being unable to escape the conditions that enable this violence. The scenes of visceral, corporeal violence and blood permeating the slave narrative ostensibly make the form rife for playing with horror genre tropes. However, it is not the depictions of violence inflicted upon black people and their bodies that ground the horror of slave narratives, rather it is the temporality that holds them hostage. Time threatens to trap people in the condition of the slave. As a result, they cannot escape these abhorrent conditions. But temporality is the root. The antiblackness of chattel slavery establishes the conditions of claustrophobic temporality and black monstrosity that shapes the horror of the neo-slave narrative, as well as the conditions of the present day. The genre of neo-slave narrative horror returns to the scene of the plantation with a certain sense of urgency. More specifically, these tropes provide a language to not only

illustrate the antiblack violence of the world we currently live in, but to gesture towards the necessity of its destruction.

Genealogy of slave narratives/neo-slave narrative

It is nearly impossible to explore the work that 21st century neo-slave narratives do without first discussing the legacy that they have inherited from traditional, nineteenth century slave narratives. Traditional slave narratives were written and used for a specific purpose: propaganda for abolition and an articulation of freedom and humanity that was rooted in citizenship and a hope for equal rights. Enlightenment ideals shaped understandings of knowledge production, citizenship, rationality, and humanity. According to Henry Louis Gates, literacy is the commodity that separates human from animal, slave from citizen. More specifically he asserts, “Black people, the evidence suggests, had to represent themselves as ‘speaking subjects before they could even begin to destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture” (Gates 141). Slave narratives were never just literature, but also had political and social aims. The genre of slave narrative was used as a tool to argue for black political subjectivity as well as a form of cultural production. Formerly enslaved authors such as Frederick Douglass and Solomon Northup wrote the stories of their lives not only to detail the horrors of slavery with the aim of bringing about its institutional end, but also with the goal of writing themselves as eventual citizen-subjects in the American project.

Slave narratives embraced the literary to serve as vectors for their political commitments. As such, these narratives often subscribe to a number of genre tropes, themes, and reader expectations. Similarities between slave narratives often consisted of more than just autobiographical narratives containing descriptions of the brutality of the plantation and details

of bondage. Upon opening a slave narrative text, readers could expect to encounter details of bondage, limited information about the actual means of escape, the introductory phrase "I was born", summary of mundanities and violence of the plantation, and a lack of moral ambiguity because of who is producing these narratives and the time period that they were produced in. They could also expect to see appeals to sentimentality and Christian religious beliefs and an insistence on authenticity and truth. Freedom is framed in the language of citizenship and a relationship to the nation, as that was how it was conceptualized at the time, through a lens of Enlightenment ideals. It is important to note that the tropes that appear to define slave narratives as an overarching genre are not incidental, but rather are deployed specifically to address the specific issue of black humanity and freedom in the context of antebellum United States. As the intended readers of these narratives, white abolitionist audiences were made to bear witness to slavery through the writing of ideas and values that attempted to bring black people closer in proximity to their own conceptions of human feelings and experiences. Additionally, these works attempt to appeal to American literature as a project in order to assert an ability to assimilate into American society, especially since they follow not only the genre conventions of the slave narrative but also the sentimental novel, romance, and the gothic novel to make themselves more legible as works of literature to their audiences. This does not necessarily mean that they strictly adhered to certain genre categories, but rather the genre categories these narratives traversed were shaped by the function that they purported to accomplish, which was to articulate a particular relationship between blackness and the potential for freedom.

Emancipation and the conclusion of the Civil War did not necessarily spell an end to the production of slave narratives or a beginning to black freedom. During the late twentieth century there was a rise of fictionalized slave narratives that came about as a response to social

movements that aimed to improve the material conditions of Black life in the United States and the shifting historiography of slavery. More specifically, these political events were the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. Referred to as neo-slave narratives, this literary form started to articulate a black subjectivity that was somewhat similar to the sort that was espoused by traditional slave narratives. Ashraf Rushdy asserts, "writers of Neo-slave narratives wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" (Rushdy 7). These authors look back to the moment of antebellum slavery while simultaneously making commentary on their own contemporary socio-political moment.

What do neo-slave narratives look like? Rushdy describes them as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy 4), while Bernard W. Bell characterizes them as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell 290). Though neo-slave narratives appear to follow the genre and plot conventions of the narrative form that inspired them, authors of neo-slave narratives are not necessarily bound by the same restrictions as their nineteenth century counterparts. While some of them, such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Sherley Anne William's *Dessa Rose* were both inspired by the lived experiences of enslaved women, the novels bear no pretense of attempting to tell an "authentic" story in the way that traditional slave narratives did. Authors of these fictional narratives are not beholden to the same values of capital "T" truth that their predecessors were. Neo-slave narratives tend to acknowledge their status as fiction, though many of them do attempt to illuminate some sense of truth about black people's experiences and imagine the scope of black humanity. The fictionality of these neo-slave

narratives allows authors to have more room to break from the genre conventions of the slave narrative and use the tropes that they see fit for constructing their ideas about black subjectivity. In the case of the works examined in this chapter, appeals to black humanity and citizenship are not useful. These texts instead trouble the very notion of the category of human as being attainable or useful for black people, especially when they are relegated to the plantation.

Genealogy of Gothic/Horror

Before delving into the relationship between neo-slave narratives and horror, it is also necessary to examine the relationship between slave narratives and the gothic. In *The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic*, Agneieszka Soltysik Monnet claims, "One of the recurrent conventions of the nineteenth-century American gothic is to begin with a preface (often by a first-person narrator) that runs along the lines of: 'here are some strange and inexplicable events. I leave it up to you (the reader) to judge them'" (Monnet 20). This gothic preface is somewhat reminiscent of the prefaces of slave narratives that emphasize their veracity. While fictional gothic narratives may invite their readers to judge the tale they read however they wish, authors of slave narratives do not have this luxury. The authors of these narratives urge their reader to judge the contents as both factual and immoral. Though the preface of slave narratives also acknowledges the seemingly unlikely events that take place within their accounts of the so-called "peculiar institution", they must implore readers to take the contents seriously. Slave narratives are intended to be the catalyst of a particular kind of moral judgement. This can be seen in the opening to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Editor L. Maria Child writes, "This peculiar phase of Slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn" (Jacobs 6). The words "peculiar" and "monstrous" allude to not only the strangeness

that is the institution of slavery, but also to the aspects of the supernatural that characterize the gothic as a genre. The gothic intends to provoke feelings of fear within its audience. By using language that suggests a merging with the gothic, Child sets up reader expectations for disgust, discomfort and pity. However, where the slave narrative deviates from the gothic in general is through its emphasis on its status as truth. Ideally, the sense of unsettlement readers feel after reading slave narratives prompts them to act on behalf of abolitionist causes. The gothic helps to make the slave narrative more legible by introducing a particularly disturbing subject matter through a genre that is somewhat familiar to its reader base. Slave narratives might be considered a technology or language of transmitting the ills of white supremacist violence as it is manifest through slavery and the plantation. For neo-slave narratives, the strangeness or "peculiarity" does not just come from the institution itself but from the mechanisms that it causes (like in *Kindred* with Dana's time travel). As twenty-first century readers, we live in the afterlives of slavery, so the knowledge of the institution is no longer foreign, but the overall effect that it has on us still causes feelings of terror and entrapment.

The fear that subtends slave narratives does not necessarily stem solely from the shock of antiblack violence being depicted in narrative form. Gothic scholar Dani Cavallaro asserts, "Fear is not disturbing because it intimates that the fabric of our lives, an apparently orderly weave, is being disrupted or is about to be disrupted, but because it shows us that the fabric has always been laddered and frayed" (Cavallaro vii). This understanding of how fear functions is crucial for examining how horror subtends the neo-slave narrative. In other words, it is not that antiblackness represents a deviation from the norm, but rather it is one of the *foundations* of the society that we currently live in. Neo-slave narratives incite fear in readers by emphasizing that the structures and epistemologies of a world that facilitated chattel slavery continue to thrive. It

is not just that "the fabric has always been laddered and frayed", but that there is a sense that this "fraying" will linger into the future. With the uptake of Hartman's concept of "afterlife of slavery" in Black Studies, there is an increased understanding that the so-called fabric of our lives has always been "frayed" but these narratives emphasize that a *different aspect or element* of it (such as temporality) is always already frayed and that is what is so unsettling. We think that we have a particular relationship to time and space and have figured out how to live within a realm of antiblackness, only for the rug to be ripped from underneath our feet. Neo-slave narratives indicate that the notion of linear, forward-moving progress is inapplicable to black people. Horror provides a grammar of the twenty-first century moment that allows the neo-slave narrative to somewhat deviate from the tropes and characteristics of the gothic, but not abandon them entirely.

Dani Cavallaro remarks about one of Stephen King's reviews, ". . . his words usefully imply that horrific images have the power to revive consciousness. They are capable of waking us up or at least reminding us that we have been asleep without necessarily knowing that this was the case. The revitalizing properties of fear are central to the orchestration of narratives of darkness" (Cavallaro 14). On one hand, this assertion hearkens back to the use of original slave narratives. These horrific images wake readers up to the realities they have been happening in front of their very faces. At the same time, it also speaks to the ways in which the affect of fear is deployed within contemporary neo-slave narratives. While nineteenth century works intended to "wake up" their audiences to the brutalities of chattel slavery, neo-slave narratives utilize it to alert readers to the conditions of antiblackness that persist in the present day. Despite a thin veneer of racial progress, the psychological, economic, and corporeal legacies of slavery are seemingly without end.

Horror is a descendent of the gothic genre and is similar in many ways, but also subtly deviates. The gothic is simultaneously the predecessor of and sits adjacent to the genre of horror. They are not always mutually exclusive genres and they bleed into one another. By the very nature of their content and setting, traditional slave narratives are always already in the realm of the gothic. Maisha Wester emphasizes how traditional nineteenth century slave narratives easily align with the characteristics of gothic tropes, "Slave narratives prove fundamentally gothic first and foremost in the setting. The slave narratives are wrought with descriptions of screams heard for miles, wicked masters who derive pleasure from the sound, and blood-soaked soil tilled by ruined hands" and "Graphic descriptions emphasize the horror of slave reality, and tales of direful housing and contaminated food. . .establish the slave narratives as an apt competitor in gothic literature" (Wester 40). While the nineteenth century context is particularly apt for the genre of the gothic, the twenty-first century necessitates a different type of writing, or at the very least, a different way of understanding the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative as they relate to their respective genre couplets. According to Gina Wisker, "Horror, drawing from the impulse and forms of the gothic, but it's more violent and psychologically, physically disturbing and invasive, destructive relation, acts as a vehicle for us to face up to and face down whatever we avoid, repress, ignore, or can see no escape from" (Wisker 10). However, for traditional slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, the distinction between horror and gothic is not necessarily so easy to delineate. Nineteenth century slave narratives and their twenty-first century counterparts are both characterized by their explicit depictions of violence inflicted upon black people. Neo-slave narratives are not necessarily *more* violent than their predecessors. Instead, the distinction between the two genres hinges upon what we "can see no escape from." Neo-slave narrative horror utilizes an altered sense of temporality in order to emphasize the apparent

perpetuity of antiblackness, and therefore the presumable inability to fully escape the clutches of slavery.

The particular experience of temporality as it is felt and experienced by the body, regardless of how it appears in the narrative, also implicates a relationship to body horror. Kelly Hurley defines body horror as "'a hybrid genre that recombines the narrative and cinematic conventions of the science fiction, horror, and suspense film in order to stage a spectacle of the human body defamiliarized, rendered other' (Dudenhoeffer 7). Horror is characterized by a particular kind of embodiment. It contrasts from the ghostly haunting of an embodied past that permeates the gothic, but instead illustrates a sense of enclosure happening TO the body that is brought on by the legacy and conditions of enslavement. Body horror is more than merely acts of gross, brutal, or disturbing corporeal violence. In the case of neo-slave narratives, it extends beyond the physical punishments inflicted upon enslaved black people into the realm of temporality. Time acts upon the physical body. It is not just that it *feels* like it is enclosing the protagonist, but that it actually doing so, further emphasizing the conditions of slavery that are difficult to escape from.

In "Genre as World System," Wai Chee Dimock expands on the etymological root of genre as "kind" by attaching it to the notion of kin and describes it as, "not necessarily a genealogical relation, but, just as often, a remote spectrum of affinities, interesting when seen in conjunction but not themselves organically linked" and asserts, that "[w]hat matters here is not lineage, but a phenomenal field of contextually induced parallels" (Dimock 86). These descriptions of genre are useful to think about in regard to not only the forms of neo-slave narratives and traditional slave narratives, but also horror and its predecessor, the gothic. While these respective genres are undeniably related through genealogy, the contextually induced

parallels between them are just as compelling. The ways that these genres are related and interact with one another are multifaceted and intertwined. More specifically, the gothic and the slave narrative have a particular kind of relationship that is almost analogous to that of horror and the neo-slave narrative. Moving forward, I will be thinking with these four genres as a series of couplets: slave narrative/gothic and neo-slave narrative/horror. This primarily functions to highlight the chronological and intertwined relationships between the genres that are in each couplet. The slave narrative precedes the neo-slave narrative while the gothic precedes horror. However, this is not to say that the four genres are mutually exclusive. Instead, by putting these genres into pairs, I am considering the relations both within and across the couplets to highlight the trajectory and development of these respective genres as technologies. The relationship across the couplets is partially chronological, but simultaneously avoids a complete sense of linearity. The primary straightforward chronological relationship is between the traditional and neo-slave narratives only because of the base definition of neo-slave narratives themselves as being produced *after* Emancipation.

Cited by numerous scholars as a quintessentially gothic text, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* also seems to be a turning point of sorts (and many of them don't say why). Despite the fact that it traffics in similarly supernatural tropes that many authors of the twenty-first century like to toy with and merge with what they call horror, it is typically categorized as gothic. What is it about the end of the 20th century and entrance into the 21st that really signals a supposed turn from gothic (at least in name) and towards horror? Horror is "in the wake of" the gothic, but when it comes to the content of slavery it does not quite depart from its predecessor, but rather takes on a new name/identity that is necessary in the current moment. Beloved the ghost is an embodied past being brought to the present whereas the 21st century texts that I am analyzing are the

protagonists themselves being brought into the past. While this distinction may not seem to make much of a difference at the surface, especially since they both are forms of haunting in a sort of way, the disorientation is driven by the fact that WE (the 21st century audience along with the protagonist) are pulled to the past, not vice versa. We are already familiar with the afterlives of slavery and how it haunts the present. This phenomenon reflects an anxiety about the future, as it suggests that there is no way "out" since characters continually move between the past and the present and still have not seen a future where freedom is evident.

Though the differences between the gothic and horror as distinct genres at times can be difficult to describe or articulate, Allan Lloyd-Smith asserts, "In Gothic the terror of what might happen, or might be happening, is largely foregrounded over the visceral horror of the event" (Lloyd-Smith 8). This is one of the places where horror and gothic diverge. More specifically for neo-slave narratives this has to do with the portrayal of temporality. In horror, the visceral horror of the event is what matters. I am not necessarily focusing on the quotidian violence that is happening on the plantations where these novels and film take place. Rather, one of the roots of horror that I am focusing on in this chapter is the disorienting and claustrophobic temporality that is portrayed within these texts. Whereas the gothic, and therefore the slave narrative, implies a more ghostly haunting (such as the ghost Beloved returning to haunt her family's home), the neo-slave narratives that I am examining do something slightly different. The narratives I examine in this chapter rely more heavily on the neo-slave narrative horror sensation of enclosure. The disorienting and claustrophobic temporality evinced within these novels is suggested/introduced by the gothic slave narrative, in this case *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and is brought to the forefront in the neo-slave narrative horror texts. The gothic connotes fear and dread while horror prompts a more visceral sense of unease. This is not to say that these

affects refrain from bleeding between both genres, but rather that they are each foregrounded in the gothic and horror in unique ways.

What are their respective roles as genre and technology and how are they interpolated into their respective relationships to chronology and temporality? Colton Saylor asserts that the horror genre is rife with radical potential, articulating that "horror's deconstructive and diagnostic tendencies–in other words, moments of unsettling or violent spectacle–allow for black radical narratives that reject the constructs of hegemony" (Saylor 92). The spectacles of violence committed against black people that are depicted within narratives of slavery are far from new or surprising. For neo-slave narrative horror in particular, they work to work to emphasize to readers that we continue to live in what Christina Sharpe describes as "the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence", or "the wake" (Sharpe 15). More specifically, these slave and neo-slave narratives highlight a claustrophobic relationship to time to remind us as readers that "progress" is a myth and time does not move linearly.

While it alludes to and foreshadows the fraught nature of "freedom", the slave narrative gothic primarily operates from an understanding of a freedom that has not happened yet (in that it is understood as being somewhat linked to Emancipation). For slave narrative gothic works such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, freedom is precarious at least partially because the institution of slavery is still in effect. What the genre does by introducing the claustrophobia of slavery is suggest that the entrapment of antiblackness built by slavery is ongoing. Neo-slave narrative horror then picks up this concept of claustrophobia and enclosure to highlight the ways that slavery's effects continue to shape the twenty-first century. The terror of slavery is

omnipresent. Both genres, slave narrative/gothic and neo-slave narrative/horror might be considered technologies that diagnose the problem of antiblackness in their respective present.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Incidents is a "prototype" of sorts that demonstrates the instability of the boundary between gothic and horror. The narrative collapses gothic haunting with horrific enclosure both literally and temporally**.** Harriet Jacobs' narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* differs from the other works examined in this chapter not only through its publication in the nineteenth century, but also through its status as nonfiction narrative. However, its initial generic categorization as slave narrative and autobiography does not stop the narrative from engaging with characteristics of other literary genres. C. Riley Snorton argues that "Initially conceived to address an audience of northern white women, the narrative takes a cross-genre form, having been described as a fugitive narrative that includes elements of sentimental, gothic, and antislavery novel forms" (Snorton 67). It is the narrative's deployment of claustrophobia in particular as a gothic trope that alludes to how claustrophobic temporality is imbricated within the both the slave narrative genre and its progeny, the neo-slave narrative.

The "non-event of Emancipation" signals the continuing unfreedom of black people despite the legal end of chattel slavery. While this may seem to be a strictly post-Emancipation phenomenon, it is alluded to in Harriet Jacobs' autobiography. While *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* differs from the other texts discussed in the chapter through its status as autobiography and being published in the nineteenth century, the claustrophobia that permeates the more recent texts shapes Jacobs' narrative as well. On one hand, Jacobs describes claustrophobia on a literal and physical level as she hides away in the garret, or the "loophole of

retreat", in the hopes of escape. Describing the second springtime she spends in the garret, Jacobs writes, "During the long nights I was restless for want of air, and I had no room to toss and turn. There was but one compensation; the atmosphere was so stifled that even mosquitos would not condescend to buzz in it" (Jacobs 135). This particular passage illustrates just how small the space of the garret is. Jacobs is physically confined and cannot move her body into a comfortable position. There is a small glimmer of humor in this passage as she gets temporary reprieve from the mosquitoes that simultaneously serves to emphasize the claustrophobia of the garret. It is too small for insects to enter, but Jacobs must remain there. The confinement of the garret is the only hope she has to gain her freedom and slavery does not quite touch her there, but she is not completely safe from its clutches. She lives with the constant fear of getting caught. Jacobs recalls, "I heard slave-hunters planning how to catch some poor fugitive" (131). While Jacobs is not necessarily the fugitive in question during this particular conversation, her ability to overhear the hunters' conversation highlights her physical proximity to the danger of being recaptured. Her relative safety relies on the suffocating concealment of her loophole of retreat. For Jacobs, the claustrophobia of the garret holds the potential for freedom and the potential for re-enslavement into unbearably close proximity to one another.

Claustrophobia in this narrative extends beyond Jacobs' enclosure in the garret to bring it into further conversation with freedom. Though she hides away in attempts to *gain* her freedom, slavery is ever encroaching. This claustrophobia is particularly noticeable towards the end of Jacobs narrative, after she has entered the region of the country where she should supposedly be "free". She writes, "I dreaded the approach of summer, snakes and slaveholders make their appearance. I was, in fact, a slave in New York, as subject to slave laws as I had been in a Slave State. Strange incongruity in a State called free!" (Jacobs 216). The phrase "snakes and

slaveholders" refers to the moment earlier in the narrative when Jacobs first begins her escape and hides in a swamp. This is not only a callback to a previous moment in the written narrative but also her experience emphasizes that though she has escaped to the north, her status as a "free" woman remains precarious. At the same time, this reference is to two beings that invoke feelings of fear for Jacobs. The snakes and slaveholders simultaneously are part of her memories from her act of escape, as well as part of her current reality. She retains the status of slave. She does not say that she was formerly enslaved, but rather that she remains a slave. Despite her efforts to flee the south, she continues to understand herself as enslaved. In actuality freedom is not tethered to geographical location, such as the north. Jacobs has escaped the immediate danger of the plantation, but this passage indicates her recognition that her safety is precarious. Freedom is also not tied to the passage of time (the years she spent in the garret). Notice how she writes that the state is "called free". On one hand, Jacobs enters into the physically claustrophobic space of the garret in a desperate attempt to escape slavery. However, her eventual crossing into the north does not guarantee that she will be released from her status as slave. With the ratification of the Fugitive Slave Act, Jacobs realizes that her ostensible freedom is in peril. She cannot fully escape her status as a slave and the anxiety that it causes her because she knows that she can return at any time. She lives in a constant state of terror knowing that there is not truly a way *out***.**

The freedom granted by Emancipation is not really free. Jacobs' gothic slave narrative portends the kind of claustrophobic temporality that characterizes neo-slave narrative horror. It is not so much that Jacobs is haunted by her past, but that she is very much enclosed within it. More specifically, Jacobs' gothic slave narrative suggests the need for the development of horror as a means to articulate the relationship between claustrophobia, temporality, and antiblackness

as intimately intertwined. This points to the continuing utility of the gothic and eventually horror into the 21st century.

Claustrophobic Temporality

In addition to the acts of physical, sexual, and emotional violence that are enacted against black people within works of neo-slave narratives, much of the horror also stems from the altered sense of temporality that tends to be portrayed within these works. More specifically, the type of temporality that is alluded to in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and more explicitly depicted in *Kindred* and *Antebellum* does not move forward linearly, but rather takes on a sense of claustrophobia. It wraps around the characters in the texts and offers little room for escaping slavery and the world of the plantation. Within neo-slave narratives, temporalities and sensibilities shaped by slavery coalesce with those that are also considered tropes of horror fiction. Gina Wisker writes, "Freud identifies *unheimlich* or uncanny as the key horror strategy. In this respect, places, people, our sense of reality and justice, and the comfortable stories we tell ourselves to stay sane and directed are all prime victims for horror's dislocation and destablisation effect" (Wisker 146). This notion of dislocation and destabilization are what are particularly critical for understanding the relationship between temporality and how it helps catalyze the horror for 21st century neo-slave narratives. Scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Calvin Warren theorize the relationship between slavery and the movement of time. For Hartman, "the 'time of slavery' negates the common-sense intuition of time as continuity or progression, then and now coexist. . ." (Hartman 759). Slavery disrupts the understanding and experience of time as forward moving. It forces temporality to take on a different shape and sensation. Meanwhile, Calvin Warren offers a slightly different theory of temporality that he refers to as "black time". He writes, "Black time is time without duration; it is a horizon of time

that eludes objectification, foreclosing idioms such as 'getting over,' 'getting through,' or 'getting beneath'" (Warren 56). These understandings of temporality give language to describe how the institution of chattel slavery influences how black people experience time, as well as how this temporality is depicted within traditional slave narratives and neo-slave narratives.

My understanding of claustrophobic temporality within neo-slave narrative horror relies upon paying close attention to not only antiblackness, but white supremacy as well. These two oppressive forces work in tandem to not only facilitate the physical, mental, and sexual violence of the plantation, but combine to establish the conditions for the suffocatingly claustrophobic temporality of neo-slave narrative horror as well. According to Charles W. Mills, white supremacy is "the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over and, in certain ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people [and is] not seen as a political system at all" (Mills 18). However, white supremacy not only functions as a system of political domination, but also as a form of *temporal* domination. White supremacy bases its linear conceptualization of time on Enlightenment ideals of progress. In other words, the future always lies chronologically "ahead". This particular mode emphasizes whiteness and white people as the dominating force that surges forward towards modernity while black people are continually left behind, unable to catch up. While white supremacy inflicts violence upon black and other nonwhite people, it is concerned with preserving the domination of whiteness as a category by any means necessary. Antiblackness hinges upon abjection. Its temporality takes on a unique spatiality. Antiblackness is not tied to linearity, but instead a sense of suspension rooted in what Hortense Spillers refers to as a "rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation" spurred by the violence of the Middle Passage (Spillers 68). It is not just that black people are left behind but that there is an air of stillness and suspension in the "not-yet" (Spillers 72).

Antiblackness stresses the inability of black people to be subsumed fully into a broader sense of "present" and the category of human. While white supremacy pushes black people out of modernity and the possibility of futurity, Antiblackness disrupts a sense of the present. The crux of both of these forms of temporality and oppression is slavery. Together, they conceptualize whiteness as human and blackness as slave. John Murillo III asserts that "slavery creates a problem that halts and loops time, dispersing the political-ontological position of the socially dead across all temporal moments and movements in its wake" (Murillo 4). White supremacy and antiblackness are what all slavery to exist in the first place. Their coming together creates loops and repetitions of violence that get smaller and smaller, holding black people hostage. Neo-slave narrative horror emphasizes and exaggerates these loops. It is not just that time "loops" in shape, but that these loops get tighter and increasingly confining, keeping black people trapped. The depictions of temporality within texts explored in this chapter highlight how white supremacy and antiblackness combine to ensnare black people. More specifically, they work together to keep black people in the condition of slave. The "non-event" of Emancipation precludes the idea that freedom is forward, temporally and chronologically speaking. Unlike the gothic that treats slavery as a specter that haunts the present, neo-slave narrative horror encloses. This particular type of temporality emphasizes the violence and horror of the institution by reiterating the fact that it has such a stronghold on present-day culture, society, and our episteme.

The claustrophobic nature of temporality that drives the horror within neo-slave narratives is tied to the precarity and perceived inability to access freedom. In other words, the threat is caused by the impossibility of completely usurping the conditions of slavery. Dani Cavallaro claims, "The interaction of terror and horror is most explicitly conveyed by stories that articulate the experience of fear as an ongoing condition" (Cavallaro 6). The ongoingness of this

form of fear means that it is difficult, if not possible to escape. The twenty-first century has shown us that antiblackness is an ongoing condition. Christina Sharpe further clarifies the relationship between existing in what she refers to as "the wake" and terror: "Put another way, living in the wake means living in and with terror in that much of what passes for public discourse *about* terror we, Black people, become the *carriers* of terror, terror's embodiment, and not the primary objects of terror's multiple enactments; the ground of terror's possibility globally" (Sharpe 15). This embodiment of terror goes along with the embodied temporality of horror. Works of neo-slave narrative horror actively engage with the knowledge that this terror is an ongoing, embodied condition. It's not just that slavery's legacy is brutality, but that temporally we are unable to leave it behind. Slavery is not relegated to a chronological past that sits "behind" us, but rather continues to shape the everyday.

Claustrophobic temporality as a concept already suggests a very specific spatial relationship between time, space (geography), and slavery in its name. The protagonists of these slave and neo-slave narratives cannot escape the time of slavery, as it continuously encloses around them. Though slavery in the United States tends to be associated with the south, in actuality the institution's impact extends far beyond the Mason-Dixon line. We see this in Jacobs' testimony as she asserts that geographical boundaries do not guarantee her safety. The constant threat and presence of slavery makes the physical space she inhabits seem smaller because there is no outside. There is no physical space that is left untouched by slavery and the potential to be pulled back into its clutches. It simultaneously covers a vast amount of space and creates a sense of entrapment. Harriet Jacobs' narrative insists that there is nowhere that is truly safe. Slavery's traversal of physical space is not exclusive to Jacob's slave narrative/gothic work, but is further emphasized through the Dana's time travel in *Kindred*. Even when she is back at

home in 1976 and in California, she can never truly be comfortable during these trips home because of the lingering threat of being ripped away at any time. The Weylin plantation may be located in Maryland, but Dana can never fully escape from its clutches and consequences. Temporal and physical distance from the site of the plantation ultimately do not make a difference. Katherine McKittrick describes a very particular relationship between the plantation, slavery, and temporality. She defines her concept of plantation futures as "A conceptualization of time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors and, consequently brings into focus the ways that the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death that no longer analytically sustain this violence" (McKittrick 2-3). This formulation emphasizes just how far the vestiges of slavery extend into both the present day and the future, as well as across geographical space. Claustrophobic temporality somewhat differs from McKittrick's conceptualization of temporality, but her concept of plantation futures points to the critical ways that the plantation was and continues to be a nexus of slavery's continuing violence. The initial labor and violence of neo-slave narrative horror may take place on the plantation, but the sense of dread and disorientation that lies within neo-slave narrative horror is compounded by the suffocating sense of danger that exists when characters attempt to step off of the plantation. More specifically, it is the looming threat of being *pulled back* onto the plantation that creates a sense of enclosure and inescapability.

With the time travel and disorientation tropes evident in these narratives we are going to where the haunting is. This is still reminiscent of the gothic because of the claustrophobia, yet the claustrophobia is primarily temporal as opposed to solely physical. The claustrophobia of the gothic is often associated with people being locked away in asylums, castles, or as in Harriet Jacobs' case, the garret. However, Jacob's narrative starts to point us away from focusing on

physical confinement and moves towards a confined, claustrophobic sense of temporality that characterizes horror in the afterlives of slavery. The neo-slave narrative horror locks people in time. What this means is that there appears to be no escape. Claustrophobic temporality is frightening precisely because it makes the possibility of escape feel impossible. It is not just that the "everyday" of antiblackness is violent and oppressive, but that it feels like it is inescapable. There is no way for the protagonists of these narratives to fully extricate themselves from the status of slave, as the passage of time and legal emancipation are not a salve.

Kindred

What does it mean to consider Octavia Butler's works, and *Kindred* in particular, within the realm of horror? Along with Butler's other texts, *Kindred* tends to be categorized most explicitly as a work of science fiction, despite Butler herself naming it as a work of fantasy. The ability of Butler's novel to be categorized as more than one genre lends itself to reading it through a lens of horror. While the content of the narrative primarily focuses on the protagonist Dana's first-hand experiences as an ostensibly enslaved woman on her ancestor's plantation, the classification of this novel as neo-slave narrative is somewhat secondary. With its use of time travel as a plot device and the plantation setting, *Kindred* epitomizes neo-slave narrative horror.

Damian Duffy and John Jennings' graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* translates Octavia Butler's text on multiple levels. In the most obvious change, it transforms Butler's prose into panels of images. The shift from prose to graphics also starts to signal a somewhat subtle shift in genre for this novel. In addition to being categorized as a neo-slave narrative, *Kindred* also tends to be grouped with science fiction. However, the details of the graphic novel's title page allude to the potential blurring of genre lines as it contains visual cues that are reminiscent

of contemporary horror movie posters. By opening with this particular visual cue, the graphic version of the novel primes readers to read the text through a horror lens. The title of the novel is printed in red block letters that appear to be somewhat faded or scratched. The background is mostly black with hints of red peeking through and the general mood of the page feels eerie. This title page does not necessarily allude to role that slavery is going to play within the plot of the novel, but the placement of the color red on the page does suggest that some sort of violence is going to occur within the pages of the text. By calling on the reader's contemporary cultural knowledge, this title page sets the stage for this novel to potentially be read as a work of horror. A present-day reader might not necessarily be familiar with the original version of Butler's work *Kindred* as a science fiction novel, but they likely would have been exposed to enough horror movie posters to at least have a general understanding of what a foreboding title page looks like. Even if readers do not understand this strictly as horror, they are somewhat set up for the unsettling events that are about to take place. Though the original novel tends to be categorized as science fiction, Duffy and Jennings' transformation of the prose into a visual language shifts both reader expectations and genre boundaries. Even readers who have familiarity with Butler's work can be prompted to interpret the novel through a neo-slavery horror lens after seeing the ominous color scheme of the title page. It is not that Duffy and Jennings are necessarily adding something to or completely altering Butler's text, but it appears that the form of the graphic novel lends itself to highlighting the genre bending that was already latent in the text. Horror scholar Kinitra D. Brooks asserts, "weakened distinctions between science fiction, fantasy, and horror create a genre confusion concerning black female authors because few to none have taken the time to explore how black women writers worry the lines between these genres to create a blend of horror/fantasy/science fiction that is specific to their themes and analytical needs"

(Brooks 56). The graphic novel as a form along with our 21st century moment emphasizes the horror of the narrative. More specifically, the graphic novel highlights the blend of horror and science fiction that readers of Butler's original text previously overlooked. Slavery as an institution and the content of the novel's plot is inherently horrifying, but transforming it into image helps emphasize that the novel is also deploying horror as a genre.

The graphic novel prompts readers to read the text through the lens of horror, rather than merely science fiction while simultaneously shifting how the reader experiences the temporality of the narrative. Time travel is a standard trope within the genre of science fiction. This is not to say that the novel is not scary or does not evoke feelings of terror, but that it generally is not considered to be a work of horror. Reading the prose alone: 1. drags out the temporality of reading and 2. places the focus on the moment of time travel itself as *opposed* to the fact that temporality is being toyed with. Relying solely on prose tends to cause the reader to think of time travel as a literary and plot device and to pay particular attention to Dana's ability/inability to control it. The adaptation's turn to the visual emphasizes the impact of the shifting temporality upon Dana, her body, and the reader. The claustrophobic, and in the case of *Kindred*, compressed temporality is the catalyst of horror in neo-slave narratives. For the other works examined in this chapter, this translates to how temporality is felt and experienced by the protagonist. The altering of time is not literal. *Kindred* deviates from the other texts in that Dana's movement through time and space is physicalized. This time travel device is what allows the novel to initially be categorized as science fiction. The *act* of time travel is foregrounded. The medium of the graphic novel is particularly suited for depicting the episodes of time travel that Dana experiences throughout the novel because of the way it alters how readers understand the relationship between time and space within a text. Comic scholar Scott McCloud asserts, "In learning to read

comics we all learned to perceive time **spatially**, for in the world of comes, **time and space** are **one and the same** (McCloud 100). This collapsing of time and space mirrors how temporality operates in *Kindred* and allows readers to better visualize Dana's predicament. Horror is more concerned with the uneasiness and terror that a non-linear, more compressed temporality can produce than the mechanics of *how* the timeline is shifted. Though Butler's prose differs from other science fiction works in that it does not delve into much detail about how Dana's time traveling actually functions (aside from being triggered by the risk of death which I will discuss more later), it does feature detailed descriptions about how Dana feels in the moments immediately prior to and after her time travel.

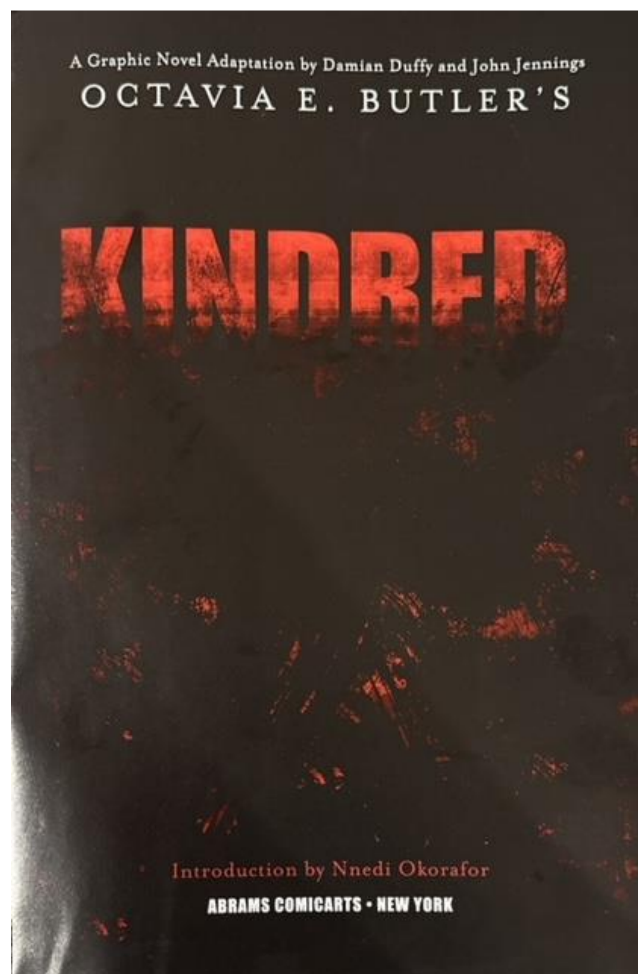

Figure 1: *Kindred* Graphic Novel adaptation title page. *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation,* Damian Duffy and John Jennings, Abrams ComicArts 2017.

With their 2017 adaptation of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred,* Damian Duffy and John Jennings transform her written prose into the form of images, taking moments of plot description and rendering them visible. In doing so, they not only allow readers to become eyewitnesses to Dana's time travel and trauma, but more importantly alter how the audience experiences reading the work. Specifically, the panels of the graphic novel lend themselves well to depicting the idiosyncrasies of temporality within the novel. The compressed, claustrophobic temporality of the narrative is highlighted through the use of image rather than description. This phenomenon is evinced in the very first pages of the narrative when Dana experiences her first episode of time travel. In Butler's novel, after pulling a young Rufus from the river, the moment prior to Dana's being pulled back to the year 1976 is written as follows, "I turned, startled, and found myself looking down the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking I was going to be shot for saving the boy's life. I was going to die. I tried to speak, but my voice was suddenly gone. I felt sick and dizzy" (Butler 14). Whereas in the graphic novel this moment is depicted in three panels (Duffy and Jennings 13.6-14.1-2). Generally speaking, the adaptation adheres to Butler's narrative pretty closely, but there are some subtle shifts that allow the reader to witness Dana's journey differently than they do in the prose version. As readers of the graphic novel, we "hear" the click of the gun and see Dana's sweaty, startled face. The next panel depicts the long-barreled gun pointed directly at her head as she stares up in surprise. The third and final panel of the sequence depicts her back in her house in 1976 with her husband Kevin. There is a striking contrast between the colors of this panel and the one that immediately precedes it. 1976 is sepia toned and somewhat faded. The river scenes contain browns, blues and greens. While the prose narrates Dana's dizziness and her fear of impending death, the graphic novel does no such thing. Dana's fear of death is implied by the fearful look illustrated on her

face and the gun barrel sitting in its close proximity. However, there is no way for the audience to know that she feels the dizziness that generally accompanies her time travel in this image. Instead, the sudden color and setting change that occurs between the last two panels wrenches the reader and Dana across time and space. The abruptness of the transition mirrors the rapidity with which Dana's body moves through time. This is obviously not the only moment of time travel in the novel and emphasizes that while Dana experiences the phenomenon more than once, it never stops being unsettling and disorienting. Rather, as Rufus ages, Dana's relationship to her own time travel becomes more urgent as she attempts to facilitate the circumstances of her birth.

Figure 2: Dana hears a gun "click" and turns to see the barrel pointed toward her face. *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* pg. 13.

As Dana navigates her attempts to keep Rufus alive and her family lineage intact, she incorrectly assumes that her status as a person born in the 20th century offers her some relative distance from the horrors taking place on the Weylin plantation. John Murillo III argues, "Temporal distance for Dana founds what she *believes* is the difference in political-ontological

position" (emphasis mine) (Murillo 61). Not only does Dana live in the same political-ontological position as the other enslaved people on the Weylin plantation, but her understanding of "temporal distance" is largely an illusion. While she does indeed have some sort of access to a post-Emancipation future that her ancestors do not, Dana is not as temporally distant as she thinks. Time closes in around her. Ultimately, Dana's resistance is futile. There is no resisting the status of slave because she was never fully extricated from it to begin with. In this world, to be black is to be slave. The material conditions may shift or appear to be different, but there is no fully escaping enslavement.

Antebellum

Similarly to Butler's *Kindred*, Gerard Bush and Christopher Renz's 2020 film *Antebellum* places its protagonist in the physical space of the plantation. The film's trailer even tries to entice viewers by alluding to a plot that at first glance appears to be a near exact replica of Butler's seminal work. However, watching the film quickly shows viewers that *Antebellum* is not the clone that it first seems to be. It is like *Kindred*, until it is not. Where the texts diverge is that despite the ostensible premise and plantation setting, *Antebellum*'s protagonist Veronica does not physically travel back in time. Instead, she is kidnapped, renamed Eden, and forced to labor on a plantation that is situated within a twenty-first century Civil War reenactment park.

The key to claustrophobic time and the horror of white supremacy as it is tied to chattel slavery is the creeping feeling that you cannot escape it no matter the extreme lengths you go to. As previously discussed, Harriet Jacobs' ambivalence about her supposed freedom in the north and the precarity of her status as a "free" woman in the aftermath of her daring escape set the stage for twenty-first century fictional depictions of slavery to grapple with questions of

freedom's achievability in a persistently antiblack world. For both Jacobs and the fictional Dana, time nor geographic offer safety from the potential to be pulled back into the grasp of slavery. By placing Veronica in the space of the plantation, *Antebellum* very clearly tries to assert itself as a part of this generic lineage. With the film's theatrical release date sitting at the precipice of what could have been a second Trump presidency, sending Veronica to what *appears* to be the slave past echoes fears of an America that is moving "backward". The timing of the film's release combines with its intention to speak to more supposedly overt forms of racism and the insistence that the United States as a society is at risk of backsliding. However, *Antebellum* does not engage with the very material conditions of existing in "the wake" of slavery, such as police brutality, redlining, environmental racism, etc., but rather attempts to emphasize the risk of what can happen if we "let the racists win" in the polling booth.

Despite *Antebellum*'s attempts to emphasize slavery's overarching legacy in the present, it relegates its impact to a singular location: Robert E. Lee Civil War Reenactment Park. By doing this, the film counteracts all of the critical work that it aims to do. In other words, by minimizing the geographic location in which slavery's harms are enacted and felt, *Antebellum* actually reduces the sensation of claustrophobia that neo-slave narrative horror relies on. Due to the plantation's location, there is indeed a sense of geographical enclosure that wraps around Veronica. However, this sense of entrapment does not extend to the way that Veronica experiences time. The horrific temporality of the neo-slave narrative is the shaped by the feeling that slavery's effects are all encompassing. There is no geographical, physical, or chronological exit route from the conditions of slavery. Veronica is not at risk of being enslaved when she is at home, but only becomes endangered when she travels to the American south, Louisiana specifically, and stays in the "Jefferson Suite" of her hotel. In other words, relics of slavery and

its dangers only seem to become relevant when Veronica enters into the space of a former confederate state and a room named after a president infamous for his abuse of an enslaved black woman. These more rigid boundaries push against the claustrophobic temporality that shapes the horror of neo-slave narratives by suggesting that there is indeed a safe space for Veronica that does exist. The worldbuilding of the film allows Veronica to escape the enclosure of claustrophobic temporality, at least until she ventures away from her home.

The temporality of this film is also not claustrophobic because the supposed "time travel" device (kidnapping) is almost too rational. Isabel Cristina Pinedo writes, "horror throws into question the validity of rationality" (Piñedo 5). With their refusal to embrace a more disorienting relationship to time, Bush and Renz craft an explanation for Veronica's presence on the Denton plantation that "makes sense". They do not "question the validity of rationality" but reinforce it instead. On one hand, this trope of kidnapping calls back to black people being snatched from their families during the antebellum time period, but at the same time it allows the characters to maintain the awareness that they are not *actually* on a working plantation in the nineteenth century. Instead, they are trapped in a place that has taken up slavery as an aesthetic and torture device. This does not negate the violence or terror that takes place within the confines of the reenactment park but does suggest the potential for exit in a way that other neo-slave narratives do not typically have access to. In *Kindred*, Dana knows that slavery comes to a legal end eventually, but the distance she must travel across time and space in order to reach her life in the 1970s is immense. More importantly, when she reaches her home in 1976 California, she is aware that she can be pulled from her space of perceived safety at any time. The first chapter of *Kindred* opens with Dana narrating, "The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember" (Butler 12). Though Dana may not have

been conscious of how she is enveloped in the lives of Rufus Weylin and others on his plantation prior to her bouts of time travel, this passage suggests that she does place herself within a particular lineage of harm caused by slavery and its aftermath. This is not the case for Veronica. Though she sees herself as a revolutionary, Veronica discusses issues of discrimination and "the lack of inclusion" (Bush and Renz, 44:53-45:00) in vague, toothless terms of invisibility rather than pointing to the pervasiveness and violence of antiblackness. She does not mention slavery, or even blackness specifically. Rather, Veronica's "trouble" begins only when she is thrust onto the Denton plantation. The anachronism of plantation slavery in her particular context means that she is not fully immersed in the world of the antebellum plantation. She and the other characters are not only aware that there is relative safety outside of the plantation and people looking for them, but that to reach it they must simply run away. I point this out not to downplay the violence that they face while trapped in the Civil War reenactment park, but rather highlight that unlike Dana, Veronica does not have to traverse time and space for a glimpse of safety. Geographical space is the primary hurdle that she must overcome.

Although the film ultimately refuses to deeply engage with time travel and claustrophobic temporality, it does somewhat attempt to address questions of time and history. When giving a speech at an academic summit, Veronica makes an impassioned speech that vaguely addresses discrimination and intersectionality. She asserts, "They are stuck in the past. We are in the future" (56:35-56:56). This speech, along with the reality of the plantation being a reenactment suggest that this white supremacist legacy is due to certain people's mentality or a desire to be part of an imagined past that is anachronistic. It suggests that this past is out of place because "we" are in the "future". This idea falls ultimately short because antiblackness and the logics created in the past are very much in the present-day. *Antebellum* attempts to grapple with the

violences of slavery without taking into consideration that its twenty-first century audience is living in what Saidiya Hartman refers to as “the afterlife of slavery”. Hartman defines this afterlife as “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment” (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6). In other words, slavery’s effects on black people stretch far beyond the physical location of the plantation and the time period of the nineteenth century. Veronica’s impassioned speech somewhat neglects this reality. By arguing that an unspecified (likely characterized as an American liberal) “we are in the future ”, Veronica pushes an ideology of forward moving progress that suggests white supremacy is a relic of the past and creates a dichotomy of “us” vs. “them” . Rhetorically, the “they” she disparages seem to be separate and actively antagonistic towards black people. In reality, this delineation between groups is non-existent. Racism and other forms of oppression can be overcome through individual acts of resistance by so-called progressive people. However, this contrasts with the present-day United States that black audience members might tend to be familiar with. The “now” Veronica touts as supposedly progressive is not devoid of antiblack violence on neither a structural nor interpersonal level.

While the temporality of the film may not quite be claustrophobic, the physical space of the plantation, which turns out to be located in the middle of a Civil War reenactment park, does contribute to a sense of enclosure. The film opens with a woman’s thwarted attempt to escape the plantation. She is killed because of it and it is implied that this is not her first time trying to break free. The brutality of the physical violence that leads to her death is undeniably horrifying. However, what is just as upsetting is the fact that her efforts are fruitless. Although *Antebellum* does not fully utilize the claustrophobic temporality that characterizes neo-slave narrative horror, it remains a useful text to analyze alongside the others in this chapter in part because it is the

only one that is explicitly named by its creators as a work of horror. Bush and Renz attempt to make their film legible to mainstream horror audiences by including overt references to classic horror films such as *The Shining*, rather than engaging further with the particularities of neo-slave narrative horror. Through its self-naming and lack of engagement with claustrophobic temporality, the film ironically stresses the importance of it as a trope within the genre of neo-slave narrative horror. *Antebellum*'s lack of this altered temporality further emphasizes the effectiveness of the claustrophobia that permeates *Incidents* and *Kindred*. Though *Antebellum* may be somewhat unsuccessful in establishing itself as a strong work within the neo-slave narrative horror genre, especially when compared to the other two works discussed in this chapter, its naming of itself as horror speaks to the resonance of the genre in the twenty first century. Horror gives filmmakers and authors a grammar to emphasize and describe the lingering antiblackness of the present-day world.

Monstrosity and the Neo-slave Narrative

When we think of horror, a villain is often one of the first ideas that comes to mind. Whether a vicious knife-wielding serial killer such as Michael Myers, or a more menacing demonic presence, horror tends to be characterized by the presence of a monster or nonhuman entity. When describing horror as a genre, Noël Carroll asserts, "What appears to demarcate the horror story from mere stories with monsters, such as myths, is the attitude of characters in the story to the monsters they encounter. In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (Carroll 16). Can this rule actually apply to horror fictions about slavery? The very notion of black humanity and freedom is a disruption to the foundations of a world built on white supremacy and antiblackness. In the case of these narratives, the horror primarily stems from a claustrophobic temporality (the continuation of

antiblackness) that traps black people within this status quo of quotidian violence and threatens us with the failure to find reprieve from it. While temporality may be the driving force of horror, it does not necessarily negate the presence of monstrosity in neo-slave narratives either.

What is neo-slave narrative horror's relationship to monstrosity and the monstrous? According to Jack Halberstam, "Monstrosity (and the fear it gives rise to) is historically conditioned rather than a psychological universal" (Halberstam 6). In general, horror is characterized by a monster or a monstrous presence. The monster typically serves as the villain within a text and uses violence to disrupt a sense of normalcy for the protagonists. However, throughout the development of both the horror genre and broader American culture, the monster has been used to signify "the Other" and ascribe monstrousness to black and otherwise marginalized people. Equating blackness with monstrosity is not unique to the twenty-first century, but rather can be traced back to early Enlightenment ideals in order to justify European colonialism and consolidations of power. In "Monstrosity, Colonialism, and the Racial State" Sylvester Johnson asserts, "Racial monstrosity was an integral feature of the colonial relation of power. It was situated in the imperial gaze of writers in antiquity, and it thrived as an analytical framework as Europe's Atlantic empires produced colonial encounters and settler polities in Africa and the Americas" (Johnson189). Blackness as monstrosity exists not only within the realm of literature and film, but rather is built into the very foundation of the United States. Blackness as monstrosity is constructed not only through cultural forms such as horror and literature, but also serves to uphold the white supremacist, settler-colonial power structure of the United States. Black audiences and authors do not leave this socio-historical context behind when they encounter a horror text. When black people see themselves as monstrous, it is not only within the context of literary/filmic genre of horror, but also within the larger social, historical

and political construction of the country as a whole. These two notions of monstrosity are inextricable, as the monstrous figure of the Other, racialized as black, within gothic and horror literature, reinforces the very nature of this power dynamic.

The construction of blackness as monstrous has been solidified through popular culture and more specifically, through depictions of black people in film. According to Robin Means Coleman, “Blackness was effectively transmogrified, with Blacks becoming one of the most loathsome and feared of all creatures” (Coleman 22). Although in this particular instance Coleman is discussing how blackness starts to connote monstrosity during the rise of film, and more specifically as a result of *The Birth of a Nation*, this statement can also be applied to how blackness is portrayed in mainstream popular culture more generally. Even outside of the horror genre, blackness is conflated with monstrosity. This construction of blackness as monstrosity facilitates the quotidian violence of the slavery and its afterlives. Who or what is the monstrosity of a neo-slave narrative horror tale if audiences and readers, black and non-black alike, are aware that to be black is to be monstrous?

Black authors and their characters use the neo-slave horror genre to embrace monstrosity in order to directly combat white supremacist violence. Sylvia Wynter frames the problem of various axes of oppression as one of genre, “It is the issue of the genre of ‘Man’ that causes all of the ‘*-isms’* (Thomas 24). More specifically, she expands on this idea within “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” arguing that it is the conflation of colonial Man (white, rational, cisheterosexual, etc.) with human that is responsible for multiple forms of oppression and ultimately calls for its destruction. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson builds upon this relationship between the human and Man, arguing that “[I]n order to *become* human without qualification, you must already *be* Man in its idealized form, yet Man, understood

simultaneously as an achievement and bio-ontology, implies whiteness and specifically nonblackness" (Jackson 33). There are numerous genres and ways of being human, but Man's overdetermination is responsible for the shaping of the human as we know and understand it. I am not necessarily valorizing or redeeming the human as a category in and of itself here. Instead, I am following Wynter's logic that there are already existing genres of human and therefore black people always already exist within one or multiple of these genres. However, because of how Man has come to be simultaneously what appears to be synonymous with humanness as a construction and therefore used to construct blackness as monstrous, I am in this chapter not necessarily arguing for the humanization of black characters. In fact, I am doing the opposite. In neo-slave narrative horror monstrosity is an alternative form, or genre, of being or the human. For ease of explanation, I will only refer to it as a genre of being for now. This would reintroduce another form of genre while also getting at the ways that black people are not fully human, horror is embracing the *being something else.* This is not to say that the black people and characters within the works explored in this chapter fully acknowledge themselves as such, but rather in their attempts to get closer access to freedom or bodily autonomy, they are forced to fully embody some of the characteristics that would usually be attributed to monstrosity (outside of those that are already incidental to or ascribed to blackness itself). In the context of this chapter, monstrosity is not necessarily villainous, but rather merely antagonistic to whiteness and white supremacy, as it seems that the work of some of the authors, neo-slave narrative creators in particular, embrace monstrosity in order to combat the evils of white supremacy head on. I do not desire to "undo" or refuse to claim monstrosity for black people, as it turns out to be a particularly useful concept for the context of horror.

When examining works of neo-slave narrative horror it might be easy to assume that the white slave owners would be considered the "monsters" of the narratives. However, it is not so simple as naming the entity that is the antagonist as the monster. More specifically, in these narratives, monstrosity is *not* synonymous with insidiousness or oppressive forces. Whiteness is the villain of these narratives, but it is not the monster. Rufus Weylin of *Kindred* is a helpful example to consider when looking at how white characters function within neo-slave narrative horror. Through his status as slaveholder, Rufus is obviously violent. He is also Dana's ancestor and family member who she is driven to protect for multiple reasons. Despite all of this, Rufus is not meant to be understood as monstrous. Rather, the root of his villainy is his white humanity, his ability to be fully encompassed by the genre of Man. White humanity is what is supposedly "rational" and "enlightened" and simultaneously causes Rufus to treat both Dana and Alice as his property despite all of his claims to care for them. This is first made visually evident when a jealous Rufus decides to sell Sam after he sees him talking to Dana. As Dana attempts to explain herself she is abruptly interrupted by Rufus slapping her across the face (Duffy and Jennings 208.3). Rufus' hand swings across his body, making contact with Dana's face as a bright, yellow starburst fills the space between them. This burst emphasizes the sheer force with which Rufus strikes Dana. Until this point, he has not laid a hand on her. Both the slap itself combined with the circumstances leading up to it emphasize the ever-present potential for violence in Rufus and Dana's relationship. It is not just that Rufus hits Dana, but that he also sells Sam simply because he witnesses a conversation between the two of them. In doing so, Rufus reinforces that he has the power to not only inflict physical violence upon Dana's body, but that he also can sell her and the people she cares about on a whim. After she is slapped, an angry Dana thinks, "He'd crossed a line. Broken an agreement" (209). The supposed agreement/contract that previously

protected Dana is voided by this action. More crucially, this agreement was never guaranteed to be honored by Rufus in the first place. His status as a white man and slaveholder and Dana's status as slave hinders them from entering into a contract that is equitable. Rufus may rely on Dana to keep him alive, but ultimately his whiteness dictates that she is disposable. The supposedly monstrous black people are in a different genre of human than Rufus and his father. White supremacy is insidious because his feelings of affection for individual black people ultimately do not matter. Through the graphics we can see Rufus' emotions that are not always evident in written text, but these emotions render his acts of violence even more upsetting for the reader because we see that white sympathy is useless. Feelings of supposed identification with black people and ostensible care for them ultimately cannot undo the logics of white supremacist and antiblack violence.

Figure 3: Rufus slaps Dana and she stares up at him in rage. *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* pg. 208.

While the moment when Rufus slaps Dana is the first instance of him inflicting physical harm upon Dana, it alludes to the more intense violence to come. One of the most egregious instances of this sort of violence occurs in *Kindred* when Rufus attempts to sexually assault Dana after Alice's death (232.5-6). The final two panels on the page depict half of Dana's face aligned with the opposite half of Rufus'. Each half of their faces take up the entirety of their respective panels that sit adjacent to each other on the page. A single tear drops from Dana's eye as she steels herself to kill Rufus in self-defense. Meanwhile, Rufus' facial expression is one of determination and anger. This brief moment of stillness before their final moment of combat alludes to a slight sense of parallelism between the two relatives. Rufus epitomizes the brutality of white manhood. Attempting to rape Dana ruptures any semblance of familiarity and kinship between the two. At the same time, in deciding that she must kill Rufus, Dana leans into the monstrousness that is already ascribed onto her. Throughout the novel, Dana has been hesitant to

inflict pain upon other people. During her first trip to the past, the mere thought of attempting to gauge out the patroller's eyes makes Dana nervous. However, in this final scene she does not hesitate. Rufus' actions drive her to monstrosity because she has no other choice. Because they are tethered to one another and Rufus is the cause of her time travel, Dana has no clue what the consequences of her actions will be. Derrida asserts that "the future is necessarily monstrous" due to its unknowability (Levina and Bui 6). With the act of stabbing her ancestor Dana not only embraces an act of violence, but also embraces the unpredictability of her fate. She does not know if killing Rufus will destroy her as well, but it is a risk that she must take.

Figure 4: A tear falls from Dana's face as she faces Rufus for the last time. *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* pg. 232.

In addition to the presence of a white villain, neo-slave narrative horror more importantly relies on black monstrosity. By this I mean that instead of attempting to humanize themselves, protagonists of these narratives take on monstrous characteristics to confront those who antagonize them. This is not to say that the depictions of characters such as Dana and Veronica are completely devoid of markers such as literacy and classed hobbies that might at the surface appear to place them closer to the genre of human, but ultimately it is their monstrosity that saves

them. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson warns against the dangers of attempts at humanizing Black people, for "When humanization is thought to be synonymous with black freedom, or even a means to freedom, one risks minimizing or extending the violence of 'universal humanity" (Jackson 29). The overdetermination of Man in the genre of human is not only inaccessible to black people, but it is actively violent. Therefore, it is not a category worth striving for. Horror films show this through their depictions of the "ideal" human, or Man and how treacherous white humanity is to black people. Jackson also argues that "[h]umanization is not an antidote to slavery's violence; rather, slavery is a technology for producing a *kind* of human" (Jackson 46). In other words, not only is humanization impossible, it cannot alleviate the conditions caused by slavery. The human produced by slavery is monstrous. Horror is the technology that emphasizes this monstrous genre of human**.** Fighting for freedom by working to gain proximity to humanness is futile. If black people are always produced as monsters, then perhaps the potential to fight for a way "out" lies in utilizing that monstrosity.

Unlike *Kindred*, *Antebellum* does not try to paint its white antagonists as villains in how they are implicated within a larger system and logic of white supremacy. Instead, it feebly attempts to transpose the figure of the monster onto twenty-first century white men cosplaying as slaveowners and confederate soldiers in their free time. The plantation is also occupied by a white woman who in her role as mistress of the plantation, facilitates the kidnappings of Veronica and others. The participants simultaneously hate black people and enjoy causing them physical harm. At the same time, they involve themselves in a misconceived attempt at recreating an imagined past. Part of what makes Rufus Weylin so horrifying is his humanity: the fact that he can commit horrendous acts to people he loves because they are black and therefore he cannot understand them as human. Additionally, the economic implications of slavery shape

Rufus' interactions with the enslaved people on the plantation as well. Through Dana's repeated pleas to Rufus asking him not to sell his offspring emphasizes that a key part of the violence of slavery is its it to economics and capital. The confederate reenactors of *Antebellum* are not concerned with profiting from the labor that takes place on the Denton plantation. While Veronica and those who are held captive alongside her are forced to pick cotton daily, the film does not suggest that those running the plantation reap any sort of economic benefit. Rather, the violence of forced labor and the brutal whippings that come as a consequence to perceived disobedience are the point. The costumed confederate reenactors use slavery as an aesthetic and torture device to punish those that they "hate". By boiling down underlying tenets of white supremacy to questions of affect, Bush and Renz unintentionally suggest that its perpetrators are few and far between. In other words, *Antebellum* attempts to depict its villains as "monsters" by characterizing them as extremists who harbor violent animosity towards black people. *Antebellum* depicts the white people who run the plantation as anomalies of sorts. The film tries to make the antagonists of the film "monstrous" by rendering them exceptions from the norm and somewhat bizarre, but in actuality it is their humanness/mundanity that makes them dangerous.

The reenactors in the film greatly contrast with how white supremacy and antiblackness operate in everyday life. They are not out of place and are not reenacted by supposedly weird, out of place "crazy" people but instead permeate the everyday. These people are portrayed as an anomaly as opposed to the norm. White supremacy is distilled to this particular location among a particular type of people that are somewhat ashamed to enact it, or at least try to keep it secret (hence they are not allowed to use real names or cell phones on the premises). By removing an altered temporality, *Antebellum* relies more on logic than would usually be necessary in a neo-

slave narrative horror. The reintroduction of logic or at least a more "rational" explanation for the events that take place within the plot removes the suspension of disbelief and temporal foundation of the horror. With the removal of claustrophobic temporality, all that is left to help characterize the film as horror is the bodily violence committed at the hands of the villain. Instead, the film primarily deploys the function of whiteness as the source of fear. Violence against black people and their bodies is quotidian. The prospect of this violence *being inescapable* is what makes it horrifying. Instead of toying with that idea, this film attempts to make corporeal violence itself the crux of the horror. In regards to traditional horror tropes, Carroll argues**,** "The monsters of horror, however, breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive human characters in the story. That is, in examples of horror, it would appear that the monster is an extraordinary character in our ordinary world. . ." (Carroll 16). However, this is not necessarily the case for s neo-slave narratives. The supposed monsters, or in the case of *Kindred* and *Antebellum* the villains are not aberrations from the existing social order. Rather, characters such as Rufus Weylin and Senator Denton are terrifying precisely *because* they are allowed to enact egregious violence against black people under the logics of antiblackness and white supremacy. While *Antebellum* may not fully encapsulate the mechanics of how white supremacy and antiblackness are enacted by those in power, it still inflicts some fear because of the context in which it was released.

Towards the end of the film, one of the characters does try to speak to the insidious pervasiveness of white supremacy. After an altercation where Veronica mortally wounds him and drags his limp body into the plantation's crematorium, Senator Denton remarks, "It doesn't end here. We're nowhere and everywhere" (Bush, Renz 1:31:37). While on one hand this statement aligns with how we understand white supremacy to operate in the afterlife of slavery, it

also contradicts the very framing of the film. Throughout the latter half of the film there are concerted efforts by the filmmakers to drop in obvious references to the hatred of black people and the rise of white supremacy. However, this phrase along with the entire premise of the film grossly misunderstands and misinterprets what white supremacy is by relegating it to the actions of a few self-described white supremacists. While "everywhere and nowhere" implies that white supremacist ideas are far-reaching, the way that it is characterized in the film relegates it to a small group of extremists. Ostensibly, audiences are frightened not because chattel slavery built the foundation of the United States and has consequences that linger to this day, but because we are not sure where the "real" white supremacists are located. In an interview prior to the film's release, Janelle Monae, the actor portraying Veronica, attempts to frame *Antebellum*'s contribution to present-day conversations about race. They say, "'I hope [it shows] people who don't get why Black lives matter, who have benefitted from these systems that have not been built for Black lives, [to] stop perpetuating the delusions of white supremacy globally" (Jones, "Entertainment Weekly"). This notion of white supremacy being a "delusion" is particularly *something* when considering both the contents of the film and the society it attempts to critique. More specifically, it further suggests that white supremacy is a deviation from the norm. Delusion also alludes to mental illness. White supremacy, however, is neither a sign of mental illness nor mere feelings of hatred towards black people. It is the foundation of the world as we know it.

Despite Jackson's warnings about the dangers of humanization, *Antebellum* goes out of its way to try to redeem black humanity through the deployment of particular signifiers, such as class and education level in the protagonist Veronica. Veronica has a doctoral degree and is centered as the face of revolution and sole liberator. Photographs hanging in her house depict her

as an equestrian, a hobby typically taken up by the wealthy. As she makes her escape from the plantation, Veronica dons a Union jacket. By putting on the trappings of the opposition to the Confederacy, Veronica not so subtly suggests that the Union and the geographical north are synonymous with black freedom. By wearing the costume of the anti-slavery military force Veronica attempts to place herself in closer proximity to humanness. However, Harriet Jacobs has already shown us that proximity to the Union and a geographical location in the north does not guarantee freedom. It is not her appeals to join the category of human that save Veronica's life. Rather, it is her descent into monstrosity that ultimately helps her to escape the bounds of the Denton plantation.

Veronica's monstrosity comes into relief when she faces off with Elizabeth, the white woman who facilitates her capture. During her time on the plantation, Denton and the other men enact the most consistent physical and sexual abuse towards Veronica. However, by situating Elizabeth as the final obstacle between Veronica and a life away from the plantation, Bush and Renz establish this white woman as the primary villain of the film. Elizabeth's role as primary antagonist is not necessarily specifically due to the violent ways in which white womanhood weaponizes whiteness to oppress black women, nor the brutality of mistresses of plantations. Rather, Elizabeth works against Veronica's understanding of womanhood in the twenty-first century United States. When Veronica finally gains the upper hand during their moment of combat she repeatedly punches Elizabeth in the face and gutturally screams, "What kind of woman are you?" (Bush and Renz 1:36:00). On one hand Veronica is speaking to the kind of liberal feminism that she espouses throughout the film. How dare Elizabeth, the white woman who sets up her kidnapping, betray a fellow woman in such a horrific way? What Veronica fails to understand is that she and Elizabeth do not actually fall into the same genre of human, nor

womanhood. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman asks that we "remain vigilant that 'all women do not have the same gender?'" (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 99). Elizabeth's acts of violence against Veronica do not deviate from the expectations of womanhood, but rather fulfills them. In addition to verbalizing Veronica's personal feelings of betrayal, her question echoes the oft-repeated refrain after the 2016 presidential election: that 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump. While Veronica feels angry at all of the ways that she has been violated while within the boundaries of the plantation, she is most irate at what she sees as being betrayed by another woman. She does not ask Denton and or the other men about themselves or their motivations. She does not care. Veronica sees herself as more similar to this white woman, but ultimately the genres of human to which they belong render them more different than she initially believes. Just as the overdetermination of Man in the category of human pushes Veronica into the realm of monster, the conflation of woman with white, middle-class women renders Veronica's black womanhood monstrous. Though she may ask the question "what kind of woman are you?" to Elizabeth, the interaction between the women in this scene more so emphasizes what kind of human/being Veronica is.

The altercation between the two women reaches its climax when Veronica ultimately kills her. Though Veronica has already committed a gruesome act of murder by burning Senator Denton and one of the overseers in the crematorium by the time she encounters Elizabeth, it is the depiction of the white woman's brutal death that emphasizes Veronica's monstrosity. After gaining the upper hand in the altercation, Veronica places a rope around Elizabeth's neck. She then attaches this rope to the saddle of her horse and drags Elizabeth on the ground behind her until she hits her head on a statue of Robert E. Lee (heavy-handedness of the confederacy reference aside), breaking her neck and killing her (Bush and Renz 1:38:00). Though this is not

the first moment where Veronica is forced to kill someone, it is the most emblematic of her (unconsciously) embracing monstrosity. This depiction of on-screen violence towards a white woman seems to speak directly back to the film that Robin Means Coleman argues cemented black monstrosity in the popular cinematic imagination: *Birth of a Nation*. While *Birth of a Nation* speaks directly about the supposed threat of sexual assault against white women enacted by black men, it also shapes how we see (or don't see) black people enact violence against white women on film. Even Jordan Peele's critically acclaimed 2017 horror film *Get Out* shies away from depicting its protagonist, Chris, killing the white woman villains on-screen[1]. In other words, because white women are seen as the epitome of innocence and virtue, black people committing violence against them should not be depicted on film, as it runs the risk of reinforcing black monstrosity. *Antebellum* does not hesitate to show its audience that Veronica must resort to violence in order to escape. Prior to her kidnapping, Veronica concludes her speech at the conference by saying, "liberation over assimilation" (56:56). This phrase alludes to the violent monstrosity that Veronica comes to embody by the end of the film. Despite the markers of class and education that at first glance look to be attempts to assimilate her into the genre of human for the sake of survival, they are not what save Veronica. Her only hope for "liberation" is her monstrosity. While she is not able to release herself from the grip of white supremacy as a whole, killing her captors is what frees Veronica from the grasp of the plantation.

Both *Antebellum* and *Kindred* conclude with their protagonists utilizing their monstrosity in order to gain some semblance of distance from the plantation. However, Veronica and Dana's ability to escape the physical confines of the plantation does not equate to freedom from the

[1] In her piece, "What Becky Gotta Do to Get Murked?", Kinitra Brooks analyzes Peele's decision to obscure violence committed against the white women characters at the hands of Chris.

harms of white supremacy and antiblackness. These works construct an alternative, more transitional sense of self. Unlike the slave narrative/gothic that appeals to rationality, reason, and citizenship in the hopes of being emancipated human beings, the neo-slave narrative horror crafts personas that use violence and manipulation to their advantage. The conditions of slavery and the plantation render them this way. Neo-slave narrative horror is the grammar that helps argue against the futility of humanization. Becoming human is no longer the point. The women depicted in these narratives were never human to begin with, but after the extent of their monstrosity is fully expressed, they are left both physically and mentally altered. Dana loses her arm while Veronica's backside is forever branded with Denton's initials. These women cannot return to being who they were prior to slavery. Their violent actions against their captors do not single handedly bring down the white supremacist, antiblack episteme of the world. Instead, they point to the creative potential that this sort of monstrous destruction brings. Neo-slave narrative horror does not necessarily define a "new" kind of self. Instead, it advocates for the utility of a black monstrosity that already exists. Black subjectivity that is free from the constraints of antiblackness cannot be imagined without first destroying the structures of the world as we know it.

Conclusion

Why return to the scene of the plantation? Neo-slave narrative horror emphasizes that it is nearly impossible to fully break away from the oppression that it facilitates. By returning to the scene where black monstrosity and antiblackness are facilitated and produced, neo-slave narrative horror charts a path towards its destruction**.** The site of production is also the setting of annihilation. As mentioned in the epigraph, Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas argue that the social order must change in order to rid the world of antiblackness. However, these narratives

highlight just how intertwined white supremacy and antiblackness are in shaping the world and temporality that we inhabit. While neither *Kindred* nor *Antebellum* dictate the specifics of what a world devoid of antiblackness or what a new articulation of black being and selfhood could look like, they do emphasize the urgency of our current episteme's destruction. Neo-slave narrative horror stresses the necessity of this destruction in order to suggest the potential of breaking out of this violent, claustrophobic time-space. Alternative forms of black subjectivity cannot exist untethered from antiblackness and white supremacy's influences unless both structures come to an end.

Although the protagonists of these texts enact their monstrosity primarily on an individual rather than a collective or systemic level, they do point to the potential for creating a way out. They embrace their most violent, monstrous selves in order to destroy the antiblack obstacles in front of them to make their way off of the plantation. Jacques Derrida asserts that "[T]he future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared, you see, is heralded by species of monsters. A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable and programmable tomorrow" (Levina and Bui 6). Between *Kindred* and *Antebellum*, we as readers bear witness to the potential that embracing monstrosity creates. If traditional slave narratives aim to put forth an articulation of the self that is human, man, and citizen, then neo-slave narrative horror accepts that black people can never be any of those things. In this white supremacist and antiblack world, black people cannot be anything except monsters. The trip back to the plantation not only emphasizes this enclosure within the category of monster, but also the stakes of the destruction. The monsters that will "herald" the future are black people using their monstrosity to their advantage.

Futurity sits outside of the ever-tightening loop of claustrophobic temporality. Neo-slave narrative horror amplifies the stakes of this altered temporality and points us towards futurity. We don't know what that future looks like, but the genre sets up the ability to create an exit route. It is less about creation and more about breaking out of the hold of claustrophobic temporality. Neo-slave narrative horror suggests that embracing and utilizing monstrosity will get us closer to an escape and allow for the possibility of imagining otherwise.

Chapter Two: Genres of Womanhood

Gender has operated as a critical organizing force both during antebellum slavery and in its afterlife. Historian Jennifer Morgan asserts that "Gender functioned as a set of power relationships through which early slave owning settlers and those they enslaved defined, understood, and adjusted the confines of racial slavery" (Morgan 7). At the same time, enslaved people's relationship to western gender categories is more complicated than the rigid binary of man/woman. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman asserts that "all women do not have the same gender" and that for enslaved women in particular, there is a "divergent production of the category of woman" (Hartman 99). It is this so-called divergent production of and differences among the gender(s) of enslaved women portrayed in 21st century neo-slave narratives that shapes the logics of this chapter. It is not just that the kinds of black womanhood produced by slavery are "divergent", or "different" from the category of idealized white womanhood, but that they are what Hortense Spillers refers to as "ungendered". According to Spillers, "this materialized scene of unprotected female flesh ungendered offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations" (Spillers 68). While being cast out of restrictive western understandings and formulations of womanhood/gender undeniably renders the enslaved women of these narratives vulnerable to unique forms of violence (and is a kind of violence in and of itself), it also opens up space for imagining black being outside of a white supremacist and antiblack episteme. C. Riley Snorton states that "The ungendering of blackness then, opens onto a way of thinking about black gender as an infinite set of proliferative, constantly revisable reiterations figured 'outside' of gender's established and establishing symbolic order" (Snorton 74). The black women portrayed in these novels are excluded from white expectations and categories of gender along with being expelled

from the category of human entirely. However, it is this expulsion that facilitates the occasion to reconsider and redefine what gender can mean and how it might be used. These characters are not using gender merely as an identity marker but utilize alternative forms and conceptualizations of gender to reorient their relationships to power and the plantation. If western conceptions of gender are not only antiblack but reify a restrictive white supremacist and patriarchal system of power, then embodying and imagining alternative ways of doing gender is necessary.

Femme/Femininity

It is nearly impossible to consider constructions of womanhood without taking the notion of femininity into account. Black women's being cast out of the overall category of woman due to their inability (and unwillingness) to adhere to the white ideals of femininity that define it prompts us to consider another form of identity: femme. Ashley Coleman Taylor argues that "Femme approaches femininity, encompasses it, and then pushes against its boundaries– especially those informed by Eurocentric ideals of 'woman'" and "[F]emme provides a counternarrative for 'femininity,' rejecting cis-heteronormative beauty and body ideals with roots in Eurocentricity" (Coleman Taylor 90 and 92). According to Tavia Nyong'o, "In order to make the speech act 'woman' coherent, a set of conventions and expectations must be imposed and enforced. Paradoxically, gender's status as citation also opens out the potential for the gender nonconforming to disrupt those expectations by refusing to 'do' their gender correctly" (Nyong'o 163). In the case of enslaved black women, it is not just a matter of "refusing" to do gender "correctly" but rather that it is virtually impossible for them to perform gender in a way that will fully incorporate them into womanhood. Their blackness always places them outside of it. Meanwhile, Lauren Berlant asserts that "femininity is a genre" (Berlant 3). For Berlant, genre

is “an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme” (4). In this chapter, I will be thinking with femininity not solely as an aesthetic structure of expectation, but one related to power as well. The characters depicted within these novels all enact their gender, femininity (and therefore relationship to femme) differently but what they have in common is that they are understood as femme by both themselves and others to varying extents.

In its defiance of white ideals of femininity, femme offers the space for enslaved black women to imagine and embody alternative conceptions of their gender along with their definitions of freedom. The texts explored in this chapter use language of woman/womanhood, but in actuality they are theorizing and thinking within the realm of femme. I refer to this chapter as “Genres of Womanhood” not as an attempt to redeem or fit these characters into the category of woman (because doing so is impossible), but to utilize the terms that these characters use to describe themselves and their fraught relationship to more rigid gender categories.

Gender/Genre

Theorist Sylvia Wynter points to etymological link between the terms “genre” and “gender”, saying, “. . .I coined the word ‘genre,’ or I adapted it, because ‘genre’ and ‘gender’ come from the same root. They mean ‘kind,’ one of the many meanings is ‘kind’” (Thomas and Wynter 23). She expands upon this idea in conversation with Katherine McKittrick in *On Being Human as Praxis*, where she surmises that “’gender’ is an indispensable function of our enacting our ‘genres’ of being human” (McKittrick 74). Wynter is not alone in thinking through gender and genre as related terms. In “The Empire Strikes Back: A Transsexual Manifesto”, Sandy Stone

posits that we should consider transness “not as a class or as a problematic ‘third gender,’ but rather as a *genre*– a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored” (Stone 165). For the novels I examine in this chapter, *The Book of Night Women* and *The Good Lord Bird,* gender nor genre are systems or categories that successfully enclose the characters within them but instead are vehicles of imaginative potential.

In *Black Trans Feminism*, Marquis Bey states that “Enslaved black life utilized the fissures in normative gender as a means of escape, which is to say that black life and blackness enable their freedom –their ability to live– precisely through fissured gender” (Bey 20). It is within these fissures of normative (white) gender where these alternative genres of black gender, femme, and womanhood lie. Twenty-first century neo-slave narratives are concerned with charting escape and rebellion through various iterations of alternative womanhood. Just as womanhood itself has multiple genres, the types of escape and understandings of freedom also vary. Instead of working towards a kind of static/stable definition of “freedom” these texts illustrate that it means something different to each woman as well.

The Sentimental Novel

While the previous chapter establishes *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as a text that merges the gothic with the slave narrative, its genre crossing is not limited to these two forms. Rather, Jacobs’ narrative takes on the characteristics and tropes of the sentimental novel to make itself (as a work of literature) and her plight legible to her abolitionist readership. The final paragraph of the text declares, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” (Jacobs 224). With this statement, Jacobs acknowledges her narrative’s deviation from the marriage plot that so often characterizes sentimental novels. In saying that her story concludes

"not in the usual way", Jacob recognizes her work as situated within (or at least adjacent to) a broader literary tradition of sentimentality. Generally associated with appealing to a white, middle-class woman readership, the sentimental novel is characterized by tropes such as: attempts to evoke sympathy from the reader, having a certain sense of propriety or "politeness", appeals to Christian morality and concealment/confinement. With the sentimental novel being largely characterized as women's literature, and women authors such as Harriet Jacobs and Hannah Crafts incorporating the form into their narratives, it is necessary to keep in consideration throughout this chapter's exploration of the interaction between genre and gender. However, the form of the sentimental novel itself does not appear much in the 21st century. Neo-slave narratives meld with a myriad of genres to varying extents, but the sentimental novel is not one of them. The appeal to propriety and respectability that characterizes sentimentalism and previously functioned as an attempt to secure freedom have shown to be insufficient to those living in a post-Emancipation society. In other words, the sentimental novel puts forth a conceptualization of freedom that is tethered to white supremacist and patriarchal ideals that cannot account for the capaciousness of black womanhood's various genres.

This chapter will take on a slightly different format than the first. Rather than beginning with a close reading of a 19th century slave narrative and then moving to the contemporary texts, I will instead read Hannah Crafts' *The Bondwoman's Narrative* alongside Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* and James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*. Though this may seem like a subtle shift, it allows for avoiding a kind of teleological explanation of the present-day move away from the sentimental. More specifically, reading Crafts alongside these contemporary works helps us to better understand how black womanhood/femme cannot be enclosed by the sentimental, even when the author attempts to meet the literary genre's criteria.

At first glance, it might seem strange to include the graphically violent *The Book of Night Women* with the humorous *The Good Lord Bird*. However, these texts are not as disparate as they initially appear. In *The Book of Night Women*, characters such as the johnny-jumpers show the dangers of adhering to hegemonic, specifically white supremacist and antiblack, constructions of gender because they ultimately continue to perpetuate the systems of violence and exploitation that are already in place. *The Good Lord Bird* puts forth a similar criticism of gender, but instead renders the entire structure a farce. Satire is not entirely separate from the anti-sentimentalism of *The Book of Night Women*. If anything, they might be considered two adjacent genres, as they both push against the respectability rules that dictate sentimentalism.

The Anti-Sentimental Novel

What I refer to as the anti-sentimental novel complicates the notion of freedom by demonstrating to readers that its meaning is not fixed. Freedom alludes to leaving the brutality of the plantation behind, but what that actually entails differs for each character. In "Poor Eliza", Laurent Berlant asserts that "'Women's texts' are gendering machines" (Berlant 636). If the sentimental novel is understood as a kind of technology that creates gender, we might understand the anti-sentimental novel as a technology that does the opposite. More specifically, as an anti-sentimental text, *The Book of Night Women* demonstrates the "fissures of normative gender" (Bey 20). Black womanhood is not necessarily created by the text itself. Instead, we can see that black womanhood is constantly being reevaluated and renegotiated. Through its relationship to violence, sex and unlikeable characters, anti-sentimentalism breaks down and defies the hegemonic gender norms that the sentimental novel intended to reinforce.

The sentimental slave narrative intended to invoke feelings of sympathy in its audience. Moral and respectable characters were deemed worthy of both sympathy and freedom as they

faced the brutality of the peculiar institution. As an anti-sentimental novel, *The Book of Night Women* has different affective concerns than the sentimental. While the sentimental novel aims to provoke sympathy, the anti-sentimental novel prompts feelings of frustration, shock, or annoyance. The neo-slave narrative does not have to be legible to a Christian audience both because of a kind of value shift in addition to the existence of the historiography of slavery. Readers do not necessarily have to be convinced of the existence of slavery's violence nor the "worthiness" of enslaved characters.

Additionally, the sentimental novel restricts both how characters can behave and what can be explicitly said or depicted. *The Book of Night Women* directly opposes that in its numerous detailed, graphic depictions of both sex and violence. It is also apathetic towards morality and propriety in general. Rules of what is supposedly proper behavior set the limits for the sentimental while the anti-sentimental throws all of this away. The 21st century is not so concerned with setting standards for behavior in relation to freedom. Instead, this genre of the anti-sentimental seems to emphasize the various possibilities for how freedom can be both achieved and defined in the afterlives of slavery.

The Book of Night Women

The 21st century necessitates alternative ways of understanding and reading black genders and womanhood in a world that is sustained by antiblackness. Patrice D. Douglass asserts that "Black female gender, which is always undone, unrealized, and violated, is central to slavery and its afterlife" (Douglass 108). Living in the afterlife of slavery requires us to also pay attention to how gender functions both as a white supremacist and antiblack tool as well as a technology of potential liberation. How can gender help plot escape routes? What do these neo-slave narrative texts show us about the relationships between gender, escape and freedom? If we

consider the sentimental novel as a technology for constructing and thinking through gender in the 19th century, then the 21st century neo-slave narrative is gendering technology in a different kind of way. More specifically, *The Book of Night Women* signals a move away from sentimentalism's desire to appeal to Christian ideals of morality and respectability. This is a novel that cares about morality only to the extent that it demonstrates the institution of slavery itself is cruel and therefore renders the characters cruel as a result. In *Humane Insight*, Courtney R. Baker asserts that "[The] moralist mobilizing of pain and suffering is paramount in the aesthetic of sentimentalism" (Baker 4). In other words, while violence characterizes the very nature of the conditions of slavery itself, a sentimental novel like *The Bondwoman's Narrative* traffics in appeals to Christian morality. As a 21st century neo-slave narrative, *The Book of Night Women* moves away from the moralism of the sentimental but does not shy away from depictions of violence and suffering. Rather, this novel might be considered the antithesis of a sentimental novel. It shows not only the violence inflicted on the protagonist and primary characters, but also the acts of brutality that she is willing to enact upon others. It makes the case for freedom regardless of morals and respectability.

Marlon James' 2009 novel *The Book of Night Women* grapples with the ways in which black enslaved women perform, define, and experience their womanhood on the fictional Jamaican plantation of the Montpelier Estate. More specifically, protagonist Lilith and her counterparts not only embody various genres of womanhood but use them to shape their relationships to revolution. The genres of womanhood that Lilith, Homer, and the other Night Women inhabit are not static or stable categories. Rather, the women move across, between, and within genres. At times, they occupy more than one simultaneously. For James' text, what tends

to signal a shift in genre category is not necessarily merely biology or an act of self-identification, but violence.

Lilith exemplifies just how fluid the separations between various types of womanhood are as the genres to which she belongs shift throughout the novel. When readers first encounter her, she is referred to as a girl. At the start of the narrative, this seems to be because of her young age. She is described as "That girl. People recall when she was still a little pickney on the Montpelier Estate, them few years when a nigger not black, playing rounders with boys" (James 4). This early description of Lilith suggests that her girlhood here is characterized by youth. The word "pickney" places an emphasis on her status as a child, while James' differentiation between the terms "nigger" and "black" implies a kind of ominous growing up to come later in time. This phrasing indicates that while Lilith and the other enslaved children on the plantation may always be "nigger", "black" is something that they must *become*, likely with time, experience, and the labor they are forced to do on the estate. Being black is becoming fully indoctrinated to the ways and the violences of the plantation. She plays "rounders with the boys" so she is still too young for there to be the social (and some labor) divisions across men/women gender binary lines yet. This introduction to Lilith's girlishness is linked to a (brief) slave childhood. However, her movement through the genre of girl is not necessarily linked to a kind of biological or chronological development. In other words, Lilith's progression in age over the course of the novel does not mean that she automatically moves from the genre of girl to woman in a way that corresponds to a kind of linear, chronological move "forward". In *Black Age,* Habiba Ibrahim argues that "What we think of as 'age,' the life stages of lifespans, changes over historical time, is socially mutable and contains its own set of categorical differences along the lines of class, gender, and sexuality" (Ibrahim 5). Lilith's shift from girl to woman is not permanent.

Throughout the novel she oscillates between called a woman and a girl, no matter how old she is at the time.

Lilith first enters her genre of woman (as opposed to girl) when she defends herself from a johnny-jumper, a slave dispatched to oversee the labor of others in the fields. When he first approaches her, Lilith "try to think like a woman" and asks him "W. . .what you from little girl?" (James 15). This initial tactic of invoking her youth to defend herself from sexual assault does not sway the johnny-jumper. More specifically, her question demonstrates just how untethered black girlhood is from the innocence that generally tends to be associated with childhood. Ibrahim reminds us that "a slave girl is not actually a 'girl' in the socially conventional sense of that category" (Ibrahim 27). Pointing out that she is a "little girl" only emphasizes Lilith's limited autonomy over her own body as the johnny-jumper responds that girls younger than her have birthed babies. Girlhood is not innocent here. It is marked by violation. Lilith tries to "think like a woman" by bringing up her status as a girl, but it is futile. Instead of by strategy, her womanhood is ushered in by violence. Not only by experiencing it, but even more so by a willingness to inflict it. When Lilith decides to fight the johnny-jumper that is "the first time she feel the darkness. True darkness and true womanness that make man scream" (James 17). For Lilith, womanhood is something that she must "feel" in order to successfully embody. This is not to say that her genre of womanhood is completely devoid of intellect or strategy, but it seems that when she tries to become what she "thinks" a woman should be, she reverts back into the mode of a girl. Girlhood is not a bad thing, but James' narrative asserts that it leaves Lilith somewhat defenseless. When she feels the so-called darkness, she uses her womanhood as a weapon. The physical and sexual violence she faces can only hope to be subdued with more violence. Lilith is the first character to invoke the term "womanness". This is the primary term

that she uses when considering her own relationship to her gender. What is womanness? In a sense, "womanness" appears to be Lilith's understanding of femininity. Both her darkness and womanness are what comprise the genre of womanhood that Lilith inhabits.

Homer

In addition to Lilith, Homer is another character whose experience with and understanding of her womanhood is inextricable from the violence she has faced. As the leader of the Night Women as they plan their revolt and sometimes maternal to Lilith, Homer experiences womanhood very differently than the girl she has taken under her wing. To be more precise, Homer straddles multiple genres of black womanhood. While Lilith moves through genres of womanhood that at least in name allude to different stages of maturity, Homer is situated in genres that not only allude to her relationship with spirituality, but also trouble her relationship with the idea of womanhood and femme itself. When readers are first introduced to Homer, her status as a relatively powerful figure on the Montpelier Estate is made evident. In addition to her extensive medical and healing knowledge, Homer is situated towards the top of the power hierarchy among the enslaved people of Montpelier. As she and the other women come to help Lilith dispose of the dead johnny-jumper's body Homer says, "'No nigger dead on this estate unless me say so, you hear me? And no nigger live either" (18). With this statement Homer establishes her place of power on the estate. To be clear, she believes that she has some say in the fates of the *black* people on the plantation, as evinced through her use of the word "nigger", not the white slaveholders and overseers. Homer is careful with her wording here. She uses specifically racialized language to emphasize that she sits at towards the top of the power hierarchy among the enslaved people of Montpelier. Where does Homer's power come from?

Unlike the johnny-jumpers, who were selected as to work as overseers of black labor, the source of Homer's esteem (notoriety) on Montpelier Estate is her reputation as a practitioner of Myal.

Homer's spiritual practices are the subject of curiosity for nearly all of the people who inhabit Montpelier Estate. There are many moments in the novel where Lilith witnesses Homer mixing remedies in order to protect her, but Homer never verbally confirms if she is a Myal woman or not. Her refusal to verbally associate with the spiritual practice is not necessarily unusual. In *The Cultural Politics of Obeah* Diana Paton writes, "With few exceptions, obeah is not and has not been a term that people use to describe their own practices" (Paton 2). Obeah and Myal are distinct practices, but Paton's point can be applied to Homer's refusal to verbally claim what her practice is. At one point, Lilith "think to ask her right there if she be a Myal woman" (James 51). However, she decides against it. Despite Lilith's avoiding asking this question aloud, it is answered with Homer pricking her on the finger. In other words, Homer's naming herself as a Myal woman is not necessary because it is a genre of womanhood that is embodied through her actions, not through just a speech act that claims to do so. To be a Myal woman suggests a kind of power and connection to the divine. Homer is respected as leader (though whether this is fully intentional is questionable) among her peers not just because of her intelligence, literacy, and thoughtful strategizing, but also because they are afraid of all that Myal might make her capable of. This suspicion of Myal is shared by the black and white people alike: "But even white people whisper when they say Obeah. . .For if Obeah be the black, Myal be the white even though the two still black" (51). Although Homer is a practitioner of Myal and not Obeah, this portion of the text makes it clear that for white people, the two forms of black spirituality are indistinguishable. The association of Homer's Myal with Obeah is particularly threatening to slaveowner Humphrey and the other white people on Montpelier because it alludes to the ever-present

potential of uprising. There is already historical precedent for Obeah's presence in Jamaican slave rebellions. Jhordan Layne writes, "Accounts of the use of Obeah in [Tacky's] rebellion cemented its place as inimical to the plantocracy and thus destructive to wider Jamaican society" (Layne 51). The novel mentions this history explicitly, as Humphrey and Rouget discuss "Tacky and his little revolt" (207). Myal and Obeah may not be exactly the same, but for Humphrey, all that matters is that Homer's spiritual practice has the potential to foment uprisings on his plantation. White fears of Obeah and Myal are further confirmed by Humphrey's mistress Isobel, who responds to overseer Robert Quinn's attempts to downplay the practice as mere superstition, "It's a tad more serious than that. I've seen an entire estate go to a standstill over their superstitions" (113). Whether Isobel, Quinn, and Humphrey actually believe in the spiritual power of Myal and Obeah is not the point. Instead, they recognize how it might bring about an end to the estate. Amongst her fellow enslaved people, Homer uses her unspoken status as a Myal woman to bring this fear to fruition.

Homer's relationship to this set of black spiritual and cosmological practices, as well as the plantation overall, calls to mind the character Rose in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Rose is an "old woman" and former nurse to plantation owner Sir Clifford's son. After Rose refuses to drown her beloved pet dog at the request of the slaveholder he says, "Now take this old witch, and her whelp and gibbet them alive on the Linden" (Crafts 23). While Clifford's use of the term "witch" here is likely intended to be understood more along the lines of the word "hag", it cannot be completely divorced from its supernatural/superstitious connotations. According to Paton, "The growing dominance of an Enlightenment approach to the supernatural mean that the acceptance of the reality of obeah's spiritual power was no longer an intellectually respectable viewpoint by the late nineteenth century, but the argument for severe measures continued to be

made” (Paton 9-10). Though Paton is specifically discussing Obeah and the context of the Caribbean here, it is safe to say that the restrictive logics and ideals of the Enlightenment impacted the antebellum United States as well. Rose’s spirituality is never named and readers get virtually no glimpse of her practices or beliefs. Instead, it is Clifford’s calling her a witch that reminds us of the possibility of her practicing a black spirituality. However**,** as she is tied to the Linden, Rose seems to embrace her perceived witchiness. When Clifford finally attempts to have her taken down from the tree Rose responds, “’No,’ she said. ‘it shall not be. I will hang here till I die as a curse to this house, and I will come here after I am dead to prove its bane’” (25). We as readers do not know what becomes of the Lindendale plantation after Hannah makes her escape. Rose’s curse does not necessarily guarantee its ruin. However, what it does do is solidify Rose’s own understanding of herself as a woman who is “witchy”. With this statement she makes it clear that she believes she holds a connection to a power that exists outside of the world she currently inhabits. *She* is the curse. Sir Clifford may have initially hung her as a punishment and a warning to other slaves against potential disobedience, but with this declaration Rose attempts to claim a sort of power for herself after death. Homer differs from her 19th century literary counterpart in that she desires freedom through the act of rebellion and escape. Rose, on the other hand, wants to haunt. Rose somewhat diverges from the idealized characters in a sentimental novel through her curse. Readers sympathize with her suffering, but she shifts almost into a kind of gothic haunting specter. She does not weep. She is *angry*. If freedom can also come by way of death, which happens with the death of Hannah’s mistress later in Crafts’ novel, it does not seem that Rose receives it. Through her vow to return to Lindendale, Rose forces the audience to think about freedom a bit differently. Rather than considering death as an

opportunity to be free from the brutality of the plantation she seeks satisfaction in retribution instead.

Slave narratives tend to cite death as means of escaping the horrors of the plantation and this is somewhat the case for Rose in *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. In a physical sense, Rose gets out of Lindendale because of her death. However, her departure is complicated by her promise to return. This enslaved black woman insists upon becoming a scourge to the place that cursed her to death. In this moment Rose is not really calling on any specific god or invoking Christianity, nor is she using a form of spirituality that is legible to other people. However, this does not make it any less ominous for the inhabitants of Lindendale. We as readers do not really need to know the outcome of the curse because the speech act in retaliation is sufficient. Readers have already witnessed one act of violence and Rose suggests that the plantation has doled out more and therefore deserves unceasing punishment. The horrors that have taken place on the plantation have been too awful to be depicted or described and therefore the haunting might be left undepicted as well**.**

In addition to her use of black Caribbean spiritual practices, Homer's self-definition of her gender identity is linked to both her experiences with violence and her desire for freedom. As she shares her own personal history with Lilith during a conversation, it becomes clear that her definitions of what her womanhood means shift over time and depend heavily upon context. More specifically, it is evident that for Homer, her understanding of what it means to be woman is at least partially defined through language of sexuality. As she clarifies the mechanics and pleasures of sex to Lilith, Homer remarks, "'Hello, what you think me keep down there, cobweb? Me used to be woman, you know. I know what you think, I know what all of you think, but there used to be one time when me was a woman'" (217). This particular articulation of

womanhood is one that is linked to sexual desire and pleasure. What made/makes Homer a woman (at least in one sense) was the desire to engage in sexual activity. This is different from the constant threat of sexual exploitation that hovers over the estate. For Homer, this is a part of womanhood that is enjoyable, although her use of the phrases "used to be" and "was" suggest that her engagement with her own sexuality as a source of enjoyment is in the past, and so her womanhood is as well. By expressing the perceived shock of the other women at her former ability to have sexual intercourse, Homer acknowledges that she embodies a kind of desexualized genre of womanhood on the estate. She seems to be doubly ungendered in a way. All of the black women are always already ungendered, but Homer's black womanhood is not quite legible to the other women or even really herself. She occupies a space of used-to-be woman. The temporality of Homer's womanhood diverges from that of Lilith's. Whereas Lilith appears to have some sort of relationship to childhood and oscillates between girl and woman, Homer's womanhood sits staunchly in her past. For her, there is no shuttling between woman and used-to-be woman.

Homer repeats the refrain of "Me used to be woman" later in the conversation but in a slightly different context. Her encounter with the Maroons causes her to question her relationship to womanhood but for different reasons. She says, "'Me did think a woman not a woman unless she be free and they take that from me. Take 'way me womanness'" (221). Her earlier confession that she "used to be a woman" was somewhat lighthearted in tone. The upbeat way in which she first mentions that she "used to be woman once" alludes to both her age as well as the idea that the younger women might not see her as sexual. However, this second reference to her alienation from womanhood is much more harrowing. She understands "womanness" as freedom. To be clear, this is not a kind of white, domestic, womanhood or a freedom to own or oppress others

because Homer asserts that she'd had this freedom at one point. For her, freedom and womanness mean to be physically removed from the confines and the violence of the plantation. Whiles she later describes the mutilation she faces as punishment, it is not the destruction of her genitals that renders Homer a used-to-be woman. It is the stripping of her freedom that does so. Homer does not believe that she can fully be a woman (even in an enslaved/black definition) while still being held on Montpelier. Homer's plans for reclaiming her freedom also facilitate her reclamation of her gender.

Freedom for Lilith

Like Homer, Lilith's conceptualization of womanhood is inextricably linked to both violence as well as a particular understanding of freedom. However, the nuances of Lilith's genre of womanhood diverge from Homer's in a couple of ways. After successfully getting away with burning down the Coulibre Estate, Lilith feels conflicted about her womanhood and thinks,

True darkness and true womanness that make a man scream. But if this be the true womanness, then she don't want it no more. Mayhaps true womanness was to be free to be as terrible as you wish. Like a white woman. Mayhaps true womanness mean to let the terribleness run loose and wild like a river flood. True womanness be the seed of destruction like plenty whorish woman in the Bible" (241).

Lilith's womanness is different from Homer's in that she considers it to be primarily based upon the acts of violence she commits, as opposed to that which she experiences. This does not prevent the reader from witnessing numerous brutal violent punishments Lilith receives. If anything, Lilith's relationship to pain and suffering emphasizes her deviation from the role of a sentimental protagonist. According to Baker, "[The] sentimental black female character. . .

figured in scenes of suffering meant to effect, if not the actual liberation of real black women, the moral redemption of black women suffering under conditions created by the institution of racialized enslavement" (Baker 4). This is certainly the case with *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. Crafts' novel follows the form of other sentimental novels of the time by imbuing Hannah and her mistress with a strong sense of morality so that their suffering pulls at the heartstrings. The same is not true for Lilith. *The Book of Night Women* is filled with scenes of Lilith's suffering. However, moral redemption is not on the table (nor is it quite relevant). Instead, Lilith retaliates. She slices the johnny-jumper with a cutlass, drowns Massa Roget and sets Coulibre on fire. When she does all of this "She don't think" (James 229). Lilith's actions are not based in strategy or a plan to set herself free. She is motivated by the darkness that has come to define her.

Lilith's suggestion that to be woman might mean to "let the terribleness run loose" runs counter to the portrayal of a sentimental enslaved woman character. More specifically, Lilith's propensity for violence and reluctance to join Homer and her co-conspirators in planning the rebellion on Montpelier renders her outright unlikeable and unsympathetic at times. Nineteenth century sentimentalism portrayed enslaved women as moral characters in attempts to render them worth having sympathy for (and therefore worthy of emancipating). However, James' 21st century anti-sentimental novel questions what we mean by freedom in the first place. More specifically, it emphasizes that freedom's meaning is not universal and reminds readers that it is tethered to material conditions of antiblackness. For Homer, to be free is to be liberated from the constraints of the plantation. Meanwhile Lilith's understanding of freedom is understood through white womanhood. For both characters, their conceptualization of freedom is intrinsically tied to their experiences and understandings of gender. To Homer, enslavement further estranges and alienates her from womanhood/femme. For Lilith, to be woman is to be dark, regardless of

whether one is enslaved or not. On one hand, we might understand Lilith's articulation of freedom as a kind of illustration of how the institution of slavery corrupts and constructs womanhood overall (even the "idealized" version of white womanhood). Through Lilith's lens of terribleness we see that she covets white womanhood not solely because of the supposed privileges and benefits but because of the harm that they can and do inflict in order to maintain their position of relative power. In *They Were Her Property,* Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers discusses this power relation, saying, "For [white women], slavery was their freedom. They created freedom by actively engaging and investing in the economy of slavery and keeping African Americans in captivity" (Jones-Rogers xvii). While Jones-Rogers writes specifically about a United States context here, white womanhood functions similarly in Lilith's Jamaican context. Freedom is constructed in direct opposition to enslavement. At the same time, while all women are beholden to certain standards of comportment in the name of respectability, black women are not afforded the luxury of terribleness. On one hand, we might understand *The Book of Night Women* as an illustration of how the institution of slavery constructs womanhood through cruelty. It renders womanhood inextricable from violence. It highlights white womanhood as a violent construction that not only casts black women out of the category, but also harms the white women who enforce it as well. At the same time, we might also understand Lilith's freedom to be terrible as a kind of resistance against respectability. Respectability attempts to dictate behavior in order to align with preconceived notions of morality. However, one does not have to be "moral" to be free and freedom itself is not necessarily "moral".

The Bondwoman's Narrative's protagonist, Hannah, demonstrates this through the way she understands freedom and its ties to marriage. Hannah considers freedom not necessarily through the ways that it shapes the *behavior* of white women, but more so through the additional

institutions and protections that their relative freedom grants them access to. About marriage Hannah ponders, “I have always thought that in a state of servitude marriage must be at best of doubtful advantage. . .The slave, if he or she desires to be content, should always remain in celibacy” and “[B]ut plain, practical common sense must teach every observer of mankind that any situation involving such responsibilities as marriage can only be filled with profit, and honor, and advantage by the free” (Crafts 135). She reiterates this belief later in the novel and asserts, “Marriage like many other blessings I considered to be especially designed for the free, and something that all victims of slavery should avoid. . .” (Crafts 212). These passages serve a couple of functions in the narrative. First, they state the strongest case for Hannah’s alignment with Christian morality. The institution of marriage may not be fully accessible for her as an enslaved woman but her endorsement of celibacy until marriage signals her compliance with the rules of propriety that might deem her worthy of gaining freedom. At the same time, it also sets the stage for the marriage plot that is often incorporated into sentimental novels. The marriage plot follows the conventions of sentimentalism while also underscoring what Hannah understands freedom to mean. Marriage is not about romantic love and freedom is not tied to the ability to behave how she would like. Instead, it means that she is able to participate in an institution and ritual that she otherwise could not (families being pulled apart by slavery, etc.) At the narrative’s conclusion Hannah’s freedom is secured through her marriage. She says that her husband “is, and has always been a free man, is a regularly ordained preacher of the Methodist persuasion, and I believe and hope that many through his means, under Providence, have been led into wisdom’s ways, which are those of pleasantness” (246). Hannah’s husband meets the criteria not only of a respectable, moral, and religious husband, but his status as a free man who has never been enslaved helps to further distance her from her own enslaved past. This marriage

is also the narrative's attempt to satisfy sentimentalism's gendered genre conventions in order to be legible to its sympathetic audience. The sentimental novel itself tries to make black women characters align with the expectations of the genre even as their circumstances cannot quite be subsumed by it. This becomes clearer when you read Hannah with characters such as Lilith and Homer. Hannah's marriage is less about her own desires and more about the need to have her freedom be somewhat legitimized by a broader patriarchal and religious institution.

Limits of Manhood

From the opening pages *The Book of Night Women* primarily focuses on enslaved black women and the violence that they face. However, this does not stop it from depicting the ways in which white constructions of gender impact black enslaved manhood. More specifically, *The Book of Night Women* demonstrates the limits of attempting to adhere a white hegemonic formulation of manhood. Characters such as the johnny-jumpers try to assert manhood for their own gain, but rather than gaining freedom they merely reinforce its incompatibility with blackness. Speaking to the concept of manhood is not such a deviation from traditional slave narratives, which often incorporated language of manhood in attempts to link black people to citizenship and therefore the realm of the human. However, the antiblackness that shapes the world we inhabit has shown that this strategy is limited. According to Habiba Ibrahim, "It is not enough for the black subject to gain the legal trappings of manhood" (Ibrahim 17). In this novel, the enslaved men characters do not truly get any of the legal trappings of manhood, but they do get to hold some responsibility and power on the estate due to their gender. They are not men in a way that fully incorporates them into the category of human, but they are in closer proximity to power. Johnny-jumpers oversee some of the labor on the plantation. They violently exert what little power that is bestowed upon them in a way that mimics the white men at the top of the

power hierarchy. They are in charge of helping to maintain the economic structure of the estate by enforcing the labor that takes place. However, we rarely see this depicted in the narrative. Instead, what is emphasized by the narrative are the ways in which they enact sexualized violence upon women, enslaved women in particular, for the majority of the narrative. Lilith's first murder is committed against the johnny-jumper that tries to assault her. We never know these johnny-jumper's names, what they look like, or any defining characteristics. Instead, they are interchangeable pawns of white patriarchy and violence.

The futility of the johnny-jumpers' attempts to be encompassed into the category of Man is emphasized when Montpelier is thrown into chaos by the woman-led revolt. They lose any semblance of power they once had because there is no labor to enforce. Homer and her comrades spent years meticulously planning the night of their insurrection. However, when they put their plan into action, instead of working towards liberation the men of the plantation continue to perpetuate the kind of violence that characterized the plantation to begin with. The men do not like the reversal of leadership, despite the fact that they were not part of planning and freedom is the overall goal**.** "Plenty mens, when they see woman giving command, don't like that at all. They do as they please and break into stable and try to grab horse" (400). For the formerly enslaved men, it does not matter that they do not know how to ride these horses or that the women have been planning this insurrection for decades. The black men attempt to maintain the existing gender hierarchy in whatever way they can, even if it is not logical. White supremacist gender norms are restrictive and violent in how they limit the imagination and control gender performances on the plantation even when the overseers and owners aren't around to enforce them. The estate is in chaos but the men would rather ignore the women in command than upend the gendered power structure that they are accustomed to. Homer and her comrades have

ventured into a genre of insurrectionary women to bring about the downfall of Montpelier. The men do not reevaluate their relationships to gender and therefore power. They cannot begin to imagine escape because they are held hostage by their adherence to a particularly violent form of manhood and masculinity.

The contrast between the gendered strivings for freedom come into stark relief in the middle of the uprising. Pallas discovers two of the men sexually assaulting Isobel and remarks, "'Stinking nasty nigger,' she say while she reach for her other rifle. 'We fighting for freedom and all you want is to free you breeches'" (405). In this statement Pallas delineates the conflicting ways in which enslaved men and women on Montpelier conceptualize freedom. While both the women and men enact violence against the white people on the estate in order to free themselves, Pallas suggests that this act of sexual violence works in opposition to their mission. In assaulting Isobel, a white woman, these men likely understand themselves to be rebelling against the structures of white supremacy that have held them captive. The johnny-jumpers are an ongoing threat for Lilith and the other women as they present the constant threat of excessive force and sexualized violence. Turning that violence onto Isobel does not free them but instead reinforces the structures of white supremacy/antiblackness that oppress them in the first place. They are wardens of white, western patriarchy and cannot see themselves outside of it. In a sense, they almost invoke Lilith's notion of the freedom to be terrible. However, in doing so, they instead reinforce the violent, hegemonic gender norms of the plantation.

Anti-Sentimentalism and Satire

While *The Book of Night Women* eschews the straightforward appeals to Christian morality and the trope of the marriage plot that characterize the sentimental novel to sit in virtually direct opposition to the genre, *The Good Lord Bird* instead merges satire with the neo-

slave narrative. In *African American Satire*, Darryl Dixon-Carr cites Frederick Kiley and J.M. Shuttleworth's description of satire as "a 'literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that institutions or humanity may be improved. The true satirist is conscious of the frailty of institutions of man's devising and attempts through laughter not so much to tear them down as to inspire a remodeling'" (Dixon-Carr 15). In the case of *The Good Lord Bird*, one of the institutions whose "frailty" is highlighted by the humorous nature of the text is the construct of the gender binary itself. From the protagonist Henry's repeated ostensible "gender mix-ups" to characters' frequent discussions of supposedly failed gender performances, McBride's novel repeatedly emphasizes the slipperiness and futility of binary gender distinctions.

While Valerie Smith writes about the "narrative silences" that characterize the sentimental slave narrative, Danielle Fuentes Morgan asserts that these strategic silences are not unique to the sentimental slave narrative but can also extend to the realm of the satirical as well. She writes, "It is here [in satire] that silence highlights both what remains to be said and what audience members are called upon to imagine for themselves as they wade through these calculated silences" (Morgan 33). In other words, though the sentimental itself is a genre that no longer seems to have the same utility in the 21st century, some of its rhetorical strategies continue to the linger. Where satire and sentimentalism diverge is in the emphasis of their respective strategic silences. Sentimentalism is concerned with propriety and respectability. It uses silence to suggest the extent of the brutality of slavery without being explicit or offending the sensibilities of their audience. In the case of *The Good Lord Bird,* it pushes back against what is "acceptable" to laugh at. While neo-slave narrative satire is not far removed from anti-sentimentalism, *The Book of Night Women's* exposes the horrors of the plantation through

depiction. Both texts have little concern for what is "appropriate". In the anti-sentimental, there is no space or allowance for silence. Contrarily, in a satirical neo-slave narrative like *The Good Lord Bird,* the genre's narrative silence elides many of the details of slavery's living and labor conditions in favor of emphasizing the other ways it oppresses and dictates how black enslaved people navigate the search and fight for freedom, including in their gender performances. The genre also demonstrates that the logics of gender that shape life on the plantation shape and orient the world outside of it, even though the ruling logics are arbitrary. Readers are not privy to the details of protagonist Henry's enslavement or the specificity of the kinds of cruelties he endures as he enslaved by Dutch Henry. Instead, we see its presumed impact on his actions and relationship to gender, whiteness, and freedom later in the narrative. If satire and the sentimental are linked through silence, then perhaps satire and anti-sentimental are tied through what they uncover and make explicit.

Sibonia

As Henry moves throughout the American west both with and without John Brown, he encounters two different iterations of revolutionary Black women through the figures of the fictional Sibonia and a fictionalized Harriet Tubman. John Brown's militia is primarily comprised of men, so when Henry crosses paths with Sibonia in Pikesville it is his first introduction to a black woman plotting an insurrection.

'Sibby, we aims to find out about this murderous plot. We know you is the leader. Several people has said it. So don't deny it'.

'I am the woman,' she said, 'and I am not ashamed or afraid to confess it'" (McBride 175).

In this moment Sibonia replaces the word "leader" with the word "woman" as she claims responsibility for planning the uprising. Woman becomes synonymous with the word leader and strategist of a violent plan for the enslaved people in the pen to escape captivity. Sibonia repeats this phrase, "I am the woman" twice. Her status as leader is inextricable from her status as woman. She also later states that it was the sale of her last child that served as catalyst for her freedom fight. For Sibonia, her motherhood, womanhood, and rebellion are enmeshed.

As she confesses her part in the rebellion, Sibonia diverges from the bloodlust that Lilith feels in all of her "darkness and womanness", but at the same time appears to feel justified using violence. She admits, "'I would have been miserable for the rest of my life. I could not kill any human creature and feel any less. But in my heart, God tells me I was right'" (179). While Rose in Crafts' 19th century narrative is punished for her *lack* of desire to inflict violence upon another living being and James' Lilith ascertains that violence is an essential part of her womanhood, Sibonia understands violence simply as a means to an end. Although the Night Women's plan to overthrow authority on Montpelier Estate was meticulously planned for years, Lilith's own relationship to committing acts of violence is more visceral. Her killing the johnny-jumper and setting a plantation fire at Coulibre were not actions that required forethought nor a desire to escape. However, for Sibonia, the abhorrent conditions of slavery along with a cosign from God justify her actions. More specifically, she asserts that the act of killing would not have brought her joy. In fact, she mentions that had her plan succeeded, she would "have been miserable for the rest of [her] life". Despite the threat of guilt and misery for ending some lives, Sibonia ultimately decides that the misery of killing for freedom is still less miserable than the suffering of slavery. Exploitation may be the circumstance of her current condition, but in planning a violent uprising Sibonia attempts to have a say in the kind of misery that she suffers. The

emotional turmoil of killing others might be assuaged by her and her comrades' potential freedom.

It is also important to note the religiosity of not only Sibonia's statement, but of the entire atmosphere of her confession. In an attempt to prompt Sibonia to turn in her co-conspirators, the judge of Pikesville requests that the town minister is the person to speak with her because "[she] was known to respect him" (177). However, instead of being given a list of names of those involved with the plot, the minister is met with a justification of her actions that is supported by Sibonia's and the Reverend's shared spirituality. She says to him, "'Reverend, it was you and your wife who taught me that God is no respecter of persons; it was you and your missus who taught me that in His eyes we are all equal" and "But in my heart, God tells me I was right" (179). The kind of Christian faith Sibonia espouses in these passages is one that is based in a logic and spiritual practice that makes sense to the white people around her. It is extremely familiar to her opponent (white people) and taught to her by them. This differs from Homer, whose spiritual acts function more so as a kind of lore to the white people of Montpelier. Although there is no evidence of Sibonia being literate, she embodies the kind of person that slaveowners would want to keep literacy and the bible away from, for fear of its teachings inspiring rebellion. Sibonia spots an inconsistency in the initially pro-slavery minister's logic of all humanity being equal and aims to use it to her advantage. In saying that "God tells [her] [she's] right", Sibonia emphasizes that God supports her actions, even if they are violent. The harm she intends to inflict upon others is alright in the eyes of her God because it is meant to liberate. At the conclusion of their conversation, the reverend revokes his support of slavery as an institution and of the town. Sibonia's goal of obtaining freedom may have been foiled, but she

does succeed in convincing one person that slavery should not exist by using the values of his own faith to do so.

After acknowledging her role in the rebellion, Sibonia and her co-conspirators are put to death by way of hanging. On the day of the hanging, as the group approaches the platform where their deaths will be made into spectacle, one of the men in the group falls to his knees and sobs in fear. Upon witnessing this display of (understandable) distress, “Sibonia grabbed him by the collar and pulled him to his feet. ‘Be a man,’ she said. . .’We’ll give you an example, then obey’” (183). While Sibonia verbalizes her own womanhood to establish herself as leader of the foiled insurrection, at the moment of her death she invokes manhood instead. It is not just that the man in front of her collapses in terror on the steps, but that Sibonia sees herself as properly exhibiting the qualities of manhood when she places the noose around her neck first. In this case, Sibonia is likely speaking about bravery in the face of death. She is not specific about what she means by “be a man”, but by offering herself and her sister Libby as examples, she gives the reader a hint. Sibonia only ever explicitly refers to herself as a woman. Demonstrating characteristics of supposed manhood does not negate her condition as an enslaved woman but instead suggests that characteristics such as bravery in the face of death are not actually inherent to one gender. This is the first of a few moments in the text that associate manhood with death. Sibonia relies on a kind of gender script in order to get people to comply. She knows that telling someone to “act like a man” evokes a particular kind of thought or behavior, despite the fact that it is the women who have shown themselves to be more brave, strategic, etc. so far in the text.

Harriet Tubman

The fictionalized version of Harriet Tubman deploys gendered language that is similar to that of her fictional counterpart. At an event aimed to recruit members to the abolitionist cause,

she says, "'Y'all clucking like a bunch of hens in here, she said. You setting here warm and cozy, worrying 'bout your own skin, while there's children crying for their mothers right now. . .some of you got wives, children, living in slavery. . .who's a man here? Be a man!'" (273). When describing the scene, Henry mentions that "[Tubman] was the only woman in the room besides yours truly, who don't count" (271). In other words, Tubman is imploring a room ostensibly filled with men to "Be a man". Her use of this phrase suggests that the people in this room are not living or embodying the characteristics that comprise her ideal of manhood. Tubman is already known among John Brown, Henry and the members of this crowd as willing to risk life and limb for the sake of liberating the enslaved. However, like Sibonia she implores her audience to take up the cause by invoking a kind of gendered rhetoric. Tubman already lives the life of bravery and risk-taking that she is asking her audience to take up. She contrasts the relatively sheltered lives of these free black men with the lives of their spouses and children that remain in captivity. In a later conversation with Henry, Tubman mentions that her own husband "became something like a woman hisself. He was fearful. Couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand being a man. But I led him to freedom anyway" (276). Ironically, this passage associates becoming a woman with cowardice. She is frustrated with her husband's supposedly woman-like behavior. Like Sibonia, Tubman does not explicitly say that she is more "manly" than her husband, but through her actions she demonstrates an embodiment of the characteristics she associates with "be[ing] a man". She is the one who leads her husband and hundreds of others out of slavery and into safety. Judith Butler asserts that "gender proves to be performative" and that "gender is always a doing" (Butler 34). The fictionalized Tubman's criticism of her husband stems from the idea that he is not "doing" his gender correctly. However, for both Tubman and Sibonia gender is

not just a performance, it also functions as rhetorical tool. They *speak* about gender in attempts to provoke the liberatory actions that they want to see.

Henry/Onion

The fictionalized Tubman and Sibonia undoubtedly embody their respective genres of womanhood and utilize them in compelling ways. However, it is the novel's protagonist, Henry, whose relationship to gender has the broadest overall impact on the trajectory of the narrative. He has the most fraught and dynamic understanding of his own gender identity throughout the narrative. *The Good Lord Bird* begins with a brash departure from the opening sentence that readers of slave narratives are all too familiar with: "I was born". McBride's protagonist, Henry, riffs on this well-known refrain in way that alludes to his upcoming gender/genre trouble by saying, "I was born a colored man and don't you forget it. But I lived as a colored woman for seventeen years" (7). When traditional slave narratives start with the phrase "I was born" the rest of the sentence tends to mention the name of the plantation on which they live or who it is owned by. In other words, this opening refrain usually deems the act of establishing geography essential. In order to begin to understand the enslaved person's story, we must first understand the circumstances of their birth. Although Henry does mention geography (and his parentage) in the following portions of the same paragraph, the way he scaffolds the information reveals his priorities. Readers must first know that he was born a man and lived as woman. By convention, slave narratives tell us the plantation and its geography so that we know what boundaries they are traversing and where they are escaping from. In revealing his deviation from the gender binary first, Henry informs readers that gender is primary, leaving Kansas Territory is secondary, at least in terms of importance for his own understanding of his narrative.

Henry's insistence that he was "born a colored man" and "lived as a colored woman" are particularly fascinating considering this is the only time in the novel where he is explicitly referred to in these terms, both by himself and by others. After the initial gender mix up when John Brown comes to believe that Henry is Henrietta, people call him a girl not a woman. It's also ironic because no one is really "born a man" (at least in terms of chronological age) but at the same time black children aren't really children. Ibrahim reminds us, "The black man is not a man, and the black person of any gender is not a child" (Ibrahim 19). While this novel is satirical it also borrows some themes from the coming-of-age novel. Namely, Henry's perceived naivete and ensuing growth not only help to propel the plot of the text, but also function as a source of the satirical humor. In addition to being the only time he fully identifies with the terms man or woman Henry's opening statement also directly contradicts the information that has been revealed in the prologue. Framing Henry's narrative as a written account found after a church fire, the prologue asserts that "the church members believed Mr. Shackleford was a woman" and "was 103 years old when the account was recorded" (3). This sets up Henry not only as a somewhat unreliable narrator, but also sets up the expectation that gender distinctions are not reliable or stable. We open the text with the knowledge that Henry ultimately decides to live as femme for years after both legal Emancipation and his encounter with John Brown. Unlike Hannah, who shifts her relationship to her own gender as a kind of vector to facilitate her freedom, Henry's gender identity is always in continuous flux. He is never even clear with the temporality of his living as femme. Henry's time with John Brown (and the narrative) ends when he is around fourteen years old, but between the prologue and the opening line of the first chapter, it becomes clear that Henry's embodiment of a femme gender performance does not have a definitive timeline or endpoint.

While Henry's opening statement and its contradiction to the events described in the prologue set the stage for the novel's depiction of Henry's gender, it is John Brown's first interaction with Henry that is the catalyst for his repeated gender/genre blurring and crossing. Unlike Sibonia, Harriet Tubman, or even the fictionalized Hannah Crafts, Henry's traversal into the realm of femme gender performance and expression is not prompted by his own actions or decision making. Initially, it is not deliberate. Rather, it is imposed upon him. When Brown enters Dutch Henry's tavern and attempts to liberate Henry and his father from their owner, he refers to Henry as "tragic octaroon daughter" and says that he will take "Henrietta" to safety (19-20). In this case the humor comes not necessarily from the fact that Henry is ostensibly misgendered, but that Brown explicitly refers to him as a tragic octaroon. In this moment Brown not only misnames the tragic mulatto trope, but Henry as well. In his attempts to show that he cares for black liberation and personhood, he simultaneously reinforces white hegemony through the act of renaming Henry as an individual and assigning him to a gender category. Henry does concede, "True, I wore a potato sack like most colored boys did in them days. . .But everybody in Dutch's, even the Indians, knowed I was a boy" and "But even those lowly types, who was so braced on joy juice they wouldn't know a boll weevil from a cotton ball and couldn't tell one colored from the other, knowed the difference between me and a girl" (20). This statement from Henry suggests that much of his understanding of his own gender stems from the way it is read and understood by others. He does not say what characterizes him as a boy and he even says that children across genders dress similarly. In other words, there is nothing intrinsic nor performative that differentiates him from girlhood. The people who know him and his context seem him as a boy. John Brown, without coming from a similar social or racial context instead uses whiteness to gender Henry as he sees fit. It is being recognized as a boy that renders him as

such. John Brown's assumption and act of gendering is what pushes him into proximity of a genre of femme. *The Book of Night Women* demonstrates how violent the enforcement of the gender binary can be. Meanwhile, *The Good Lord Bird* emphasizes how it truly is an invention that is not grounded in much (as it has no stable referent) and pokes fun at it through this initial mix up. While Brown has good intentions, Henry does not understand himself as freed. At one point, Henry considers correcting Brown's misgendering of him but decides against it because "[John Brown] was an outlaw and I was his prisoner" (28). Brown believes himself to be Henry's liberator, but this is clearly not the case, as Henry understands himself to be held captive. As he is stuck with John Brown and his militia, Henry also remains tied to a gender identity that he did not select for himself.

As John Brown's whiteness causes him to assign Henry to a gender category aligned with the binary, Henry repeatedly encounters other black people who do not read his gender in a straightforward or binary manner. Instead, his gender is approached with a sense of openness and an unstated knowledge that black gender expands beyond the categories of man and woman. The first example we see of this is when meets a man called Nigger Bob. After running away from John Brown and his men, Henry encounters the enslaved Bob on the California Trail and requests to ride with him on his master's wagon. As Henry attempts to correct Bob's assumptions about his gender the two have the following exchange:

""'I ain't a girl'

'Whatever you think you is, honey, I don't think it's proper that you unstring that dress from 'round yourself in front of Nigger Bob– a married man'" (66).

In a sense, this passage highlights Henry's initial understanding of his gender– that it is primarily tied to his physical body and biology. He believes that his gender is something that other people should be able to see. The passage cited above is accompanied by Henry's efforts to untie his dress so that he can reveal himself to Bob. Throughout the novel, Henry attempts to correct the people around him about his gender are characterized with repeated foiled tries to show others his body parts. In other words, he must *display* that he is a boy in order prove that he is one. Being a boy is something that is physical, not named or verbalized. In his attempts to vocalize, Henry does not say that *is* a boy, only that he "ain't a girl". Being not-a-girl does not necessarily mean that he is a boy. Bob's refusal to label what he thinks Henry believes himself to be further emphasizes a formulation of black gender that is more capacious than boy/girl or man/woman. Bob is unsure of "whatever [Henry] think[s] [he] is" but deems seeing the child's bare body a potential violation of his marriage. At the very least, Bob understands Henry to exist as femme. Even if he nor Henry cannot fully articulate what that might mean, he recognizes that Henry is neither a boy nor a woman. Even if he interprets Henry to be a confused girl, his mentioning what he "think" he is allows the space for the imagining of a gender outside of conventional norms.

Bob is not the only character who acknowledges alternative conceptualizations of gender when talking to Henry. When Henry reaches Pikesville, in addition to meeting Sibonia in the slave pen he also encounters Pie, an enslaved woman consigned to sex work at the Pikesville Hotel. During their first one-on-one interaction Pie says, "'That's touching, but everything on this prairie's a lie, child. Ain't nothing what it looks like. Look at you. You's a lie. You got to go. You ain't gonna make it on the prairie nohow. I know a feller drives a stagecoach for Wells Fargo. Now *he's* a girl. Playing like a man. But whatever she fancies herself, girl or boy, she's a

white thing. And she’s going from place to place as a stagecoach driver’” (154). Although Henry’s gender has been up for debate for the entirety of the narrative, this is the first time someone directly alludes to the possibility and existence of transness. However, Pie mentions the stagecoach to suggest that Henry is failing at crossing gender distinctions/categories. She sees that there is something somewhat similar about the white stagecoach and Henry’s relationships to gender, however she also thinks that Henry is a “lie”. While the stagecoach can be understood as trans through how Pie says, “*he’s* a girl”, he still somewhat adheres (or at least is legible to) the existence of a gender binary. The stagecoach’s “playing” or performance of gender is coherent to Pie, perhaps because of his whiteness. Pie repeatedly emphasizes that Henry is a “lie”. This might be due to his inability (or lack of desire) to “pass”. Christine Overall writes that the notion of passing is often perceived as “a deliberate attempt to be interpreted or read as a member of the wrong gender” (Overall 203). This understanding of passing is tied to an act of deception and seems to be a belief to which Pie ascribes. Henry’s gender performance is not necessarily intentional. It is more incidental. Despite always being on the cusp of attempting to “reveal” himself, Henry does not staunchly associate himself with a gender identity. Ironically, Henry’s gender presentation being largely unintentional and not quite deceptive enough is what prompts Pie to call him a lie. At the same time, the stagecoach’s whiteness and performance along more strict gender binary lines renders him more legible (and therefore more truthful) in the eyes of Pie.

While Pie judges Henry for not sufficiently passing (in her opinion/definition), Henry has a more fraught relationship to passing, authenticity, and his gender. His concern about the “truthfulness” of his gender and his identity comes up again during his first encounter with Harriet Tubman. After seeing her speak, he thinks, “But colored women could sniff out my

nature better than most" (McBride 272). Overall asserts that "The very concept of 'passing' assumes that there is something that one really is, at heart, in one's essence, in one's innermost being, and that something is being hidden" (207). Henry does not say what constitutes his "true nature". In fact, while it might be assumed, he does not confirm that he is thinking of his gender during this moment. He may feel that he is concealing *something* about himself, but it is a bit unclear what that is. If anything, this moment in the text is another instance of his inability or refusal to call himself a boy. Whatever Henry's "true nature" is, it is something that is more coherent to black women overall. This alludes to Henry's alignment with femme. He has difficulty naming what his gender is because it is illegible to the gender binary. Black people in general can better understand Henry's kind of unnameable relationship to gender, but it is only black women who also see this as related to what it might look or be like to be femme.

I would be remiss to examine Henry's gender mishaps and crossing into proximity with femme gender(s) without also putting it into conversation with Hannah's moment of cross-dressing. As she flees from the plantation where she is being held, Hannah sees "a suit of male apparel exactly corresponding to my size and figure. To whom it had belonged or who had worn it was alike a mystery to me" (Crafts 216). Her disguise sufficiently shields her identity and also gains her sympathy from the white women she encounters, as she "[Tells] them I was an orphan who had been left in destitute circumstances, and that I was endeavoring to make my way on foot to join the relatives of my mother who lived at the North" (218). C. Riley Snorton asserts, "If, as Hortense Spillers explains. . .the capacity for gender differentiation was lost in the outcome of the New World, ordered by the violent theft of body and land, it would stand to reason that gender indefiniteness would become a critical modality of political and cultural maneuvering within figurations of blackness, illustrated, for example, by the frequency with which narratives

of fugitivity included cross-gendered modes of escape" (Snorton 56). Both Henry and Hannah demonstrate the gender indefiniteness Snorton describes, albeit in slightly different ways. Both characters utilize the capaciousness of black gender's possibilities in order to facilitate their freedom and survival. For Hannah in particular, dressing in men's clothes is framed primarily as an act of utility to secure her immediate safety. Dressing as a man not only allows her to successfully exit the plantation on which she is held, but also aids her in gaining provisions such as food and water. The discovery of her identity as a fugitive slave would place her immense danger. Her cross-dressing is prompted and accompanied by a sense of urgency. Henry's gender crossing, on the other hand, is not prompted by his own desire for freedom but from being gendered by John Brown. His decision to remain in proximity to femme is also motivated by the need for survival. Because his apparent captor, John Brown, is an abolitionist, Henry's act of using his gender as a means to access safety may not initially seem as urgent as Hannah's. However, Henry shares her motivations. When Brown gives him a dress and bonnet to wear, Henry wants to push against it and thinks, "Not in no way, shape, form, or fashion was I gonna do it, But my arse was on the line, and while it's a small arse, it do cover my backside and thus I am fond of it. Plus, he was an outlaw and I was his prisoner" (McBride 28). For Henry, cooperating with John Brown's insistence that he accept the dress and bonnet, and therefore stepping into a femme identity and presentation, is a matter of survival. He may be away from his former owner Dutch but being with John Brown and his militia is not freedom. Embracing the perceived girlhood that Brown assigns him is Henry's attempt to get one step closer to it.

As the novel progresses, Henry's relationship to his own gender continues to be an enigma to both the people he encounters as well as himself. Throughout the narrative, Henry continuously voices his fraught relationship to manhood. He repeatedly says that "it weren't in

me to be a man" (376). It appears that manhood is out of the question not just because of his age. While this novel merges the forms of satire, neo-slave narrative, and aspects of the bildungsroman, Henry's movement through various (yet unnameable and imprecise) genres of gender is not merely a matter of navigating his personal identity. Rather, Henry's movement through gender is directly tied to his experience of slavery and captivity. Right before the start of the raid at Harper's Ferry, Henry muses, "I was a Negro above all else, and Negroes plays their part too; Hiding. Smiling. Pretending bondage is okay till they're free, and then what? Free to do what? To be like the white man? (380). This is the moment in the text where Henry most explicitly grapples with how *he* understands his gender to be operating in the world, as opposed to how he and his gender are read by others. Henry's understanding of freedom is reminiscent of Lilith's in that they both question what freedom could actually mean. Their understandings of freedom are not tethered to ideals of Christian morality or marriage that characterize the sentimental novel. These characters of 21st century novels instead conceptualize freedom through the demographics that get to experience it the most. Both characters are aware that in the worlds they inhabit, freedom does not exist in and of itself. It not merely an open signifier but instead is perpetually linked to the violence of whiteness, abjection, and restrictive nature of hegemonic gender categories**.** Henry, however, considers it in relation to white men in particular because of both his continuous physical proximity to various white men (Dutch his previous owner and John Brown), as well as his initial relationship to some kind of enslaved black boyhood. Despite his continuous negotiations of his gender, Henry ultimately realizes that it is his blackness that dictates his reality (including his gender). He is "a Negro above all else". This is not to say that his experiences of gender are inconsequential but rather that they are dictated by the terms of blackness/antiblackness. Henry's blackness is what causes him to be ungendered. It is this

ungendering that both impedes his ability to fully be free while simultaneously opens space for his repeated gender traversals. In an antiblack world, his blackness informs all else. It is only after Henry comes to some sort of realization about his gender along with his blackness that he feels like he can actively fight for his freedom and is no longer a coward. It is not necessarily manhood, but he must use something to his advantage, even if it is gender fluidity.

During his final encounter with John Brown, dressed "as a boy", Henry finally addresses him directly about his gender dilemma and says, "But, Captain, you never asked me why I. . .went 'bout as I did'" (455). John Brown responds to Henry with a "true smile" and that is when Henry "knowed then, too, that he knowed what I was – from the very first". When he finally responds verbally, Brown says, 'Whatever you is, Onion,' he said, 'be it full. God is no respecter of persons'" (455). Although it is Brown's categorization of Henry into the genre of girl that launches Henry's journey with gender, this moment between the two suggests that John Brown understands Henry's gender identity to be much more indefinite, diffuse and difficult to pin down than he initially let on. During this interaction Henry is wearing explicitly masculinely coded clothing for the first time in the novel, but neither he nor John Brown refer to him as a boy. Instead, they use phrase such as "I went about as I did" to refer to Henry's gender performances and "Whatever you is" in reference to his gender itself. In other words, Henry's gender is somewhat elusive, at least in name. In thinking with the femme, Ashley Coleman Taylor states, "When language seeks to confine or define our sexualities and genders, femme marks itself as an ineffable performative gender" (Coleman Taylor 90). I would like to return to Snorton's concept of gender indefiniteness to consider it alongside Taylor's notion of ineffability as we read this final scene with Henry and John Brown. If anything, Henry embodies gender indefiniteness. While he slips in and out of using language such as boy, girl, and "not a man" to

describe himself, his gender/genre label is both slippery and not quite named. This is the space where we end the book and ostensibly Henry "finds himself". While the language of the narration attempts to use language that distills Henry to the categories/binaries of boy or girl, there is ultimately no language to sufficiently name or encapsulate his genre of gender. Henry operates in a kind of liminal space of femme. Although he dons "men's" clothing, Henry's gender identity remains unnamed. Even if he maintains a more masculine gender presentation towards the end of the narrative, the prologue indicates to readers that Henry's gender is never static. We end with the knowledge that freedom for Henry relies upon the constant movement and negotiation of his gender.

Conclusion

Where the sentimental slave narrative uses respectability and morals in attempts to argue for freedom, the anti-sentimental and its sibling genre, satire, suggest that the constraints of sentimentalism as a genre end up restricting it instead. If we consider the most basic definition of freedom, the ability to act without restraint, then the sentimental novel's rules and being beholden to 19th century Christian propriety cannot stand up to the 21st century. The sentimental novel and the sentimental slave narrative did not and could not incorporate women who were unsympathetic, lacking in morality, or displayed hints of revolutionary and rebellious behavior. At the very least, the types of rebellion depicted were primarily limited to literacy and running away from the plantation. There are limits to what the 19th century white abolitionist imagination would find "acceptable". Reading Crafts alongside James and McBride emphasizes how freedom does not have a stable or universal definition, even among the black women depicted among the pages of the novels. Freedom's definition and how to achieve it shifts not only in relation to the time period in which the respective narratives are published, but also with the genres of

womanhood that each woman occupies. Rose and Hannah are both products of the 19th century novel but navigate their leaving the plantation extremely differently. The characters in these texts use their various genres of womanhood to formulate their respective routes to freedom. They do not necessarily succeed, but they do emphasize the necessity of exploring alternative constructions of womanhood. Hegemonic rules of gender as a power relation work to not only oppress them, but to render them always already deviant. By using this deviance to their advantage, they are able find ways to navigate away from the plantation.

Chapter Three: Adapting Insurrection: Nat Turner as Serial Figure

Introduction

In her foundational text, *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman describes the difficulties of attempting to research and narrate the experiences of enslaved people but encountering a meager archive. She writes, "I was determined to fill in the black spaces of historical record and to represent the lives of those deemed unworthy of remembering, but how does one write a story about an encounter with nothing? (Hartman16). This question about encounters with blank spaces and gaps in hegemonic archives continues to animate Hartman's work as she opens *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* with the assertion that, "Every historian of the multitude, of the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" (Hartman xiii). Hartman articulates that the missing pieces of marginalized, and enslaved in particular, people's stories are not coincidental, but rather another product of the systems that white supremacy and antiblackness have put into place. In other words, grappling with the unknowability of slavery is a problem that is not unique to Hartman in particular. Instead, it is a symptom of a white supremacist power structure in general. However, the ways that authors decide to *respond* to these gaps varies.

William Styron reveals in an interview about his infamous novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that he faced a similar problem as Hartman when it came to finding information about the figure at the center of his book, saying, "[A]lmost nothing was known about this man. This historical record is so incredibly skimpy" (Greenberg 222). While for Hartman the scantness of slavery's archive is further evidence of the institution's violence and its continuing afterlife,

Styron's thinking diverges. He asserts, "We have virtually no understanding of what kind of person he was, so this allowed me to make him into what I, as a novelist, wanted to make him into" (Greenberg 222). Within the gaps of the archive, Styron apparently saw opportunity where Hartman saw the vestiges of the slavery's devaluation of black life. This interview reveals that though Styron's work is inspired by a person who existed in history and the insurrection that he led, the novel itself does not necessarily attempt to be anything but a work of fiction.[2] Styron admits that the Nat Turner who fills the pages of *Confessions* does not purport to be a kind of recuperation of Nat Turner the person, but rather a character that is the product of his imagination. He takes numerous artistic liberties to expand what was originally a 20-page pamphlet into a novel that spans nearly 400 pages. The "blank spaces" in the archive of Nat Turner's life force authors and filmmakers to turn to their imaginations in their attempts to depict him as a figure. Styron was not alone in his captivation with the revolutionary figure. Versions of Turner's story in the form of novels, graphic novels, and films (including documentaries) have continuously been produced since the insurrection's occurrence in 1831. Readers encounter Turner not necessarily by way of "history" or facts, but rather as a product of historical fiction.[3] How authors and filmmakers choose to depict Turner reveals how they conceptualize conditions of antiblackness, white supremacy, and power in the United States.

Adaptation and Genre

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[2] Both Hartman and Styron *must* use imagination and fiction in order to craft their respective narratives. However, Hartman's method of critical fabulation relies on what she refers to as "narrative restraint" and requires the "refusal to fill in gaps", whereas Styron instead attempts to flesh it them out. While his contemporaries may have framed the novel as offensive due to the issue of "appropriation", he writes without accounting for the issue of power and appears to be exploiting the archival violence.

[3] Grant Rodwell posits that "The terms 'historical fiction' and 'history' are far from synonymous. Each has its own purpose. History is a disciplined method of enquiry of the past; historical fiction is a creative act, making extensive use of historical personages and events" (Rodwell 54). By the very nature of their fictional status, neo-slave narratives firmly situate themselves within the genre of historical fiction.

What is the relationship between adaptation and genre? My understanding of genre is that it is a form of technology used by authors of neo-slave narratives to understand and articulate freedom and black being in the afterlife of slavery. Adaptation is *not* a genre. Theorist Linda Hutcheon describes adaptation as "repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 7). Through its acts of repetition that do not directly copy the original source text, adaptation functions as a vehicle that allows narratives to maneuver through and across genres, especially as they change mediums and forms[4]. In other words, reading one story across multiple adaptations renders the impacts of genre more visible. Hutcheon also asserts, "An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context- a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum" (Hutcheon 142). I would contend that her understanding of context would also extend to the genre of an adaptation as well. As Nat Turner's story is transformed from legal confession to historical fiction, the context in which these historical fictions are produced plays an important role. Genre tropes and aesthetics are able to shift how readers understand both the narrative itself and certain formulations of freedom. Through the act of adaptation, authors can work from the same source material, but manipulate it so that it produces vastly divergent meanings. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* Julie Sanders asserts, "Adaptation can be a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself" (Sanders 19). For Nat Turner, the mere act of Gray's recording his account of the insurrection transforms his words into the form of a legal document and genre of confession. In order to then tell this story in the form of a narrative, authors must once again change the genre

[4] Hutcheon also writes that "According to its dictionary meaning, 'to adapt' is to adjust, alter, to make suitable" (Hutcheon 7). Present day authors use fiction to adapt the form of the slave narrative into what we know as the neo-slave narrative. It is not just that neo-slave narratives are produced after emancipation, but that they rely on fiction in a way that the original form did not (and could not afford to) do.

of Turner's tale. This chapter will be looking at this phenomenon by examining recent depictions of Nat Turner' insurrection, Nate Parker's 2016 film *The Birth of a Nation* and Kyle Baker's 2008 graphic novel *Nat Turner*.

It is important to note that while I open with Styron's taking up Turner as a character for his novel, I am not considering his version of *Confessions* to be the source text for the adaptations that are the focus of this study. Rather, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* is what I am treating as the source text in this chapter. Styron's novel is early evidence of Nat Turner's transformation into what Shane Denson and Ruth Mayer refer to as a "serial figure". They describe a serial figure as "a type of stock character inhabiting the popular cultural imagination of modernity– a 'flat' and recurring figure, subject to one or more media changes over the course of its career" (Denson and Mayer 108). While Denson and Mayer primarily discuss the serial figure in the context of Marvel comics, I argue that as Nat Turner and the story of his insurrection continue to be adapted across genres, media, and time, he operates as a kind of serial figure as well. When we read or watch 21st century media that focuses on Turner, we are not necessarily engaging with a text that is *about him* as a historical figure nor as a "real person". There are certain ideas and characteristics (religious zealot, leader, violent revolutionary) that have become associated with him because of his actions and how he has been depicted over time, but the Nat Turner that audiences and readers see the most is a work of fiction. He represents something to each of the people who portray him (and the particulars of it likely differ). It is not just that the worldbuilding and the plot particulars of *Nat Turner* and *The Birth of a Nation* fall into the genre of historical fiction, but rather that the Nat Turner audiences see is historical fiction as well. This is not a phenomenon that begins in the 20th century. Thomas Gray

establishes the initial conditions for Turner to become a serial figure. For Gray, he is "the great Bandit" and a figure of great violence. For others he means something else. How Parker and Baker utilize Turner as a figure reveals their respective understandings of present-day antiblackness and resistance against it. Depictions of Nat Turner and the insurrection he led have frequently operated less as a kind of record of historical fact and instead function as a means to signal certain relationships to rebellion, slavery and freedom. However, the specifics of what this looks like varies depending on author's individual decisions as to how they interpret and adapt the narrative.

The Confessions of Nat Turner as Told to Thomas R. Gray

In order to explore the ways that the story of Nat Turner has been used across media in the 21st century, we must first consider the first written account of his insurrection: *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray*. Recorded by Gray after Turner's capture in October of 1831, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* exists not as a slave narrative, but as a legal document. While 19th century slave narratives were written with the abolition of slavery in mind, the transcription of Nat Turner's account of his life and the rebellion he planned had different concerns and purpose altogether. It is not a pamphlet that intends to communicate the ills of slavery or truly describe the conditions that drove Nat Turner and his comrades to murder. Instead, Gray's goal was an attempt to gain a better understanding of Turner's supposed depravity and to help convict him in the court of law. In other words, whereas traditional slave narratives were written in opposition to the state and its enforcement of slavery, Gray's pamphlet was meant to serve as further evidence for the need to keep slavery as the status quo. It is a document created for and by the state. If *Confessions* is not a slave narrative, then why include it

in this study? While the text itself does not fall into the genre of slave narrative, it does serve as the source material for 21st century works that are embedded within the genre of neo-slave narrative. If anything, its beginning as a legal document rather than a slave narrative helps to further demonstrate the ways in which Nat Turner as figure along with what we know of his story have traversed multiple genres and forms of media in the almost 200 years since the event took place. With the film *The Birth of a Nation* and the graphic novel *Nat Turner*, director Nate Parker and author Kyle Baker shift the genre of Nat Turner's confession into historical fiction so that he may be used as an avatar for them to project their own ideas about freedom and rebellion.

While this chapter is primarily concerned with how Nat Turner and the story of his insurrection are utilized in present day film and literary productions, it is important to note that he has been deployed as a figure for various purposes since the violent act of resistance took place. According to scholars Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, Turner exists in the public imagination not as a historical figure, but "as a myth, as an imagined configuration of convictions, dreams, hopes and fears" (Gross and Bender 487). It is Gray's pamphlet that helps to set the stage for the existence of Nat Turner, the mythic, and eventually serial, figure. Although Turner is the person telling the story, after his account leaves his lips, it no longer belongs to him. He cannot use it to exonerate himself or lessen his sentence. Instead, it exists to be used by Gray, the court, and the white southern public. As Gray's pamphlet and the tale of Turner's insurrection continued to be adapted across both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Turner's transformation into a figure to be used for the purposes of writers and creators becomes more evident. In *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*, editor John Henrik Clarke ends his critique of Styron's novel with, "And our Nat is still waiting" (Clarke *x*). Clarke and the other black, specifically male, writers featured in the volume, feel a

kind of claim to how Turner is portrayed in popular culture. These writers are not unique in their feelings of ownership over the characterization of Nat Turner. As Nat Turner's story continually gets adapted across time, genres, and mediums, he shifts into a serial figure who belongs to each respective author who uses him as an avatar.

The Birth of a Nation

In September 2016, director, actor, and screenwriter Nate Parker's film *The Birth of a Nation*, inspired by the life and insurrection of Nat Turner, debuted to a standing ovation at the Toronto International Film Festival. This was after the film had already been acquired by Fox Searchlight for a record breaking $17.5 million. With Barack Obama's second presidential term coming to an end, the election of Trump occurring only a month after the film's theatrical release in American theaters, as well as the continuing visibility of the Black Lives Matter Movement, tensions about the intersections between blackness and the nation seemed to be coming to a head**.** Parker envisioned this film as a means of both intervening in the national conversations about race as well as writing Nat Turner into a particular kind of American history. During a panel at TIFF he asserts, "'This is someone who should be celebrated along the lines of Patrick Henrys, of Jeffersons, of our founding fathers. . .I felt like this was a story that I felt, historically speaking, could really promote the type of healing we need and the conversation around race'" (Lang, *Variety*). Parker's lofty goals are immediately evident in the very title of the film. First and foremost, the phrase *The Birth of a Nation* does not evoke Nat Turner in the mind of an audience, but D.W. Griffith's notoriously antiblack 1915 motion picture. Griffith's pro Ku Klux Klan movie is forever cemented into American and film history as the first film to be screened at the white house. According to Robin Means Coleman, the film also cemented blackness as a source of terror in the popular American imagination, as it "soundly casts Blacks as horrific

figures" (Means Coleman 7). The film being screened at the white house makes certain suggestions about how black people are perceived by the powers that be (the state). The original *The Birth of a Nation* casts a long shadow. Giving a film about Nat Turner the same title attempts to speak directly to this antiblack history of both the original film and its relationship to the nation. If Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* casts black people as monstrous, violent, and horrific, Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* aims to portray them (or at least Nat Turner) in a different light. At the same time, the title of the film obscures Nat Turner as a figure. The name Nat Turner connotes slave revolt, violence, and attempted usurpation of power. All of which work against Parker's aim of establishing Nat Turner as a founding father and potential symbol of American patriotism. Keeping Turner's name out of the title and replacing it with the nation gives Parker the space within the film's narrative to rewrite Nat Turner as a figure and how audiences might associate him with the formation of the United States as we know it.

Parker's decision to name a film that is about Nat Turner and his insurrection after Griffith's infamous film also prompts the question of *The Birth of a Nation* (2016)'s relationship to adaptation. What might be considered the source text, *The Birth of a Nation* or *The Confessions of Nat Turner, Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.*? Kevin Wetmore Jr. summarizes Linda Hutcheon's conceit "that adaptation is thus simultaneously an acknowledged reworking of another work or works, a creative work in and of itself, and an extended intertextual engagement with the reworked work and all other adaptations of it" (Wetmore 627). According to this understanding of adaptation, *The Birth of a Nation* is somewhat an adaptation of Griffith's film by nature of it being an "acknowledged reworking". Wetmore and Hutcheon do not delineate the extent to which the content of a source text must be "reworked" in order to be considered an adaptation. In other words, while the narrative of the

more recent version of *The Birth of a Nation* does not incorporate or even explicitly call back to Griffith's original work, by nature of sharing a title these two films are in direct intertextual engagement. The "reworking" that is produced in Parker's film is a complete change in subject matter. He removes the Ku Klux Klan glorifying storyline entirely and replaces it with his own version of Nat Turner's story.

At the same time, the film's intertextual relationship with the text that it shares the most similarities with in terms of narrative content is much more subtle. Although Nat Turner is at the center of the film, there are no references to the previous iterations of his story in neither the opening epigraph nor the closing postscript. *The Confessions of Nat Turner as Told to Thomas Gray* is not cited as a source text or point of inspiration/departure for the film. However, I would argue that the lack of explicit acknowledgement does not negate the possibility of the film's "extended intertextual engagement" with the original text. Audiences of the film are likely familiar with the existence of both Styron's novel as well as the original *Confessions*, even if they have not read the texts themselves. In an interview with *Vanity Fair* prior to the film's theatrical release, Parker is specifically asked about his thoughts on Styron's novel and its approach to telling the story of Turner's insurrection. Parker responds, "That said, the most important fact to consider when reflecting upon Styron's work is that it is a work of fiction- by his own admission a 'reimagining' of Nat's life and motivations. With that in mind, I find it interesting [that] his fictionalized interpretation of a true event is so often the subject [of] exploration" (Tanenhaus, "Nate Parker on *The Confessions of Nat Turner*"). Parker's criticism of Styron's novel for its status as fiction is fascinating, for it attempts to assert that his film's approach to depicting Turner's life and insurrection is not also a product of fiction–that *The Birth of a Nation* is somehow how more "historical" than *The Confessions of Nat Turner* despite the

fact that both writers encountered similar gaps in the archive of Turner's life. Fleshing out a sparse historical record into a two-hour long movie (and Oscar bait) requires the addition of fiction. *The Birth of a Nation* does not purport to be a documentary, nor an attempt to "accurately" portray the events that took place. It is a work of historical fiction. Parker's statement is made even somewhat more peculiar by the fact that he neglects to mention the existence of Gray's version of *Confessions,* both in the interview and in the film. Whereas even Styron includes a portion of Nat Turner's confession to Gray as a prologue to his novel, Parker attempts to set the film up as a kind of singular or authoritative telling of Nat Turner's narrative. Despite the filmmaker's neglect to acknowledge the source text and even hiding of Turner's name from the title, *The Confessions of Nat Turner as Told to Thomas R. Gray* haunts the film. Though Parker and his film may not explicitly acknowledge its intertextual engagement with Gray's *Confessions,* it is unavoidable simply due to the fact that it is basically the only firsthand account of the events that took place. Turner's confession is the starting point for historical records and research into the insurrection. Kevin Wetmore Jr. asserts that "Adaptation is thus an 'original' work in and of itself, especially if its audience has no referent to which to compare it for fidelity" (Wetmore 626). This is certainly the case for *The Birth of a Nation,* as the filmmaker purposefully attempts to distance the production from previous versions of Nat Turner's story. Parker knows that audiences will likely at least know something about Styron's novel, but he also takes advantage of a presumed lack of familiarity with Gray's text by refusing to mention it as well. This allows his film not only to further stand alone as an "original" work, but also works towards his goal of being an authoritative portrayal of Nat Turner as part of the American myth.

In addition to its calling back to the 1915 film, the title *The Birth of a Nation* also speaks to the relationship that the film aims to establish between the figure of Nat Turner and the nation

state. He wants Turner to be celebrated as a founding father in the same ways that white governmental actors such as Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson are. By naming the motion picture adaptation of Nat Turner's story, *The Birth of a Nation,* Parker suggests that Turner is instrumental in the formation of the United States. However, in doing so, Parker neglect the key difference between figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Nat Turner: Turner was enslaved. Parker's aim to put Turner in conversation with the founding fathers is further evinced at the start of the film. As the film opens an epigraph fills the screen. The very first words the audience sees are not words from Nat Turner, but from Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever" (Parker 0:00:01). This epigraph serves multiple functions. On one hand, it ostensibly draws a connection between the story of Turner that will soon unfold and the concerns of a statesman of the place where Turner lived and eventual president. At the same time, Jefferson's mentions of God and justice allude to the religiosity that permeates the film and comes to define Nat Turner's character in the film. An unacquainted viewer might assume that this statement is about the belief that slavery must come to an end. However, the inclusion of this quotation is also a contradiction. Though the prose asserts the desire for justice, it comes from a man who was a slaveholder. Jefferson and Turner likely had staunchly divergent understandings of justice, especially since Turner eventually resorts to killing so that he and others can be free from slavery. Slavery as an institution is built into the fabric of the country, but opening with Jefferson's remark demonstrates a desire to write the rebellion against it as a sort of act of nationalism. This runs counter to both how the rebellion was perceived at the time and how the original document of the confession was used. *The Confessions of Nat Turner as Told to Thomas Gray* was a legal document intended to prove his guilt in the eyes of the state. Turner was not a

founding father because his insurrection worked against the very institution that aimed to hold him hostage. In rebelling against slavery, he was not building the state or the nation, but rather was making an attempt to tear it down. By opening with the words of Jefferson instead of the (mediated through Gray) words of Turner, Parker's film further establishes its distance from the ostensible source text.

Turner's Functional Religiosity

The adaptation of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* from legal document into the historical drama that is *The Birth of a Nation* relies upon a portrayal of Turner that emphasizes religion in a way that manifests differently than in the original. More specifically, just as Gray's characterization of Nat Turner as a "Great Bandit" attempted to cast the insurrectionary leader in a villainous light, Parker's emphasis on Turner's religious leanings in the film contributes to its attempts to write Turner into the fabric of the U.S. nation. In every iteration of Nat Turner's story, his staunch spirituality is a constant. However, *The Birth of a Nation* crafts a version of Turner that relies on a kind of syncretized Christian religiosity to facilitate the events that take place within the narrative, not solely the uprising for which he is known.

The film's audience is first introduced to its protagonist when he is a child. Under the cover of darkness, his mother takes him into the forest to participate in an afro-diasporic spiritual ritual. In an unnamed language, the leader of the ceremony points to young Nat's chest and says, "This boy holds the holy marks of our ancestors. He is a leader" (Parker 0:02:04). This moment is somewhat reminiscent of one of Turner's recollections in the original *Confessions*, where he says, "I would surely be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. . .I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast" (Gray 7). In both versions of Turner's story, he is believed to be

set apart as leader through some sort of intervention or revelation from the divine. However, Turner's confession to Gray does not mention a connection to ancestors nor a spiritual ritual. His reference to "the Lord" suggests that the kind of spirituality he invokes in the original text is one that is more closely related to the Christian faith. By opening with this moment of black spirituality that is situated outside of the realm of Christianity, the film legitimizes Turner's role as a leader early on in the film. Not only is his leadership determined since his youth, but it is supported by his ancestors. The presence of this ritual at the start of the film situates Nat as having some sort of relationship to traditions that existed on the African continent. At the same time, it is a divergence from the devout Christianity we see him espouse and preach later in the film. It is important to note that this is the most extended engagement we see with this African tradition and religion in the film. This opening ritual, nor other active engagements with African spiritualities are not seen again. This scene does allude to a kind of resistance that is not tethered to the American nation state. Parker uses it to explicitly establish Turner as a kind of "chosen one" character, whose fate as a leader and person who should be listened to is established from birth. African spirituality is what first establishes him as a leader, but it is devotion to Christian religion that takes over as the narrative continues. Parker's aim of making Nat Turner a figure that can be incorporated into the nation requires an attempt to be legible to the faith and knowledge systems that support it. If the point is to include him into the American project, then he can't be seen as "too" African.

As the film progresses, viewers see more of how Turner's faith shapes his everyday life. When he becomes an adult, slave owner Samuel Turner decides to make use of both Nat's devout faith and his literacy by having him take up the role of itinerant preacher. The idea to have Nat take up this role is sparked when Samuel is having a conversation with another

slaveholder about how conditions of drought are causing potential unrest among the enslaved. He says to Samuel, "Talks of insurrection got folks scared. I think people might pay good money to have 'em calm down a bit. Especially by one of their own" (0:18:19). On one hand, this conversation gives audiences a glimpse into the various types of exploitation that took place on the plantation. Physical labor is what tends to come to mind when thinking of the types of labor that enslaved people did. However, Samuel takes ownership of Nat's intellectual labor as well, as he is the one who receives payment for Nat's sermons. At the same time, this exchange establishes an oppositional relationship between Nat and the act of insurrection, at least for the time being. The name Nat Turner is almost always associated with slave revolt. Even those who might not know the particulars of how the insurrection unfolded might at least be familiar with his name and what he represents. Because of this, the audience knows Nat Turner as a figure who foments rebellion, however, the film instead initially paints him as someone who is used as an attempt to quell it. The slaveholder's mention of the drought frames the possibility of insurrection as a direct result of it, as opposed to enslaved people combatting the brutal conditions of their everyday existence that started long before. This is the audience's first introduction to a possible uprising. It comes not from the enslaved themselves, but from nervous plantation owners. Turner's first role is not as insurrectionary leader, but to pacify the enslaved. In *Confessions*, Turner does not mention his faith being put to use in such a way. Instead, he says that he "studiously avoided mixing in society and wrapped [himself] in mystery, devoting [his] time to fasting and prayer" (Gray 9). Although Turner's faith is what ultimately prompts to lead others in rebellion, in his confession to Gray his early articulations of his spirituality are more private. He spends his days alone in prayer, as opposed to being the charismatic preacher depicted in the film. This deviation in how Turner's faith is depicted on film introduces a kind of

dramatic tension that might not have existed historically but reinforces the work's status as piece within the genre of historical fiction.

In addition to showing the ways in which Christianity could be used as a means to staunch potential uprisings, *The Birth of a Nation*'s portrayal of Nat Turner as a traveling preacher also serves a very specific function for the film's audience. As the protagonist of the film, Turner is the audience's introduction to the world of the film and therefore the landscape of the plantation and chattel slavery. This portrayal of Turner allows him mobility and the opportunity to take the audience with him as he speaks at plantations that are not owned by Samuel Turner. As he travels to more plantations, Nat and the audience bear witness to escalating amounts of violence enacted upon enslaved people. The violence onscreen ranges in degree from smaller moments, such as a little white girl playing with an enslaved black girl on a leash, to more explicit instances of torture using devices such as whips, bits, and chisels. The audience is inundated with the scenes of the quotidian moments of cruelty that comprise the environment of the plantation**.** It's crucial to note that as an enslaved person himself, Nat Turner would not have been unfamiliar with the levels of cruelty done to the enslaved. However, much of the narrative is driven by its insistence on repeatedly depicting the physical brutalities of the institution. Because Nat Turner is witnessing the various atrocities across multiple plantations along with the audience, his emotions serve as a primary motivation for inciting the rebellion. As he sees more and more cruelty, Nat gets gradually more fed up. He cannot bear seeing and experiencing the evils of slavery anymore and so he must rebel. One would assume that in purporting to tell the story of Nat Turner, *The Birth of a Nation* would focus on the insurrection that he led. Instead, the film prioritizes illustrating the depravity of the conditions that caused it. This film seems to want to try to expose and demonstrate the violence of slavery. It is less about

Turner as a person, but more about illustrating the brutality of the institution for its audience. Nat is the audience's way in as we travel with him as an itinerant preacher across plantations. Playing up Turner's relationship to his religion by making him into a preacher gives him a reason to travel and leave the plantation on which he lives. It is not sufficient for Turner to be fed up with brutal conditions of slavery in his day-to-day life, he must bear witness to conditions that are "worse" in terms of physical punishment. In a way, the film functions similarly to traditional nineteenth century slave narratives in its desire to put the violence of slavery on display.

Insurrection on Film

While Nat Turner's fierce religiosity has undoubtedly been cemented as part of the lore that surrounds him as a figure, by placing it in the foreground, *The Birth of a Nation* leaves what is arguably the most important part of his story for the last thirty minutes of the film's runtime: the insurrection at Southampton. One might initially assume that a film about Turner would make the insurrection the focal point of the film. After all, just the mention of Nat Turner's name conjures the idea of rebellion in the popular imagination**.** Instead, the audience is shown scenes of repeated violence against black people, which seems to function as an attempt to justify the violence that Turner and his militia will inevitably enact against the slaveowners and white inhabitants of the county. Members of the twenty-first century audience do not necessarily have to convinced about the existence of slavery's violence in the way that nineteenth century readers of slave narratives did. However, Parker seems to incorporate an immense level of brutality against enslaved black people onscreen so that they might be able to retaliate with vigor and still be deemed sympathetic and their actions reasonable. This runs counter to how both slavery and the insurrection are portrayed in *Confessions.* More specifically, Gray's record of Turner's confession is not intended to be sympathetic to the plight of the enslaved, as it is not intended to

be an abolitionist document. If Turner speaks in detail about the cruelties he faced on the plantation, Gray does not keep in it on the record. In fact, while the goal of his interview is to gain insight into Turner and his planning, Gray declines to provide more details about what occurred than Turner provides him. He writes, “I will not shock the feelings of humanity, nor wound afresh the bosoms of the disconsolate sufferers in this unparalleled and inhuman massacre, by detailing the deeds of their fiend-like barbarity” (Gray 19). Gray’s refusal to further describe what happened to the white people who were killed during the insurrection foreshadows Parker’s hesitation and need to further rationalize the depiction of violence against white people on screen.

As the insurrection ensues, the film not only shifts away from a more straightforward historical drama but also Parker’s motivation to incorporate Turner into a kind of American nationalism bubbles back to the surface. While the film has been generally been situated within the genre of historical fiction, it is at this moment where it briefly merges with the genre of war film. The war film not a genre that is mutually exclusive from the historical drama, but I bring it up more so to point out a very clear, yet brief, generic shift at this point in the film. *The Birth of a Nation* merges historical fiction with the war film in its attempt to solidify Nat Turner as a key figure in the formation of the American nation. Rather than portray on screen the repeated acts of breaking, entering, and murder, Parker instead stages a fictional battle in the town of Jerusalem. According to scholar Barry Langford, war films “exercise their own powerful capacity to structure popular memory and hence to ‘rewrite’ history” (Langford 108). Including a battle scene at Jerusalem and momentarily shifting the film’s genre does the work of rewriting history by attempting to manipulate how audiences understand Nat Turner as a figure. So far in the film he has already been established as a leader. Now, Nat Turner becomes a military leader.

Following along *too* closely with historical events might not necessarily lead audiences to this conclusion. After all, they were primarily killing men, women, and children as they slept. While the real Nat Turner and his militia were apprehended before they made it to Jerusalem, Parker makes it the climax of the insurrection and the film. Bloodied from their first night of killing their masters (primarily off screen), Turner and his militia wield axes, knives, swords, and sticks as they face off with the gun carrying white landowners. As he recites from Psalms, "The Lord is my light and salvation, so whom shall I fear. . ." the men charge at each other while bullets fly and axes start to swing (Parker 1:35:42). The last bit of violence the audience sees committed by Turner and his men is one of religiously supported "combat". It is not only a bit more "respectable" or "victorious" even though they ultimately lose, but it also ostensibly makes it easier to incorporate them back into the American project (as problematic and contradictory as that is). They merely lost a battle. Casting Nat and his co-conspirators as a militia in battle elides the fact that they were actually acting against the very state that Parker's film wants to place them into. Illustrating the historical reality of the event might not only make for a less compelling watch, but also would force the filmmaker to address the systemic power imbalances that are otherwise somewhat downplayed by the rest of the film.

The Birth of a Nation's brief intermingling with the genre of war film illustrates an understanding of freedom that is tied to both nationalism and militarism that quite ironically works against popular understandings of Nat Turner as a figure. This is seen not only through the addition of the battle scene, but through the character of the unnamed young boy. The audience is first introduced to him when he wants to be part of the militia but Hark tries to send him away, telling him that he is too young. However, Nat allows the boy to stay with them as they start to plot their uprising (1:17:42). At the first sign of battle, he is afraid and returns to his master.

However, in one of the final scenes as Turner is being hanged, the camera alternates between a close up of Turner's eyes and the boy's as he tearfully looks up at him. The camera then pans out to show the boy, now a young man, in a union army uniform with an American flag behind him as he runs into battle (1:49:38). This is the final scene of the film. These closing shots function in two ways. First, they establish the boy as a kind of inheritor of Nat Turner's legacy. Because he is tried and hanged, Turner does not live on to fight another day, so the boy must literally take up arms to do so. At the same time, the closing frame attempts to establish the Civil War as a continuation of Turner's insurrectionary battle. However, this does not quite work. By nature of his actions, Nat Turner is considered an enemy of the state. His insurrection is not merely a reaction to mistreatment, but an attempt to usurp power. Even in fictionalizing the majority of the events that comprise his life story, it is difficult (if not impossible) to reconcile that a figure who would kill white people for freedom would be easily accepted as a hero of a nation built on white supremacy, antiblackness and slavery.

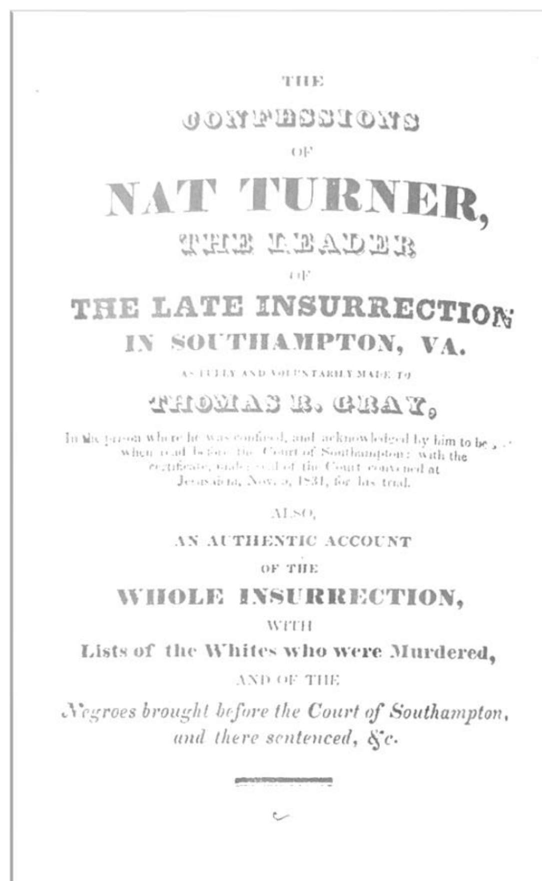
Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner*

Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* is not the first time that the story of Nat Turner's rebellion has been told in a visual medium in recent years. In 2008, Kyle Baker independently published his graphic novel version of Turner's story, entitled *Nat Turner.* Initially released as a series of separate comic book issues, after multiple reprints it was published as a single volume under the publisher Abrams Comic Arts. *Nat Turner*'s initial run as an independently published work was not due to lack of access to the larger publisher but rather an intentional decision made by Baker who writes in the preface, "I originally chose to publish Nat Turner myself, rather than through the comic book publishers I usually work for (the two largest). I liked that one of my first books as an independent publisher would be about a self-freed slave" (Baker 7). What does this kind of

framing suggest about Baker's novel? In a sense, Baker's decision to publish *Nat Turner* outside of the major institutional channels might be understood as an attempt to speak to (or maybe amplify?) Turner's plan to upend the existing power structure that was chattel slavery. In describing Turner as a "self-freed slave", Baker establishes his conceptualization of Turner a figure who worked to upend existing structures of power. Baker crafts a figure of Nat Turner that exists not only outside of the institution of slavery (due to his own self emancipatory actions) but also one that is situated (at least initially) outside of major publishing institutions as well. At the same time, Parker uses *The Birth of a Nation* to situate Turner inside of both the nation-state along with the American motion picture industry. Acknowledging the respective publication and distribution histories of both of these works might not necessarily change how audiences engage with or understand them but does offer a glimpse into how author and filmmaker understand and utilize Nat Turner as a figure before the narratives unfold.

In addition to its approach to publication and distribution, Baker's *Nat Turner* also differs from *The Birth of a Nation* in its relationship to the source text. Baker incorporates *Confessions* in order to craft the specificities of Nat's own life story but the worldbuilding of the text is built by well researched fiction. In other words, although Baker more explicitly refers to and incorporates Turner's confession into his novel, the images and overall depiction of Turner himself are products of his imagination. While *The Birth of a Nation* distances itself from its source material by both refusing to mention Gray's version of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* by name and opening with an quotation from Thomas Jefferson, *Nat Turner* makes it clear to readers that the graphic novel has an intimate relationship with its source text from the very first page. Baker opens the graphic novel with the image of the title page for *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA, As Told to Thomas R. Gray*.

The words are written in gray, slightly faded font. Beginning his graphic novel with this title page draws a direct connection between Baker's graphic novel and Gray's account of Turner's confession. The very first image readers see are not Baker's illustrations but a reminder that there is a record of Turner's account of events. This lets readers know that the narrative that fills the pages of this novel can be assumed to be based on, or inspired by, the words within Turner's account. At the very least, it puts the two forms of Turner's story into direct conversation with one another. *Nat Turner* does not purport to be *the* story of Nat Turner, but instead is one of many. At the same time, it somewhat situates itself as part of the older account's lineage. It also leads readers to the "logical" conclusion that the narrative told on the pages of Baker's novel is a visual representation of Turner's confession. While *The Birth of a Nation* elides the violence of the rebellion by refusing to mention it in the title and the film's opening scenes, the title page of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* includes the portion that asserts it is "an authentic account of the whole insurrection, with lists of the whites who were murdered" (Baker 10). *Nat Turner* does not attempt to hide the violent nature of the insurrection. The actions that led to Turner's incarceration are not left up for question. Instead, the novel establishes its relationship to violence and rebellion from the outset.


THE

CONFESSIONS

OF

NAT TURNER,

THE LEADER

OF

THE LATE INSURRECTION

IN SOUTHAMPTON, VA.

AS FULLY AND VOLUNTARILY MADE TO

THOMAS R. GRAY,

In the prison where he was confined, and acknowledged by him to be such, when read before the Court of Southampton; with the certificate, under seal of the Court convened at Jerusalem, Nov. 5, 1831, for his trial.

ALSO,

AN AUTHENTIC ACCOUNT

OF THE

WHOLE INSURRECTION,

WITH

Lists of the Whites who were Murdered,

AND OF THE

Negroes brought before the Court of Southampton, and there sentenced, &c.

Figure 5: The title page of Gray's version of *Confessions* featured in the opening of *Nat Turner. Nat Turner*, Kyle Baker, Abrams ComicArts, 2016, pg. 10.

Although the inclusion of the title page suggests that this will be an adaptation of Turner's confession, it does not mean that it is a direct word-to-image translation of the original text. The inclusion of the original text's title page sets the scene for Turner's confession, only for the first page of the actual graphic narrative to deviate. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the first page immediately after the title page features a statement from Edmund J. Lee, the clerk of the district, authenticating the account and then is followed by a public statement from Gray. While the early pages of the source text establish it as a legal document, Baker's opening scene of *Nat Turner* makes it clear that the graphic novel is going to part of a different genre of writing. The first image readers see is a black and white illustration of what appears to be a market in an unnamed African country. People sell their wares and there is an overall peaceful tone to this opening scene. The third panel features the headshot of a man who can be understood to live in the village where the market is held. His facial expression sits in a serene smile. This opening

scene illustrates how the violence of the slave trade disrupted daily life (11). This scene is also unexpected. The title page sets reader expectations for Nat Turner's confession and his story, which does not necessarily entail traveling to Africa, especially because Turner himself was born in the United States. What does starting Turner's story in Africa do? It ties him to a geographical and revolutionary lineage that is larger than the United States and extends beyond himself. It also opens with a world, continent, and country of black autonomy. Though Turner was born enslaved, this version of his narrative beginning on an African shore suggests that this is the kind of black freedom that Turner aimed to return to by way of slave revolt. Though we only see this scene for a couple of pages, it is a more in depth and prolonged engagement with Turner's connection to Africa than in *The Birth of a Nation* (and is completely nonexistent in *Confessions*). Baker's imagery imagines a Turner whose life story is more intimately tied to Africa prior to being touched by the Middle Passage. In this narrative, the continent is not merely a source of spirituality or inspiration for a kind of myth making. It is a place where people built their daily lives briefly unencumbered by the violence of antiblackness.

Figure 6: A thriving community in an unnamed country in Africa before the arrival of slave traders. *Nat Turner* pg. 11.

Another effect of *Nat Turner*'s opening on the continent of Africa as opposed to the plantation is that it facilitates the depiction of various types of resistance that took place. Readers witness not only Nat Turner's insurrection in Virginia but are given access to viewing other forms of rebellion that were enacted in the Middle Passage. The first instance we see of this is portrayed in a scene where a trader attempts to capture a small child. The child stares up at the trader with enlarged, frightened eyes as the figure's shadow and his lasso loom over him. In the next panel, a woman throws a handful of dirt and stones into the trader's face. As he is startled and blinded, the young woman picks up the child and runs away, bullets whizzing past their faces (18.3-20.1). Despite their weaponry being unequal in power (rocks versus a gun and horse), this early moment of retaliation and defense sets the scene for the resistance that is to come later in the narrative. During this brief moment, the woman not only asserts the will to defend herself, but to protect others as well. The potential for her own individual freedom from their captors does not come at the cost of the child's safety. At the same time, this encounter also

demonstrates that resistance might not always look like insurrection. Instead, it appears in these seemingly smaller instances of direct confrontation. It might seem that the story of this woman is disparate both geographically and narratively from the story of Nat Turner, but in fact the inclusion of her fighting back into this narrative places Turner into a broader lineage and tradition of rebellion and resistance. Resistance against the antiblack violence that buttressed the slave trade is not limited to those who lived on plantations. The desire to fight for freedom from capture extends across the Atlantic. Though Turner's insurrection lives in historical infamy, he is far from alone in his efforts to combat the conditions of enslavement. Nat Turner's act of defiance may look different from that of the rock thrower, but they both have the same goal: to secure their freedom and that of those around them. The original *Confessions* does not mention a world outside of Virginia. There is no allusion to the existence of black communities and societies on the African continent. At the same time, *The Birth of a Nation*'s commitment to the U.S. nation-state precludes a conceptualization of Nat Turner as one of many leaders of insurrection. Parker's effort to create a version of Turner that exists as patriotic avatar consequently places him inside of a vacuum. In contrast, by incorporating the scene of this woman's act of resistance, Baker suggests that rebellion is an afro diasporic phenomenon. The insurrection in Southampton does not stand alone, but instead is one of many instances of slave revolt that took place across geographical boundaries.[5]

[5] In a future version of this chapter, I'd also like to explore how Parker and Baker's texts gender the act(s) of rebellion and how they depict enslaved women. *The Birth of a Nation* portrays the insurrection as primarily involving men, women characters exist only so that their pain serves as motivation for Nat Turner and his male co-conspirators. This, along with the film's merging with the war film genre paints Turner and revolution as a product of a kind of (hegemonic) masculine militarism. Meanwhile, *Nat Turner* incorporates women and their various acts of rebellion (including infanticide, reading, and participation in Turner's insurrection) as part of Turner's lineage and an imagining of black rebellion.

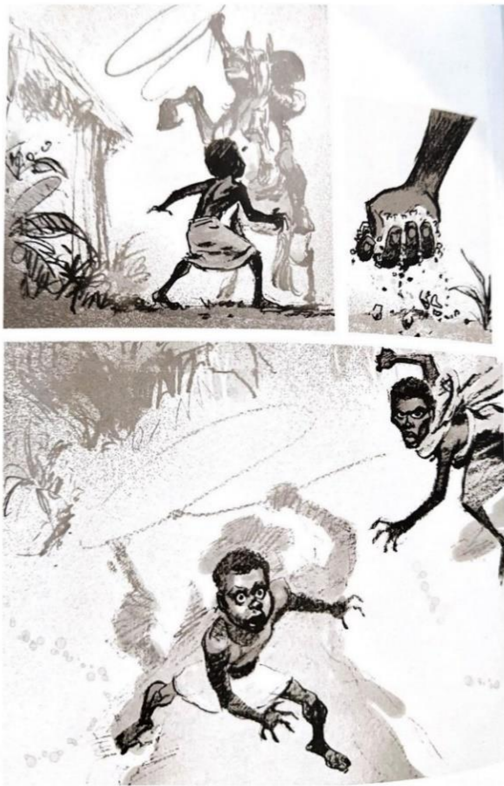


Figure 7: A child encounters a slave catcher, but a woman defends him and helps him escape. *Nat Turner* pg. 18-20.

Nat Turner's literacy

In addition to conceptualizing Nat Turner as a figure who fits into broader battles for black freedom, Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* understands him as a necessarily strategic and

duplicitous leader. In contrast, to make him a compelling film protagonist, *The Birth of a Nation*, primarily relies upon portraying Turner as a passionate and charismatic figure. Parker's Nat is driven primarily by his feelings of horror caused by slavery along with his fierce religiosity. With the film's emphasis on depicting the brutality of slavery and the emotions of Turner for its audience, it in turn downplays the revolutionary potential that was latent in Turner's other traits and skills, such as his literacy. Meanwhile, *Nat Turner* portrays its protagonist as necessarily strategic and duplicitous, even prior to planning the insurrection itself, and does so through its depictions of Turner's literacy. *The Birth of a Nation* briefly shows a moment where the mistress of the Turner plantation teaches Nat how to read as a child. While he is limited in the texts that he is allowed to read, his early literacy is framed as an act of kindness done by the mistress. Not only does this depiction of Turner's learning to read deviate from the source text where Turner tells Gray, "The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect east, so much so, that I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet. . .was a source of wonder to all in the neighborhood, particularly the blacks" (Gray 8), but also does not suggest the reasons *why* black literacy was limited in the first place. While *Confessions* frames Turner's literacy as a source of wonder, *Nat Turner*'s illustrations highlight both the dangers of black literacy on the plantation as well as Turner's use of strategy in hiding it. This is shown during a moment where a young Nat is reading a book, presumably the Bible, as it has a cross on its cover. One panel features only a single boot that has the motion of walking. The next panel depicts a close up of Turner's ear and his eye is fixed in the direction of the boot in the previous panel. He is noticing that someone is approaching. By the time the overseer is standing next to Turner on the next page, the young boy is holding the book upside down. His facial expression is dazed and his eyes are crossed. This

Nat directly contrasts the attentive, studious child who was featured in the earlier panels. He is hiding in plain sight. He does not simply try to put the book away. Instead, he feigns confusion and a kind of bumbling clumsiness so that the overseer does not know what he is up to (Baker 88-89)[6]. This series of panels is revelatory to the reader in a couple of ways. First, it demonstrates Turner's ability to think quickly, even at a young age. It also reveals that the Nat Turner seen by white men is not necessarily the "true" Nat Turner. His actions and how he comes across to others is a tactical decision. He is calculated. This scene also reminds readers just how much of a risk Nat takes by practicing his reading. Turner's literacy is dangerous and a threat to the antiblack and white supremacist foundations of society, but the images show that Turner is strategic in hiding it. At every turn, Baker reminds readers that Turner is potentially threatening, and for good reason.

[6] Baker emphasizes the risks of enslaved people reading earlier on in the text when an unnamed older woman sneaks to read a book inside of the big house and is violently punished when she is caught (Baker 74).

Figure 8: Young Nat feigns confusion to avoid being punished for reading a book. *Nat Turner* pg. 88.

Like both Parker and Gray's iterations, Baker's version of Nat Turner also imbued with a potent sense of spirituality and commitment to his faith. One consistency in Turner's characterization across each text is that his status as a leader is due to his being selected by the Divine. His status as eventual rebel leader is tied to his faith. However, how this plays out in the visual narrative looks a bit different from these other versions of the narrative. To be more precise, Baker's imagery creates a portrait of Nat Turner where his literacy, faith, and therefore for his leadership are intimately tied. For example, Turner says, "I was greatly astonished, and for two years prayed continually, whenever my duty would permit– and then again I had the same revelation, which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty" (92). Reading only Gray's prose would not necessarily give an indication of what Turner's acts of prayer look like. More specifically, praying is an act that most often tends to be associated with orality. One would assume that in saying that he

"prayed continually", Turner is speaking aloud. However, Baker's illustrations interpret these words in another way. Across a series of three panels, Turner is shown to be holding a Bible. In the first, he holds the book close to his face and only top of his head and furrowed brow are visible. Although it is somewhat difficult to tell, he appears to still be a young child in this frame. The second panel shows his entire face but his head is tilted forward. It is as though his is gaining more comfort and confidence with what he is reading, as well as having aged a bit. In the last panel, Turner's head is fully lifted and he has reached full adulthood. This sequence of panels appears to take place over a period that spans longer than the two years mentioned in the narration. However, in pairing these images with this particular excerpt of *Confessions*, Baker creates a visual link between Turner's acts of prayer and studying the Bible. He comes into his leadership not just through prayer as a kind embodied and spoken act, but through his literacy as well. Readers do not see Nat Turner bowed in prayer. Instead, we witness him intently reading and studying his religious text. Baker's Nat Turner is one whose spirituality and leadership, while initiated by "the spirit", is confirmed through other measures. *The Birth of a Nation* emphasizes his religiosity over his literacy while *Nat Turner* demonstrates that they are tied. Baker sees Turner's planning of the insurrection and his tactical prowess as inextricable from his devotion to *reading* his bible. The graphic novel's Turner is a figure who operates not from blind faith but a want to engage with the written word.[7]

[7] Literacy and it's potential to spark ideas of rebellion are not unique to Turner but also seems to be built into his revolutionary lineage. The book concludes with the image of an enslaved person taking *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Gray's version) to read under the cover of darkness.

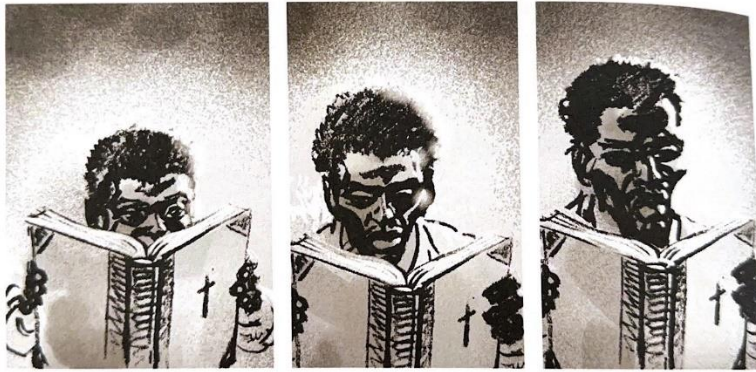


Figure 9: Nat studies his Bible. *Nat Turner* pg. 92.

The Insurrection

Nat Turner's portrayal of the infamous insurrection and the events that precipitated it highlights that this insurrection did not occur in a vacuum. More specifically, the panels that accompany the prose of the original *Confessions* when Turner makes the decision to plan the uprising continues the graphic novel's attempts to place it into conversation with other global acts of black rebellion and slave revolts. As Turner confesses, "And immediately on the sign appearing in the heavens, the seal was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do, to four in whom I had the greatest confidence– it was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the 4th of July last" (111). This excerpt from Turner's account sits adjacent to two panels containing images that at first glance might not seem to have much to do with one another. The first panel depicts a dimly lit scene of large pig being roasted on a spit over a campfire. The pig is situated in the center of the panel over the flame, while what appears to be trees and at least one person, are lined around the perimeter. Meanwhile, the second panel is a more direct illustration of what is being described by the prose. Turner stands towards the center of the panel and is flanked by four men. The narration sits on the page next to both panels, suggesting that while Turner's account of planning the rebellion does not include anything about a pig, its visual presence on the page is at least somewhat related to his planning.

Though at first glance this panel might seem out of place, for those who are familiar with the lore that surrounds the start of the Haitian Revolution, this panel is difficult to ignore. The image calls to mind the Bois Caïman ceremony, a vodou ceremony and the site of where enslaved people of what was then Saint Domingue crafted their plan to revolt. Presided over by a man named Boukman, this ceremony involved the slaughter of a pig and is considered the catalyzing event of the slave revolt that ultimately came to be known as the Haitian Revolution. Although the narration (and therefore *Confessions*' version of Turner) does not give readers reason to believe that Turner practiced similar vodou rites, this illustration puts the two slave uprisings into conversation with one another. It is less about the pig itself and more so the potential that it represents. Just as a gathering of slaves in the woods of Saint Domingue led to emancipation and the establishment of a new country, Turner's gathering of men carries with it the possibility of changing the course of history.

Figure 10: A pig roasts and Nat Turner plans his insurrection. *Nat Turner* pg. 111.

The graphic novel's portrayal of the insurrection itself is vastly different from its depiction in Parker's film. Its illustration of events appears to align more closely with how Gray discusses the event in the opening pages of *Confessions*. By this I do not mean that Baker *literally* turns all of Gray's words into image, but rather that *Nat Turner* captures the air of terror felt among white people as a result of it. Gray describes the militia as "remorseless murderers" whose "[a]pprehension for their own personal safety seems to have been the only principle of restraint in the whole course of their bloody proceedings" (Gray 4). Baker's illustrations do not shy away from depicting the brutality of the entire affair. While *The Birth of a Nation* tries to portray the rebellion as though it was a war, *Nat Turner* depicts it for the massacre that it was. Gray describes the scene as bloody and the militia as murderers. *Nat Turner* is not reticent to show its audience that Turner and his co-conspirators were indeed willing to kill for their freedom. It does so by including images that are reminiscent of a slasher film. This is especially evident in the depiction of the first death of the insurrection. Nat and fellow rebel Will enter the bed chambers of his master and mistress to "spill the first blood". The panels that portray their attack on the man and woman are dark and somewhat chaotic. It is difficult to decipher the actions that are occurring. However, it is the immediate aftermath of this first kill that shifts the imagery into a kind of graphic slasher novel. One panel shows a single pair of feet from the ankles down and a hand carrying a hatchet. As one foot takes a step forward, bloody footprints are left behind. More blood flows from the head of the hatchet as a pool of blood creeps into the panel from the left side, presumably stemming from a body lying out of frame (Baker 116.1). The very next panel makes the audience feel as though they are watching Nat's militia through a door. As the men dressed in blood-stained clothing walk away from the door carrying their weapons, a single bloody handprint sits on the door (116.2). For a few moments, the

inescapability of the blood in this scene communicates the level of violence that is occurring (and will continue to occur) without showing the dead bodies at first. The sheer amount of blood alludes to the level of violence that is sure to come. The delay of seeing the carnage adds to the reader's feelings of suspense and terror as the insurrection continues in the narrative. On one hand, this is what happened historically. Turner and his militia went to homes and hacked people with hatchets. At the same time, it speaks to the radical potential of the insurrection. For white people, not only is the possibility of the enslaved turning against them terrifying on a physical level, but it also threatens to upend the structures of power that they rely on. In other words, Baker briefly uses the terror that comes from the visceral violence of the slasher horror genre to not only illustrate the sheer violence Turner and others needed to turn to in their attempts to get free, but also articulate the insurrection as a grasp for power.

Figure 11: The insurrection begins. *Nat Turner* pg. 116.

Conclusion

The Birth of a Nation and *Nat Turner* illustrate that two people can take the same source material and ostensibly center the same character yet create works that communicate vastly divergent articulations of not only how they understand Nat Turner as a figure, but also their conceptualizations of what insurrection and fights for freedom mean in the present day. As Turner's story is repeated and adapted into different mediums and across genres, the narratives that are produced are not necessarily about what occurred during the historical event. For Nate Parker, Nat Turner is not the religious fanatic leader of massacre that Thomas Gray understands him to be. Parker's Turner is a Christian military general who leads his men into battle not only for his and his people's freedom, but for the sake of the morality of the nation. Meanwhile, Kyle Baker's Turner does not stand alone in his quest for freedom for enslaved people but rather is one of many around the world resisting slavery in a myriad of ways. These vastly different portrayals of the same figure are made possible through the act of adaptation. Examining these works alongside each other reminds us that how Nat Turner and his insurrection are portrayed in literature and popular culture are not objective, but rather are the result of intentional decisions on the part of those who craft these narratives.

Adaptation as a phenomenon is not limited to the story of Nat Turner and the creation of new versions of his narrative. The 21st century has seen a proliferation of adaptations in the form of neo-slave narratives. To be more precise, fictional neo-slave narratives have been adapted from novels into the forms of either film or television miniseries. The past three years alone have seen television adaptations of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, and James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*, while it was announced in 2022 that Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer* will also be adapted into an upcoming film. Adaptation is a

modality that seems to be particularly pertinent for authors of 21st century neo-slave narratives. On one hand, the neo-slave narrative in and of itself might be considered an adaptation of the slave narrative. If we consider that the neo-slave narrative initially emerged as a form to speak about the issues, frustrations and shifting political scene of the 1960s, then it makes sense that the form would also shift as the years continue to pass. Linda Hutcheon reminds us that "According to its dictionary meaning, 'to adapt' is to adjust, alter, to make suitable" (Hutcheon 7). Perhaps adapting neo-slave narratives into visual forms is one way try to "make them suitable" for the 21st century and continue to rearticulate black freedom in the afterlife of slavery.

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