Resonant Genres and Intertexts in the Neo-Slave Narratives of Caryl Phillips, Octavia Butler, and Lawrence Hill

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor in Philosophy

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
November, 2005

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Abstract

Since the late 1960s, a number of postslavery writers in English have contributed to a growing body of literature that, in re-imagining slavery, does crucial cultural work in challenging preconceptions about race relations. The novels’ structure and verisimilitude depend in large part (but not exclusively) on the earliest examples of Black autobiography in Europe and America: the slave narratives written, transcribed, collected and published (often in the service of anti-slavery and anti-racist movements) in the late 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. These neo-slave narratives thus appropriate, translate, and critique a constellation of slave narrative attributes. To date, critical studies of these neo-slave narratives have been confined within traditional nationalist (often American) perspectives. The current study redresses the relative lack of attention granted to British/West Indian and Canadian authors, and places them in the context of studies of American neo-slave narratives. More importantly, existing scholarship extensively describes the enduring generic lineage of the abolitionist slave narrative, but omits the influence of other genres and discourses. The thesis therefore applies the varied intertextual, discursive and generic strategies of the concept of métissage (combination), as articulated in the theories of Françoise Lionnet, M. M. Bakhtin, Gérard Genette, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to attend to varied influential genres and discourses in four polyphonic neo-slave narratives. The thesis examines previously neglected correspondences between slave narratives and travel writing in Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge and those between juxtaposed holocaust writing, prison writing, and slave narratives in Phillips’ Higher Ground. Next, the thesis assesses the critique that Octavia Butler’s dialogic Kindred presents to slave narratives and speculative fiction. Finally, it contextualizes the embedded slave narrative of Lawrence Hill’s Any Known Blood within popular family memoirs. The four novels all are shown to negotiate a location within and independence from both dominant and marginal literary traditions, their inner tensions providing lessons in reading a larger, living moment of genre renewal.
Acknowledgements

My experiences at Dalhousie University are distinguished by the generous and cooperative community I found there. My supervisor Dr. Marjorie Stone managed for a very long time to fit constructive criticism and faith in my ability into her long schedule of commitments. I am deeply impressed by and grateful for her dedication. Her suggestions have always been complemented perfectly and thoroughly by those of adjunct professor Dr. Maureen Moynagh, of Saint Francis Xavier University. I also thank Dr. Anthony Stewart and Dr. Jason Haslam for insightful discussions and readings of the thesis. Dr. Victor Li helped along research and writing in the early stages. Together, the members of my supervisory committee prove that successful communication can take place over great distances. Any remaining errors are my own.

Occasional consultation with Dr. Trevor Ross, Dr. Bruce Greenfield, Rory Leitch and Steve McCullough has also assisted my thinking. The support of Dalhousie faculty members Dr. Christina Luckyj, Dr. Melissa Furrow, and Dr. Len Diepeveen, and graduate secretaries Lynn Lantz, Carol Sequeira, and Mary Beth MacIsaac at various times of crisis also deserves mention. The Faculty of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie University provided generous financial support through the Graduate Fellowship for four years of this project. With this support, I was able to do necessary research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York. Staff members at that and other libraries have been generous with time and expertise.

Lawrence Hill granted a lengthy and thoughtful interview for my chapter on his novel.

Simon Fraser University, The University of British Columbia, and Kwantlen University College awarded me the means of remaining connected to academic communities through teaching contracts while I lived in Vancouver and worked on the thesis. I single out the staff, faculty, and students in the English Department at Simon Fraser University for their engaged responses to my ideas and for encouraging me to teach in my thesis area. In particular, Dr. Tom Grieve assisted me to reshape the thesis at a crucial point, and many students – including Don Bourne, Andrea Pearce, Gloria Slaney, Phil Mahoney, and Lawanda Patterson – made illuminating suggestions about the texts in question.

I thank study buddies Greg Sutherland, Aaron Cavon, Stacey Armstrong, Dr. Aurelea Mahood, Dr. Kate Scheel, Elizabeth Gooding, Heather Wainwright, Heather Stretch and Sandra Gabrielle for many helpful conversations and much support.

My family members – Mary, Kenneth, Janet, Lawrence, Graeme, Patricia, and William – provided homes, working spaces, and financial assistance. I thank them for these and for the priceless gifts of sympathetic listening, good humor, sacrifice and incredible patience. Without the help of each and every member of my family, I simply could not have started nor could I have completed this study.
Chapter 1

Introduction

A number of recent texts combine historical and sociological awareness and research with varied artistic visions to rectify certain omissions in the received history of slavery and emancipation, or to repair particular rents in nineteenth-century narratives occasioned by abolitionist pressures or by more general social strictures. These neo-slave narratives come to terms with historical slavery and the earlier literary tradition of representing that slavery, and they represent the continuing effects and manifestations of slavery in recent times. Such works may include the dramatic work Beatrice Chancy, by George Elliott Clarke; more prominently, they include fictions such as Margaret Walker’s Jubilee, William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner, Ernest Gaines’ The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada, David Bradley’s The Chaneysville Incident, Sherley Anne Williams’ Dessa Rose, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, Charles Johnson’s The Middle Passage and Oxherding Tale, Gayl Jones’ Corregidora, Phyllis Perry’s Stigmata, Lorene Cary’s The Price of a Child, Michelle Cliff’s Free Enterprise, Fred D’Aguiar’s Feeding the Ghosts and The Longest Memory, David Dabydeen’s A Harlot’s Progress, Nalo Hopkinson’s The Salt Roads, Caryl Phillips’ Higher Ground, Cambridge, and Crossing the River, Octavia Butler’s Kindred, and Lawrence Hill’s Any Known Blood. The neo-slave in these novels can be a slave newly written, or an individual (often the descendant of slaves) enslaved by the dominant expectations and trenchant racism of a “master” society. I suggest, through diaspora theory, black feminist theory, and an examination of literary conventions, that neo-slave narratives not only contribute to the established tradition of writing about slavery as experienced by those of
African descent, but also subvert expectations of the genre. In other words, the “neo-slave narrative” is both the new story of the old slave, and the old story of the new slave.

I present four texts – Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge* and *Higher Ground*, Butler’s *Kindred*, and Hill’s *Any Known Blood* – all of which use hypertextuality as the predominant vehicle for introducing heteroglossia (the artistic manipulation of numerous discourses) into all texts and into the representation of the past; together these novels’ structures make a strong statement that, in order to appreciate the complexity of history, we must have imaginative access to many voices speaking the past. Within each novel, pastiche and polyphony take a subtly different form. *Cambridge* (1991) contains within a narrative framework several competing reports, from differently raced, classed, and gendered individuals, on the same circumstances, a West Indian slave’s murder of a plantation overseer. I argue that the novel’s patterns of extensive borrowing from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century travel writing and slave narratives provide an implicit critique of these discourses and are connected to its polyphonic effects. *Higher Ground* (1989), on the other hand, creates several characters inhabiting entirely different places in history and geography, whose dispersed discourses and experiences are juxtaposed and held in open-ended tension. I identify sources for the novel’s prison letters and demonstrate the tenuous symmetries between people incarcerated by slavery, the Holocaust, and racist legal systems. As the thesis progresses, it leaves behind the more specific citations of Phillips’ hypertextuality for looser instances of hypertextuality, and leaves behind discourse pastiches for genre. The third text, *Kindred* (1979), should be considered dialogic (as opposed to polyphonic) as it presents us with a single narrator’s voice split by time travel between her literal involvement in her family past of
enslavement and the present demands of her interracial relationship; hence the narrator unites — but is unable to hold together — speculative fiction and the slave narrative. In unraveling the generic threads, I find that this novel poses a rebuttal of the underlying assumptions of speculative fiction. Finally, the narrator of Any Known Blood (1997) discovers, and his fictional family memoir reconciles, a number of embedded polyphonic documents, including a slave narrative, and is therefore an inclusive, not fragmented, polyphonic text. Working from patterns drawn from family memoirs, I emphasize this novel’s reworking of the testimony of a black member of John Brown’s army and Alex Haley’s Roots. Voices in conflict; voices speaking into a void; single voices attempting to control and center the whirling testimonies of the slave past. The thesis begins with extremely noisy confrontation and disruption between overlapping yet competing discourses the reader is required to negotiate in Cambridge and Higher Ground; as the study proceeds to Butler and Hill, the texts still instantiate critiques of slave narratives and other genres, yet they also clear space for the creative and unifying potential (glimpsed in the writerly preoccupations of both protagonists) emerging through the juxtapositions of discourse and genre.

In rethinking these (indeed any) neo-slave narratives, it is useful to place their varying integrations of historical pasts. One convention of neo-slave narratives is the anxious and continual renegotiation between the competing claims of history and fiction expressed in different forms at different times.¹ In general, the thesis moves from works located entirely in the past to works located (never entirely) in the present. With all characters and discourses located firmly in identifiable past scenarios, Phillips’ two novels are resolutely historical fiction: the first, Cambridge, taking place nearly two
hundred years in the past, and the second, *Higher Ground*, ranging from the eighteenth century to the 1960s. In these two books, all the characters are minor players in and eyewitnesses of large historical movements: the enslavement of Africans, the Holocaust, the Black Power movement. The narrators are complicatedly restricted, cloudy windows through which readers see episodes of the past unfold. Then I move toward fiction framing the past in contemporary settings. Butler’s novel situates its narrator in 1976 and includes (through the vehicle of time travel) scenes from the early nineteenth century.

Torn from 1976, Dana is an unwilling researcher of the past. Finally, *Any Known Blood* takes place in the present day of the 1990s, with past events and scenes not experienced but imagined and documented by the protagonist as part of a fiction-making project. In the latter two books, narrators are (like readers) voyeurs of the past who become participants in the imaginative recreation of history. Even in fiction, the understanding of slavery gained from eyewitnesses is of a different quality to that gained from historians.

A reader may identify more closely with their near-contemporaries as she accompanies these voyeurs of the past, sharing many of their concerns about historiography, especially the distance between event and representation. In short, representation of the present takes over from representation of the past, and the relationship between past and present becomes a more manifest thematic concern of the works, as I move through the argument.

Although it may not “be possible to advance a non-essentialist discourse” (George Elliott Clarke after Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *Odysseys Home* 60), I still feel that the choice of three “black” authors runs the risk of resurrecting a powerfully essentialist vision of race – a vision that, if taken as “fixed determinism” (Gates, “Authenticity” 30), could well contribute to further exploitation and oppression. Clearly, white scholars who
take an interest in black culture can and often do impose a more-or-less disguised version of the antagonistic, hegemonic, imperialist gaze that has sought to oppress and/or assimilate blacks and black culture for hundreds of years. Implicitly, my readings of these novels of the black diaspora pay homage to the literary skills of their authors, yet, heeding bell hooks’s comments on the literature of black American women writers – “to engage it critically in a rigorous way is more a gesture of respect than is passive acceptance” (Yearning 7) – my readings also struggle to attend seriously to the aesthetic, political, and social concerns of each book. The academy’s need for rigorous analysis is thus perhaps a small – very small – means to meet marginal groups’ pressing need for recognition and restitution. The selection of texts (and incidentally their authors) is a small part of an effort to challenge hegemonic notions of race and diaspora, as each author poses interventions in the essentializing discourses of race which I hope to continue by highlighting these texts’ pluralities of identity, geography, discourse, and genre. It is of course crucial to proceed without effacing the differences between the authors, or their particular racial, gendered, cultural milieux, or, most importantly, the texts examined; in short, to answer Stuart Hall’s call to attend to the diversity of blackness (30).5

How did slavery remain so important a figure in individual and cultural construction? In the US, with its cessation of black reconstruction and the commencement of black codes largely built on the slave codes, Jim Crow and systematic lynching and rape throughout the Southern US, systemic racism throughout the US, and new forms of wage slavery such as sharecropping – in short, “one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings” (Du Bois, Black Reconstruction
727) – African-Americans were not permitted to lose sight of slavery and achieved only what African American District of Columbia property-owners in 1866 termed a “partial liberty” (qtd. by Du Bois 285). At the same time, paradoxically, a “new historical trend in effect obscured black perspectives on the slave past” (Van Deburg 77), and blacks were “ashamed of their slave past” (Ellison, Shadow 269). Even today, slavery may be a frequently unpleasant, unwanted reminder of oppression to blacks (Coombe 136). Yet measures of freedom such as the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments did not smother slave narratives so much as ignite the autobiographical impulse for men and women anxious to achieve and to record their achievements. In the West Indies also, extreme forms of class-consciousness and sensitivity to gradations of colour, imported indentured labor, and new forms of socioeconomic dependence and stratification, constantly reminded members of the black diaspora of the continuation of slavery, a “diluted slavery” in the words of George Lamming (qtd. in Ledent, Caryl Phillips 128).

Throughout the new world, including Canada (also a post-slavery site), slavery remained a touchstone experience that shaped institutions, society, and culture, a shared shorthand with codes recognized throughout the black diaspora. In this respect, Hortense Spillers is correct to assert that the reinvention of slavery by “every generation of systematic readers” involves bringing slavery’s “prominent discursive features” into play (28). Nevertheless, as Ashraf Rushdy has definitively documented in Neo-slave Narratives, the prominence of slave narratives in historiography and literary studies has grown staggeringly since the 1960s. Similarly, the incidence of fictional revisiting of slave narratives has increased in frequency and self-consciously marked reference.
Members of the black diaspora cultures have renewed contact with a powerful moral, political, and symbolic employment available to them as a framework for articulating experience and expressing complaint.

In brief, the means of that renewal occurred in the context of much larger social changes as black authors and critics of black culture were stimulated to examination by the Great Depression and Nazi ideology. For instance, “[i]n the twenty years which followed the close of World War II, college texts increasingly reflected their authors’ newfound awareness of racial prejudice and of the role which racism had played in American history” (Van Deburg 88). In the 1960s, intellectual currents changed with political tides, and with the realization that ex-slaves and their testimonies were passing away, the co-existence of autobiography and fiction finally altered and genre transformation occurred. Galvanized by gains in America during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, by the challenge of popular culture to high culture (Hall 21), by decolonized and postcolonial states (Hall 22), by new enthusiasm for African-American sources of history (Van Deburg 89) arising from the “New Left social history, with its focus on history written ‘from the bottom up’” (Rushdy, “Neo-Slave Narrative”), and by apparent appropriations of black history (and concomitant reductions of black history to repressed sexuality and fanatacism) such as William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner, cultural commentators and authors demanded a greater role for blacks in constructing appropriate representations of slavery. Popular writers and speakers such as Alex Haley, Malcolm X, and Eugene Genovese inspired new assessments of slavery. Authors joined the public in availing themselves of a tremendous “search-and-reprint activity” beginning in the 1960s in the US (Sollors 164), a little later in the UK and West
Indies. At the same time, postmodernity’s pastiche thrust authors toward metafictional awareness and exposure of the means of creation in slave narratives, supplying new means to approach and frame the genre and documents of slave narratives.

Some authors believe that “decorous” slave narratives and other descriptions of slavery had not done justice to the experience of slaves, and that their tales remained untold. As Toni Morrison records, in the 1800s, “popular taste discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience” and slave narrators “drop a veil” over unpalatable experiences (Morrison, “Site” 90). For instance, a 1849 commentator announced that “America has the mournful honor of adding a new department to the literature of civilization, – the autobiographies of escaped slaves” (Peabody 19) as he simultaneously attempted to impose expectations of decorous language; Frederick Douglass, in his early days of lecturing, received from white abolitionists the following advice: “Give us the facts…we will take care of the philosophy” (My Bondage and My Freedom 361); and Fisher prefaced the 1837 publication of fugitive slave Charles Ball’s narrative, which he edited: “Many of [Ball’s] opinions have been cautiously omitted, or carefully suppressed, as being of no value to the reader; and his sentiments upon the subject of slavery, have not been embodied in this work” (xi). Despite their emphasis on the verifiable, the slave narratives’ emphasis on decorum somehow missed out on experience and negated the feelings about those experiences, the inner lives of slaves. In these newer fictional versions of slavery, the horrors and vulnerabilities of slavery coexist with its pleasures and survivals, the interior lives coexist with the exterior lives of slaves. For instance, Hill’s novel treats sexuality much more openly than did slave narratives. Concerned with the dated inaccessibility of
some texts, these authors I examine attempt to reinvigorate accounts of slavery with realistic and convincing details. Furthermore, all texts give play to the dynamic tension between resistance, rebellion, and submission negotiated by slaves. Frances Smith Foster claims that, in comparison with slave narratives, neo-slave narratives incorporate fewer appeals to a white reader’s sympathies, more individualistic and cynical black protagonists, and the explicit indictment of white racism (Witnessing Slavery). Thus the neo-slave narratives attempt to reinstall that which was omitted from slave narratives. Writing about the anti-nostalgic recovery of the past, Audre Lorde states unequivocally that “We know what it is to be lied to, and we know how important it is not to lie to ourselves” (139)7, and bell hooks elaborates:

The history of colonization [and] imperialism is a record of betrayal, of lies, and deceits. The demand for that which is real is a demand for reparation, for transformation. In resistance, the exploited, the oppressed work to expose the false reality – to reclaim and recover ourselves. We make the revolutionary history, telling the past as we have learned it mouth-to-mouth, telling the present as we see, know, and feel it in our hearts and with our words. (Talking 3)

The neo-slave narrative draws aside the veil by bringing imagination to the interior lives and external conditions of slaves, as its authors explore the historical, rhetorical, ethical and political contingencies of blackness. Writers feel they must connect slavery with the modern world, but they also feel an urgency to de-form slavery’s tropes, to explain slavery itself in ways that could penetrate apathetic, even stagnant, understandings of slavery.

Revisiting slave history and literature is a part of a larger phenomenon that Richard Terdiman terms the “modern memory crisis,” in which Westerners since the French Revolution have been worried about the past and their control over it. Within this
model, the neo-slave narrative can be seen as the will to memory. Noting the onetime loss of the vibrancy of slave culture, black writers appear to resolve collectively to not forget again:

forgetting is not a unitary phenomenon, for although sometimes we simply forget, at other times – with whatever embarrassment – we recollect having forgotten. The latter experience understandably spurs efforts to reduce the frequency of the former. Such efforts produce an important cultural technology. We could say that among the things that memory conserves, perhaps what it conserves par excellence are paradigms, protocols, practices, mechanisms, and techniques for conserving memory itself. (Terdiman 15, original emphasis)

The neo-slave narrative is a dynamic practice for conserving the slave narrative and its techniques for thinking and representing slavery (rememory, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*). Thus it is no surprise to find traces of slavery and slave narratives in much black writing. Yet slavery can be overly deterministic: the tropes of slavery – the violent whippings, attempted escapes, sexually exploitative relationships, autodidactic education and so on – can seem rusty after several hundred years of use. Even to point out that the past is never past, that there are parallels between slavery and whatever contemporary conditions an author describes – imprisonment in camps or prisons, sharecropping, wage slavery, illegal immigration, lynching, or women’s status – is a trope of venerable stature. More crucially, authors are restricted by history: as postslavery author Dionne Brand says: “I cannot unhappen history, nor can my characters” (Lecture). A route out of this determinism is for people to “intervene in the reproduction of what has been in order to reconceive what might be” (Terdiman 359). Neo-slave narratives do not reproduce or imitate slave narratives; they reimagine them, revise them in a new, living tradition of genre. The postmodern dilemma is that we know meaning is imposed and created, but we still feel an imperative to create it. The authors examined here appear to
hold similar views on slavery: they know that the conventions of representing slavery
determine how convincing the depiction of the slavery is; nevertheless, they proceed to
represent it, albeit in ways that dislocate the conventions and call attention to their
constructedness: “[w]hat slavery was in the past is not so important as what slavery
means, or (more importantly) can be construed to mean, in the present” (Andrews, “The
Representation of Slavery” 68)

The most effective authors of the latest generation to pen neo-slave narratives
have been those who have nudged the genre into juxtaposition with other genres, thereby
opening up its tropes to indeterminate meanings and plural interpretations. I thus propose
that variations on this generic mixing be considered one of the most prominent and
significant features of the neo-slave narrative. The neo-slave narratives’ uses of multiple
generic or discursive routes (only one of which is the slave narrative) toward the
representation of slavery, can be easily overlooked because the term “neo-slave” may
appear to point toward the slave narrative alone; nonetheless, this is one of its defining
features. To my knowledge, while there are some shorter indications of individual
novels’ *métissage* (discourse- and genre-mixing)*⁸, this thesis is the first full-length study
of the interactions between slave narratives and other genres and the means by which
these might constitute the neo-slave narrative. The authors of neo-slave narratives are the
architects of a roundabout of genre; they remind readers of roads previously taken and the
expectations they bring to a text, and they direct the choices readers make in confronting
genre. To assert their place in a lineage of writers emerging from slavery and to indicate
their independence from literary ancestors, while avoiding the creative cul-de-sac of
slavery’s tropes by updating them, are the tasks of contemporary black writers of fiction.
Where authors and their novels plan a space for the occupation of varying generic
customs, for past and present, for fiction and fact to coexist; where they defy both
monologic and chronologic singularity and the seductive pull of infinite relativism; where
they defamiliarize the slave narrative and restock slavery with terrible significance; there,
they are successful. Accompanied by generic métissage, the neo-slave narratives
discussed here meet the expiration of the slave narrative genre face on with
defamiliarizing juxtapositions with other genres and discourses. A transgressive function
is thus restored to slave narratives via the generic transgressions of the neo-slave
narrative.

The current definition of this term, “neo-slave,” tends to be limited to the
influence of slave narratives and to the specific temporal placement of characters and
their interactions within the historical enslavement of people of African ancestry in the
United States. I argue for a geographically and chronologically more inclusive definition
of the term: neo-slave narratives are produced to describe the conditions of slavery in
other parts of the world as well as to describe the subjection and resistance to racism and
discrimination in the twentieth century. To focus solely on the impact of American
slavery narratives on American literature is to disregard the international recognition and
success such narratives achieved during the nineteenth-century, and to underestimate their
impact on literature on an international scale. Therefore, I will argue in favor of a
tradition which includes not only African-American men, but also women writers, and
which includes not only Americans, but also British West-Indian and Canadian authors
who are, relatively speaking, less visible in the critical literature. Like George Elliott
Clarke’s work, the thesis proposes not a model (i.e. American) blackness but a modal
blackness in which writers from outside of America affirm and contest American versions
of blackness (see “Contesting a Model Blackness,” *Odysseys* 27-62).

In so doing I follow Paul Gilroy’s consideration of such movements across
national boundaries, across the Middle Passage, across what he terms “the black
Atlantic.” As a feminist and a Canadian, I find, like others before me, that Gilroy’s
construction requires the insertion of black Canada and of gender awareness.\(^1\) A black
Atlantic perspective is aware of the ways diaspora unintentionally “set up all kinds of
tensions and possibilities for growth” (Dabydeen, “Coolie” 175) and produced ironies
(Phillips, “The Legacy” 191), invites fruitful comparisons otherwise neglected by
nationally-based assessments of literature\(^2\), and recognizes that people of colour are
“modern people in the sense of having the potential for living in complex states”
(Dabydeen, “Coolie” 175). The thesis establishes itself first in stories situated in Africa,
England, and the Southern US in *Higher Ground*, circling slowly closer to North America
with *Cambridge*’s primary setting of the West Indies, moving slowly north and west in
*Kindred*’s Californian time travel to Maryland, and finally coming to rest, in some ways
at home, in *Any Known Blood*’s crossing of the border from the US into Canada. All the
books problematize national and regional boundaries. Although the project entails
reference to many sites in the African diaspora, several places are more significant than
others; the Southern US, for instance, is a touchstone setting for all three authors; and I
find it important to end the roundabout journey of the thesis with reference to my own
(national) identity, as I begin it with reference to my own (raced, gendered, classed)
identity. While the project is conceived of as diasporic, it is not truly cross-cultural, since
it looks only at literatures in English, and since it sees America in its inception and in its
later embodiment as an imperial power\textsuperscript{13} as contiguous with English cultural norms.\textsuperscript{14} Risks of a diasporic comparison are that it may, in this case, result in a certain lack of historical specificity, and, because it is fundamentally based on the connection of black peoples through slavery, it may reinscribe slavery on the lived experience of many black people to whom slavery is frankly peripheral.\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, various versions of hypertextual, generic métissage highlighted here articulate likeness and difference not only at the roundabout of genre and discourse, but also evidently at the Atlantic roundabout of the circulation of English-speaking cultures.

The neo-slave narrative, as first described by Bernard Bell, is an important emerging area of contemporary historical fiction, partly because it is one version of the wider “neorealism” (285) of contemporary African-American novelists. Many critics cite the important influence of slave narratives on contemporary African-American writing, including Valerie Smith, Barbara McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, and especially Ashraf Rushdy. Smith discusses the impact of slave narrative models of authenticity on African-American men and women, from Douglass and Jacobs through African-American fiction up to Ralph Ellison’s \textit{Invisible Man} and Toni Morrison’s \textit{Song of Solomon}. \textit{Slavery and the Literary Imagination} moved beyond the slave narratives to consider “the topic of slavery itself in its profound impact on the national literature” of the US (McDowell and Rampersad, “Introduction” vii). In two book-length projects, Ashraf Rushdy has set out many of the attribute clusters of neo-slave narratives. Furthermore, several critics such as Missy Dehn Kutbitschek, Angelyn Mitchell, and Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu specifically consider the legacy’s impact on black American women’s writing (as we shall see in the chapter on \textit{Kindred}); Deborah McDowell’s article
on Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* remains an excellent brief introduction to the main issues of neo-slave narratives about women as well as an engaged interpretation of one of my favourite neo-slave narratives to teach and study. Although only one of the authors discussed here is a woman, all of the texts include women’s voices, and I hope that the project as a whole reflects the challenges and insights provided by woman-centered studies.\textsuperscript{16}

To turn to West Indian and British studies, Frank Birbalsingh’s interviews of contemporary Caribbean authors in English demonstrate that although Caribbean authors might not be as invested as African-American authors in the neo-slave narrative, many are certainly interested in producing postslavery literature and recognizing a continuum between slavery and other forms of postcolonial exploitation. At least as much as American authors, West Indian authors struggle with the task of representing history as an active process, and of analyzing oppressive societies and the psychologies of their constituent members. Yet to date there is no comprehensive study of British, West Indian, or Canadian neo-slave narratives to compare with the American ones. This study thus initiates a dialogue between neo-slave narratives from different English-speaking regions.

Although the premise of the thesis requires readers to move away from the centrality of slave narratives in some respects, I do make many references to both well-known and lesser-known slave narratives and literary criticism of these throughout the study. Therefore, a brief elaboration of the broad influence of slave narratives on neo-slave narratives is necessary. I believe that neo-slave narratives enact slave narratives, and are intimately linked to these early black autobiographies through their evocations of
early black autobiographical forms’ dynamic genericity. That genre is dynamic is abundantly illustrated in the history of the slave narrative, precursor to the neo-slave narrative. While slave narratives share a distinctive set of characteristics, their generic independence is compromised in several ways. Each slave narrative contains within it the structures of several genres, most transparently in the earliest productions, based as they were on religious conversion and Puritan captivity narratives. Sometimes, as with Olaudah Equiano’s use of travel writing, the slave narrative borrows passages from other works.¹⁷ Like the slave narratives, all of the neo-slave narrative novels discussed here rework various forms of autobiographical and testimonial life-writing, whether slave narrative, family memoir (as in Any Known Blood), letters (such as the letters penned in prison in Higher Ground), or travel narratives or diaries, such as those pastiched in Cambridge and Kindred.¹⁸ According to Handley, “[t]estimonial language is metonymical because it always points to the experience of others who have not told their stories” (150). Testimonial forms are particularly important, as they include slave narratives, prison writings, trauma narratives, holocaust writing, diary keeping (think of Anne Frank), memoirs, and so on. Through integration of autobiographical testimony, neo-slave narratives, like slave narratives, declare their representativeness and uniqueness.

Slave narratives relied on fictional forms as well as autobiography. This interdependence of autobiography and fiction continued despite prominent need for documented testimony arising under abolitionism in the mid 1800s: Richard Hildreth’s notoriously convincing novel, Archy Moore (1836), like Charles Ball’s narrative (1837), was an abolitionist text.¹⁹ One year later, the publication of James Williams’ “ersatz” or
forged slave narrative would confound efforts to distinguish between fact and fiction in the slave narrative (Gates, “Authenticity” 28). Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-52) is a sentimental novel based partly on slave narratives, while Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is a slave narrative with strong links to sentimental and gothic novels. At the turn of the century, Pauline Hopkins’ novel *Contending Forces* (1900) includes a latter-day slave narrative to illustrate the effects of slavery, as does Booker T. Washington’s autobiographical *Up from Slavery* (1901). And in the 1930s, while WPA researchers interviewed surviving slaves in the US, Arna Bontemps wrote novels about revolutionary slaves based in part on slave testimony (*Black Thunder*, 1936) and Margaret Walker first started writing *Jubilee*, basing it on stories passed on by her grandmother. Even as late as the 1960s, the Cuban ex-slave Esteban Montejo was being interviewed and his narrative published (1968), while William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) was winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. To suggest that the slave narrative is autobiographical and the neo-slave narrative fictional would be a gross reduction of the history of generic transformations. Interplay between fiction and nonfiction genres is inherent to the slave narrative. The slave narrative was only one of several genres available to make meaning out of slavery and suffering: the sentimental novel, the *Bildungsroman*, historical novel, and various forms of autobiography were other forms that could incorporate the slave’s experience and were employed accordingly from its inception through its height of popularity.
Peabody’s review and Fisher’s remarks cited earlier are merely a small portion of some “two hundred years of speculation upon the nature and function of the narrative of slaves,” according to the preface of Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s, *The Slave Narrative* (v). While Davis and Gates’ volume contains many definitions of the genre, of particular note are James Olney’s and Robert Stepto’s works (published elsewhere as cited below). Charles Nichols’ groundbreaking survey of slave narratives, *Many Thousand Gone* (1963), and Arna Bontemps’s passionate introduction to a selection of narratives (1966) sketched out the potential for slave narrative study. However, these studies were restricted somewhat by their masculinist, nationalist, historical and even aesthetic biases. The slave narrative’s accommodations of ingenuity have been underestimated (by James Olney, for instance). A perception of automatization in slave narratives – the perception of a lack of originality and so forth in the slave narratives – can be traced to faulty perceptions and emphases of the dominant culture. Later assessments of slave narratives have been more inclusive. John Sekora’s survey of slave narratives describes many more kinds of narratives, in addition to exploring the contributions/limitations of abolitionist involvement in such narratives. Moreover, Joanne Braxton, among others, points out the need for “[f]urther study of all such texts and testimonies by women” to “correct and expand existing analyses based too exclusively on male models of experience and writing” (387). Gender-sensitive definitions of genre come from Frances Smith Foster’s *Witnessing Slavery*, Mary Helen Washington’s *Invented Lives* and Jean Yellin’s *Women and Sisters*. These critics’ views have generally informed my reading of American slave narratives with respect to
Any Known Blood and Kindred, and have allowed for particularly feminist imperatives in
the latter.

Less work has been done on the topic of the slave narrative in the field of
British/West Indian literary studies. There are studies, such as those by Helen Thomas or
Keith Sandiford, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Afro-English writing that include
slave narratives. Most critics looking at the presence of slavery in British literature treat
Romantic poets such as William Blake or Victorian writers like William Makepeace
Thackeray, paying (sometimes peripheral) attention to slave narrators Mary Prince or
Olaudah Equiano (Debbie Lee, Deborah Thomas, Jonathan Taylor, Joan Baum).23 While
somewhat uneven, Edward Braithwaite’s, Selwyn Cudjoe’s, Kenneth Ramchand’s, and
David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe’s surveys construct a West Indian literary
history, with all the ambivalences of such a history of oppression and resistance, into
which I can insert Caryl Phillips’ novels. In particular, Cambridge’s Emily speaks
colonial formulations of West Indian slavery and then the slave Cambridge talks back to
these. David Dabydeen and Nina Wilson-Tagoe underscore the debate over whether
West Indian literature should be indebted to European models as well as local ones (170),
a debate that has also opened up in African-American studies. Together, Moira
Ferguson’s two books on British and Caribbean women writers on the subject of colonial
slavery and its legacies give a cultural history of the ways in which women’s anti-slavery
protestations might in fact bolster colonial power. This has assisted my thinking about
the imbrication of gender and race, as shall be seen in more detail in the chapter on
Cambridge. Although the work of these postcolonial scholars suggests that slave and
neo-slave narratives have less central generic positions in black postcolonial studies than
in African-American studies, it does indicate that these genres do play a transgressive role, mediating between hegemonic and subaltern literatures. Careful study of literature of the African diaspora and its critics reveals that in fact the slave narrative has great narrative and cultural powers of endurance and influence throughout the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which the neo-slave narrative is one manifestation.

One objective of this introduction will be to work out a position from which to speak of generic and discursive strategies, a position which will be compatible with each novel’s slightly differing intertextuality and intratextuality, *intertextual* signaling the relationship between texts and precursors (also called *hypertextuality*); *intra*textual the relationship between texts and the other voices they contain (also called *dialogism*). As this project avails itself of the terminology of narratology in order to examine the multigeneric quality of neo-slavery fiction, it is important that I explain my understanding of Bakhtin’s concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia, and intertextuality, and the way these link up in current critical practices of *métissage* or black postmodern genre and discourse braiding.24

Bakhtin developed the idea of the polyphonic novel with reference to Dostoevsky’s novels, calling it “[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 6). These “combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (6). Later, Bakhtin conceived of the novel itself as a self-critical genre, a way to rethink other genres (*The Dialogic Imagination* 5) by laying bare their conventionality (162). The primary features of the novel are its polyglot roots, its distinctive inconclusive temporality, and its contact with the present (11). Polyglossia, the state of two or more national languages existing in one culture, may be the most
fruitful condition for dialogism; still, heteroglossia, which is the state of other, different, diverse and varied voices “within a language” (67), also carries on the “centrifugal” (272) work of interrupting centripetal official languages and thoughts with a dismembering laughter (23, 236-37), and a proximity to unofficial, spoken languages and thoughts (20, 25). Not only can the novel easily incorporate nonfictional genres (33), “semiliterary” forms such as the diary or letter, and oral or folk forms of culture, language, and utterance (262; see also 320-21), but it is, in fact, the precise combination of all of these that defines the novel as novel (262). While the novel reserves a specially-marked place for dialogue between characters, it also creates a space for dialogical contact or a “conversation” with “the languages, styles, world views of another” (46); thus a multitude of languages overlap on different planes (48), as captured by Bakhtin’s powerful musical/sound metaphors of orchestration and polyphony. In polyphonic fragmentation of the text, “the strategy is explicit: the reader is expected to compare the various points of view, to discover parallels and differences, and also to notice what remains unsaid” (Vivès 64). An awareness of a range of dialogic practices on overlapping planes is important, for dialogism enters each novel discussed below in slightly different ways.

The tension between dialogism – not merely idiosyncratic speeches distinguishing characters but a means by which multiple voices (especially those of opposition) can enter an apparently single utterance26 – and monologism – an official, “unitary” language that denies recognition of other languages and urges “centralization” or ideological closure in a “correct language” (270) – is never resolved in the novel, as the two forces perpetually circle one another, the one attempting to unmask, the other attempting to subsume.27 Bakhtin’s insistence that not all language users have equal access to
discourses (294), that authorial intention accents each voice differently, and that proper analysis of the novel as genre depends on a refusal to isolate these elements from their interactions or dialogues within the novel proper (266) and considers basic period-based social tones of a style, have made his theories attractive to postcolonial and African-American theorists seeking a continuum to articulate and valorize the centrifugal voices of subaltern fiction and to express these voices’ socio-political tensions with centripetal official discourses. Rosemary Coombe, among others, mobilizes Bakhtin’s notions of “the materiality of signs” (82) to describe the postcolonial strategies of the dispossessed to respond to or resist dominant discourses (84). Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s article, “Speaking in Tongues” introduces dialogism to the practices and traditions of black women’s writing. For her, “plural subjectivity” is to be distinguished from a “fractured subject” (137) of slippery relativism. In following her lead, I therefore discard Lawrence Hogue’s postulation of a “fragmented, decentered” black postmodern subject (2). We are authored by voices around us, particularly by dominant discourses, but there is slippage; we can turn these, and not allow them to finally determine us: “[t]he ‘self’ is a dialogic and ethical relation with other selves that is never given, but always dominated by a ‘drive to meaning’” (Coombe 83). Author Caryl Phillips has commented that “I like the idea of different voices, because that’s what I hear when I go to the Caribbean.... I don’t feel that I can easily apply an authorial position of the third-person narrator to a society which is made up of so many different voices and experiences” (“The Legacy” 195). Reflections on authoring and being authored apply to readers as to characters and authors. I am also aware that I am not invisible or neutral; the works read me, too, and often reveal that I am a white, middle-class, Canadian female reader with a working-class immigrant
heritage. Yet awareness of privilege (as opportunities and limitations) cannot stop short at unproductive guilt or avoidance. Access to hegemony is not tantamount to an embrace of hegemony.

In the verbal interchange true of the novel, all words are secondhand, and exist in dialogue with prior utterances. Thus, Bakthin’s ideas about language invite the study of intertextuality, which is the more restricted analysis of literary utterances and their relations with other texts encountered. As Bakhtin writes, “genre lives in the present, but it always remembers the past, its beginnings” (qtd. in Todorov 84). Though Bakhtin primarily employs parody and laughter as elements disruptive of official discourses, other critics identify a wider set of practices in “literature in the second degree” (Genette 400), including, but not limited to, “satire, parody, irony, quotation, collage, stylization, and polemic” (Coombe 85). Because of the importance of prior citations of words and texts (intertextuality or hypertextuality) in establishing genre or discourse recognition, the process “whereby a writer leans on one or more preceding works to construct that which will give expression to his thought or his artistic sensibility” (Genette 395), is a crucial aspect of these novels’ confrontation with the limits of genre and discourse and therefore will be explored in more detail in the next two chapters.

Genre allows writers to orient their work, according to Alistair Fowler (256); it is an “invitation to form” (Claudio Guillén qtd. Fowler 256). An individual work of course adds up to more than its genre(s), but “it is in relation to the forms of that genre, in the first place, that it exists and communicates its vision” (Fowler 276). Genre might be best described as a “generic horizon” (262), as a familiar and familial set of conventions, as a “complex interaction of insights, experimental relations with literature, and relations with
other critics” (260). Ideally, rather than pursuing “a fervent application of labels which would do no more than classify works,” I try to “[establish] which discourses and models are present in the intertextual field,” making it possible “to use them as axes of reading and consider their interpretative repercussions.” (Viviès 109).30 Genre creates family resemblances through repeating and changing features, and enables deconstruction and transformation of narrative expectations as much as fulfillment of those expectations. Genre systems are not fixed, closed, or static, but dynamic.

Of particular interest to this study are the various forms of generic reactivation. Fowler argues that a genre ceases when audience is no longer competent to read it (167); according to superficial observation, this might happen to British slave narratives in the 1830s, or to American slave narratives in 1865. However, as indicated above in the discussion of continuing forms of slavery, “the question of exactly when a nation obtains postslavery status, if ever, is deeply complicated” (Handley 3). A genre can transform into new genres, or it can be reactivated (Genette 210), under various internal or external pressures, and Fowler lists the kinds of possible transformations, practices I call métissage. The ones that concern me here are the generic mixture (which can be either a balanced combination or “modulation” of genre) and the inclusion model. The balanced generic mixture puts two “neighboring or contrasting” genre repertoires into equal proportion (Fowler 183). Phillips’ novels balance neighboring and competing genres such as travel narrative and slave narrative, or slave narrative and prison letters. In doing so, they undermine hierarchies of discourse and genre. Generic modulation is a perceptible mixture of two or more genres that takes “one of the genres to be only a modal abstraction with a token repertoire” (Fowler 191). Butler’s novel, it seems to me,
fits into this category, with speculative fiction present in rudimentary form as time travel to facilitate the slave narrative, although speculative fiction is clearly critiqued. Finally, in generic inclusion, one literary form encloses another, and the “inset form then becomes conventionally linked with the matrix” (Fowler 179). This neatly describes Hill’s family memoir novel, which includes a self-contained slave narrative as a separate chapter. What is important to note is that different genres within individual works take effect through moments of divergence as much as moments of agreement; tensions, then, exist between genres as well as between discourses.

Intertextuality in the “model” or American blackness is constituted by the revisionary practice of signifying, associated with indeterminacy, uncertainty, play, performance, and “making fun” (Gates, The Signifying Monkey 68). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has outlined the theoretical potential of “a coded literary universe” (Collected Black Women’s Narratives xxiii) in which texts transform, rupture, rehearse, subvert, violate, disrupt, dislocate, decenter, translate, negotiate with, or otherwise engage in hypertextual relations with existing texts.\(^{31}\) Rooted in the vernacular (as his own and others’ work demonstrates\(^{32}\), the practice calls attention not only to the “speakerliness” but also to the “literariness” of these texts and the ways in which they replicate, allude to, and interrogate tropes of other texts within the same tradition of writing – in this case, writing about slavery.\(^{33}\) Although I acknowledge and applaud the efforts of Baker, Gates, and Stuart Hall among others in this direction, and although on occasion I gesture toward their understandings of the interplay of oral, gestural, and written forms and styles, mine is not a vernacular or popular theory attuned “discredited knowledge” (“Rootedness” 342); there are “spaces white theorists cannot occupy”
Tremendous research and reading cannot compensate for my privilege; in fact, my access to resources embodies such privilege. None of the texts examined here appear to be “speakerly texts” of the type identified by Gates. Though I limit the sphere to literary texts, and though I see the coded connections or formal bonds extending across the Atlantic and becoming part of the literary language available to a number of authors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the purpose of my research is to participate in the acts of navigation that Gates recommends.

While it has been extremely useful at various stages in critical reception to trace “black” lines of artistic descent and influence, in the present circumstances it is crucial to be aware of continuities and breaks between black literary and cultural documents and Euro-American artistic movements. An exclusively black lineage can be restricting to authors who need to choose their own ancestors: Ralph Ellison argues that “[i]t requires real poverty of the imagination to think that this [conscious eloquence] can come to a Negro only through the example of other Negroes,” thus suggesting that critics need to see African Americans as responding to several available traditions (Shadow 117; original emphases; see also 315-316). In the neo-slave narrative, the slave narrative is an essential ingredient, but only one of many available to the writer of fiction, just as it was only one genre (admittedly one of primary importance) to authors of slave narratives. Ann duCille’s exploration of American “coupling” opens up a sometimes essentialist black literary tradition to an awareness that “all texts participate in larger, intercultural dialogues or polylogues in a complex nexus of literary cross-dressing and back talking” (24). This project responds to her call.
Nor can we continue to claim an African American literary tradition as an island, entire unto itself, separate from and uninfluenced by so-called white cultural constructs and Western literary conventions. Intertextuality cannot be defined as movement solely from black text to black text, from one black author to another. Rather, such resonances must be viewed as cutting across racial identities, cultural spaces, and historical moments. (9)

Like duCille and others36, I see black and Euro-American studies as different eddies and currents within the same shifting body of culture. In the two cities I’ve lived in during the research and writing of this thesis, a number of roundabouts or traffic circles visibly mark the landscape of travel.37 While the large Rotary in Halifax may not appear to have much in common with the small gardened deterrents to speeding in East Vancouver, they share qualities deserving metaphorical elaboration in relation to both my own approach to this project and the project’s emphasis on intertextuality. A crossroads can be a confrontational, if generational, meeting point; a road can become a path taken thoughtlessly, taken for granted; a roundabout, however, requires carefully planned decisions about how to proceed, making one appreciate the construction of the journey. The roundabout also describes the meeting and mutual accompaniment – the merging, if you will – of genres and discourses that take place in each novel discussed. This project seeks to resituate the works analyzed at the roundabout of genre where the constituent features of several genres or discourses accompany one another for a time. In other words, the texts deliberately maneuver between local and metropolitan, subaltern and imperial, female and male, black and white discourses. To anticipate a metaphor from the final chapter, we cannot seek the intertextual roots of the novels, “precisely because we gain the confidence of having arrived at the origins too soon, too fast” (Handley 40); rather, intertextual studies present some (not all) routes to explore. This gesture is
intended not to make black literary culture subordinate to Euro-American thought and the universalizing imperative, nor to “[construct] African-American culture as though it exists solely to suggest new aesthetic and political directions white folks might move in” (hooks, Yearning 21), nor to deny that at times black culture has been misused for these very purposes; rather it articulates the range of possibilities available to practitioners of culture and points out that hegemonic discourses are not neutral but also are racially marked; they are not outside of or somehow beyond race. To the reader grappling with antecedents, the opportunity to explore those figures, texts, and movements in Euro-American cultures which have served particular cultural needs at particular times in black cultural history permits appreciation of mutual processes of selection and rejection that tell her a great deal about the values and ontologies of both. More directly, when I see the two side by side, I can craft readings sensitive to the element of choice in the writing and reading of neo-slave narratives.

*Métissage*, a concept first formulated by critic/poet Edouard Glissant, “amounts to a genuine way of perceiving difference while emphasizing similarities in the processes of cultural encoding from which none of us can escape” (Françoise Lionnet 248). In Lionnet’s take on *métissage*, it is a kind of “braiding” or weaving together “of cultural forms through the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts” (4). *Métissage* is both aesthetic concept (“a form of *bricolage*”) and praxis (8). It can apply to cultural interactions, to discourse, to genre, and to intertextuality. As such, it “rejoins the signifying practices familiar to all oppressed peoples, in particular to the descendants of slaves in the New World”; it is thus “an art of transformation and transmutation, an aesthetics of the ruse that allows the weak to survive
by escaping through duplicitous means the very system of power intent on destroying them” (18).\textsuperscript{39}

While \textit{métissage} “is the fertile ground of our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects” (Lionnet 8), it is also a subversive “concept of solidarity which demystifies all essentialist glorifications of unitary origins, be they racial, sexual, geographic, or cultural” (9). Writers can use “repressed” discourses in an exchange with dominant discourses (3) and resist inclusion within them (14). \textit{Métissage} positively describes a “balanced form of interaction [or] reciprocal relations [that] prevent the ossification of culture and encourage systematic change and exchange” (16). As does the roundabout, \textit{métissage} “[encourages] lateral relations: instead of living within the bounds created by a linear view of history and society, we become free to interact on an equal footing with all the traditions that determine our present predicament” (7).

Although the classificatory impulse to define and distinguish discourses and genres may suggest continued reliance on the tools of hegemony, the counterweighted impulse to find lateral links between black and Euro-American traditions affirms my project’s awareness that “[r]enewed connections to the past can emancipate us, provided they are used to elaborate empowering myths for living in the present and for affirming our belief in the future” (Lionnet 7). \textit{Free} and \textit{emancipate} are the operative words here; through the authors’ difficult task of occupying an in-between space, in this case by interacting with slave narratives and other (dominant) genres and discourses, these authors gain creative perspective and independence.\textsuperscript{40}

\textit{Métissage} may be a postcolonial synonym for postmodern \textit{indeterminacy} (Lionnet 17), but this specifically black and transnational formulation poses a set of challenges to
the postmodern. As Phillips’, Hill’s, and Butler’s novels are not only postmodern but also subaltern, my understanding of them benefits from this interrogation of postmodernity. The first challenge is métissage’s claim to be a “fundamentally emancipatory metaphor” (29). What, then, do we make of Linda Hutcheon’s statement (69) that any method that “depends upon and draws its power from that which it contests” cannot be “truly radical” nor “oppositional”? It may be a fundamentally emancipatory process, but not an emancipatory goal, for, as the reader will recall from Bakhtin’s model of the continuum on which plural languages and discourses struggle with monologic limitations of significance, there is no resolution to meaning. Uncertainty over the liberatory potential of métissage is played out in the narrative destinations of the texts studied. Phillips’ open-ended juxtapositions tend toward death, madness, and silence. Butler’s heroine obtains a literally partial, amputated liberty. Only Hill’s novel arches optimistically away from the past.

The following discussion tackles possible points of correspondence between métissage and postmodernism in order to further answer the question of subversion/assimilation. In this respect, it is worth citing Stuart Hall’s rejection of finalizing claims about culture’s emancipatory and enslaving work:

I don’t want to suggest that we can counterpose some easy sense of victories won to the eternal story of our own marginalization – I’m tired of those two continuous grand counternarratives. To remain within them is to become trapped in that endless either/or, either total victory or total incorporation, which almost never happens in cultural politics, but with which cultural critics always put themselves to bed. (Hall 24)

We can neither pathologize black writers as bitter victims or criminals, nor overemphasize their agency to heal themselves and the rifts of culture and history.
Nevertheless, dialogic, signifying, and intertextual practices, as strategies embraced collectively by métissage and its awareness of plural cultural origins, are subversive of cultural essentialism.

The point of underlying overdetermination – black cultural repertoires constituted from two directions at once – is perhaps more subversive than you think. It is to insist that in black popular culture, strictly speaking, ethnographically speaking, there are no pure forms at all. Always these forms are the product of partial synchronization, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition, of the negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, of the subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, of critical signification, of signifying. (Hall 28)

When not oversimplified, reduced to a grand narrative of liberation or enslavement, the texts’ uses of métissage can be unfolded to reveal both emancipatory and containing moments of contact with discourse and genre.\textsuperscript{43}

Incorporation of “the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people” has the potential to alter not only postmodernity’s optics but also its politics (hooks, \textit{Yearning} 25), and postmodern practices can conversely alter the strategic cultural interventions of subaltern peoples (Coombe 35-36).\textsuperscript{44} If postmodernity is antagonistic to purity and if it values transgression, then postmodern and racial reading practices need to be reconciled. Blackness must be seen not as separate from, but integral to modernity and postmodernity.\textsuperscript{45} Stuart Hall thinks that the latter’s focus on difference may be a \textit{fetish} of difference, a repeat of modernity’s primitivism (23), and notes that it is “extremely unevenly developed as a phenomenon in which the old center/peripheries of high modernity consistently reappear” (22). Furthermore, texts practicing métissage could be assimilated under postmodernism to “[invoke] a neo-universalism which reinforces the very European hegemony which these works have been undermining or
circumventing” (Ashcroft et al. 173). For instance, it would be a relatively simple matter to see all the works discussed below as instances of a characteristically postmodern genre, historiographic metafiction: “novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge,” by both affirming and disrupting the limits of history and fiction (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 54-55). Historiographic metafiction rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts, in strong terms, the specificity and particularity of the individual. Nevertheless, it also realizes that we are epistemologically limited in our ability to know that past, since we are both spectators of and actors in the historical process. (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 71).

Multiple points of view in Phillips’ novels demonstrate affiliations to postmodernity’s promulgation of multiple truths, and Cambridge in particular questions “whose truth gets told” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 71; original emphasis). Hill’s and Butler’s narrators each show a severe lack of “[confidence in] his/her ability to know the past with any certainty” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 66). All novels signal “a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) know that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 68; original emphasis). As Hutcheon argues, the focus changes: “we only know the past (which really did exist) through its textualized remains” (67); the question alters from “to what empirically real object in the past” does the text refer? to these: “to which discursive context could this language belong? to which prior textualizations must we refer?” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 68). Clearly, the postmodern is an insightful, if seductive, perspective with which to approach and link the texts in question.

What I notice about the texts unpacked here is that they critique the structures through which difference is amplified and fetishized; they explicitly refuse universalism’s
analogies; and they always include that “historical consciousness” of the specificity of slavery. As Rinaldo Walcott remarks, a black historiographic metafiction is aware of its lineage back through emancipation (Black Like Who? 99): “black postmodern practices, articulations/utterances and aesthetics,” then, constitute “an unsentimental approach to addressing the complex and varied histories of diasporic black peoples” (Walcott 93).

The search for community, strength, culture and so on through the routes of slavery may sometimes be nostalgic, but it is always qualified in the texts I examine and is always “unsentimental.” It is worth noting that black postmodernity, as the adjective implies, reserves a place of privilege for the gravity of the materiality, the real, and the body (as shall be explored further below), when postmodernity is popularly supposed to have given up all such claims. In extending themselves to slavery’s histories, in irreverently juxtaposing and merging genres and discourses, these novels I discuss take advantage of the postmodern crisis of subjectivity to “unwrite any notion of a homogenized American/black subject” (Walcott 93). Additionally, the black postmodern takes advantage of postmodernity’s refusal to erase generic distinctions; postmodern readers are aware of limits and transgressions where genre is concerned (Cohen 16). The black postmodern can also, then, come under the rubric of métissage. The lateral structure of métissage addresses Hall’s and other critics’ concerns, and bridges postmodern critiques and race-based literary theory.

Because all the texts considered here, as postcolonial historiographic metafictions, are descendants of the historical novel, they are invested in some mimetic function of language, and the following explanation of the relationship between the body and language shows how that function might be restricted and interrogated. Both Higher
Ground and Kindred directly take up the questionable status of representations of the real and outline the problems of drawing analogies with slavery. More indirectly, the search for origins in Any Known Blood and the painful destinations of slave owners’ rhetoric in the lived experience of Cambridge (in Phillips’ novel by the same name) and other slaves also works out the status of the word (literary representation, literature, fiction) vs. the real (the body, the material). Thoughts on the representation and observation of traumatic suffering in narrative are relevant to all chapters, as they are to most of the slave and neo-slave narratives.47

For the novelists I examine, slavery is an important, though not the only, source of identity. The authors whose work I have examined are not ready to concede slavery; they have conviction in slavery. Yet all are aware that slavery is poised uncertainly between discursivity and materiality. Hortense Spillers has put the issue neatly in her analysis of intertextuality in another neo-slave narrative: “[i]n a very real sense,” for contemporary writers and readers, “‘slavery’ is primarily discursive, as we search vainly for a point of absolute and indisputable origin, for a moment of plenitude that would restore us to the real, rich ‘thing’ itself before discourse touched it” (29; original emphasis). Spillers articulates her response further:

I want a discursive “slavery,” in part, in order to “explain” what appear to be very rich and recurrent manifestations of neo-enslavement in the very symptoms of discursive production and sociopolitical arrangement that govern our current fictions in the United States. At the same time, I suspect that I occasionally resent the spread-eagle tyranny of discursivity across the terrain of what we used to call, with impunity, “experience.” (33; original emphasis)

Spillers has good reason for her suspicion of the dismissal of experience, for “not all ‘experience’ is accorded social and cultural recognition or legitimacy” (Smith and
Watson 28), as has certainly been true for black experiences. In such circumstances, authors may not be prepared to give up the appeal to experience, nor are they ready to relinquish the specificity of slavery. In these novels the social subjugation of women, the poor, the imprisoned, the uneducated, trauma victims, or illegal immigrants, and their literary expressions of subjugation, run parallel to but do not supersede institutionalized slavery and its literary forms (after Moira Ferguson, Subject to Others 281). They are not substitutes or analogues for slavery, as suffering is not distributed equally.

To deliver superficial analogies between slavery and other forms of oppression is, in the eyes of these authors, to err in the politics of representing and observing suffering. There are several ways discursive slavery can go astray: observers may resist the demands of the sufferers (Elizabeth Spelman), may feel that they must “assume a position of masochism or voyeurism” in response (Gilmore 22), may interpret slavery only to better savor their own freedom (Morrison, Playing 38, 52, 64), or might “receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that [they are] reading such a book at all” (James Baldwin on Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Notes of a Native Son 19). Readers cannot rely on such self-congratulatory complacency. According to Spelman, compassion is required instead, and authors can control its creation. While pity merely views “the colored man as an unfortunate inferior, rather than as an outraged and insulted equal” (Angelina Grimké qtd. 60; Spelman’s emphases), compassion, on the other hand, is the recognition of “our relatively equal capacity for suffering” and “[demands] acknowledgment of equality in other areas” (Spelman 8). Some slave narrators, such as Harriet Jacobs, undertake to tell their audience how to feel, how to interpret the suffering (Spelman 61). A morally indignant anger or outrage, the exercise of faculty of judgment, the provision of an
historical context for suffering: all these intervene in the taking pleasure from others’ suffering and the appropriation of the suffering by others (Spelman 81-82). Neo-slave narratives integrate slavery into British, Canadian, West Indian, and American histories and literatures, enacting testimony that works to hold dominant discourses and their speakers accountable (Herman 207-208). Writers of neo-slave narratives therefore create intercorporeal reminders of slavery, citing its material as well as its discursive impact and dramatizing the dangers of unsympathetic or casual responses to it.

The writers I examine here explore physicality to embrace bodies devalued by the perceived mind/body split, to cross boundaries, to encourage multiplicity, to provide evidentiary history of oppression that cannot be gainsaid, and to put bodies of speakers behind the voices recorded.49 Laura Doyle distinguishes between “intercorporeal” writers such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Toni Morrison, who “make bodies and objects the favored level of the real” (206), and writers who “gain the metaphysical” by “[trekking] through the blood and mess of the physical,” and by “[cultivating] intimacy with feminine, other-kin bodies, but only to prove superiority, difference, and autonomy” (53).50 She is suspicious of “an old ideological practice whereby metaphysical assumptions – of spirit over matter, idea over thing, mind over body – function to uphold social divisions between master and slave, owner and worker, light-skinned and dark, man and woman” (Doyle 28). The body in pain especially can be overdetermined. Elaine Scarry asks what happens when pain (which “resists verbal objectification” [12]) enters the sphere of language and politics, when it becomes subject to interpretation.51 She explains that
to have a body, a body made emphatic by being continually altered through various forms of creation, instruction (e.g. bodily cleansing), and wounding, is to have one's sphere of extension contracted down to the small circle of one's immediate physical presence. Consequently, to be intensely embodied is the equivalent of being unrepresented and ... is almost always the condition of those without power. (Scarry 207)

Thus blacks (like women in Margaret Homans's Bearing the Word) may suffer by being seen within a patriarchal and racist order as literal, material bodies capable of only one language, that of the body. "The black body in Western discourse is a marked body—marked with the history of enslavement and disenfranchisement" (Walcott, Black Like Who? 89; see also 90). A black body, therefore, cannot be trusted "not to be the agent of [the self’s] victimization" (hooks, Black Looks 103).

In intercorporeal writing, and in the neo-slave narratives discussed below, discourse (the voice) is accompanied by gesture (the body), and meaning becomes palpable, shared (Doyle 79, 161). The prominent position of the real, the material, the body, the experience, does not dismiss the abstract, the metaphysical aspects of slavery and emancipation. A materialist emphasis is the expression of "anti-authoritarian impulse" (Scarry 242), and continually asserting the priority of the body can be subversive, particularly when framed through métissage. Gestured speech is also the intersection where individuality meets public spheres. According to Ralph Ellison, a writer "did not make an arbitrary gesture when one sought to write.... [F]ictional techniques are not a mere set of objective tools, but something much more intimate: a way of feeling, of seeing and of expressing one's sense of life" (Ellison, Shadow 162). Ellison's emphasis on gesture and feeling is important, as it shows that the split between
language and the body is not inevitable (Doyle 102), and that slavery can be both
discursive and literal (Spillers).

These authors’ words inhabit overdetermined, speaking bodies – dynamic, diverse
bodies in space and time – that are united with their voices and that resist an interpretive
monopoly, including the interpretation argued here. The study is not intended to be an
authoritative substitute for reading the texts, nor their critics. I know I cannot speak in
place of black authors, black texts, and the black characters within them and countless
others they do speak for; I place this study next to these other texts. Although not the
most direct path between two points, a roundabout allows users to accompany one
another for a time in the same direction, and this accompaniment captures what I mean
when I assert that my study does not replace, but for a time stands next to others that no
doubt have different origins and destinations. Black authors have struggled, by making
evaluative judgments, by expressing moral and political engagement, by imaginatively
creating narrative, by employing a range of extraordinarily sophisticated practices of
signifying/hypertextuality/dialogic/métissage, to make available the supposedly restricted
and privileged symbolic order of figurative speech to articulate black thought and
experience. Misgivings aside, their radical insertions of the material, the real, into
literature, have altered truth claims and destabilized the deterministic ontological
binaries of mind/body, imaginary/real, free/slave, and black/white.
1 For my understanding of the relationships between past and present and between history and fiction, I am indebted to several critics. First, Georg Lukács and Harry Shaw’s definitions of historical fiction, particularly its reliance on a mimetic function (its reliance on the real), and the terms of its literary value, have been helpful. The former states that the historical in an historical novel is precisely the “derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (Lukács 19). For him, the good historical novel is inherently revolutionary, and good writers write from a sense of the popular life that clarifies economic relations (294-95). Thus, the past is the necessary precondition or prehistory to the present, as is often repeated. The past is not mystically distant, “alien and incomprehensible” (231), as it is in bad historical novels, which contribute to the brutalization of feeling with sensational depictions of violence and suffering (300). The more inclusive Shaw recognizes that history “plays a number of distinctly different roles in [different] historical novels (22), and acknowledges that historical novels are subject to “[t]he idea that the past is intrinsically more dramatic than the present” (Shaw 82), and “a wish to redeem history” that may “[forget] that history is irredeemable” (Shaw 117). Other critics such as Louis Mink, Hayden White, and Linda Hutcheon comment on a breakdown of the boundary between history and fiction. “Fundamental assumptions dictate that literature creates its own measure of reality, whereas history should by and large be measured by external, absolute past events (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 59). Nevertheless, both history and realist fiction “derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent, either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 54).

2 Ann duCille warns that “For all our rhetoric about race as socially constructed rather than biologically determined, much of our critical and cultural theory still treats race as natural and transhistorical. To a large extent, contemporary tradition building and canon construction are rooted in reified notions of culture as based on race” (147). And, as Cornell West notes, “[a]ppeals to black authenticity …hide and conceal the political and ethical dimension of blackness” (26).

3 For instance, Leslie Sanders writes that “[w]hite scholars of [b]lack culture have often represented the academy at its most imperialist” (169), and Alice Walker that white teachers can be “enemies of women, certainly of blacks” (Walker 36). Probably the most pressing demand is to not provide a study in which “the gathering of a culture’s difference into the skirts of the Queen is a neutralization designed and constituted to elevate and maintain hegemony” (Morrison, “Unspeakable” 10).

4 Despite familiarizing myself with postslavery works written by authors identified as Caucasian – William Faulkner, William Styron, Steve Erickson and Barry Unsworth among them – I have selected three writers who self-identify as black. Partly this was because I wanted to look specifically at those texts invoking slave narratives, and of the above only Styron appears to have done so. His revisions of the slave narrative form
have been vigorously debated already; Rushdy expertly discusses these debates and their effects in *Neo-slave Narratives*. I agree with Rushdy that the reception of Styron’s novel was a mobilizing event for African-American historical and literary productions, specifically neo-slave narratives.

5 Similarly, bell hooks urges critics to “recognize multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions which make diverse cultural productions possible” (*Yearning* 29).

6 As W. E. B. Du Bois would put it in what is still a gripping account of the continuation of civil war and slavery, “The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (*Black Reconstruction* 30). This added up to what Du Bois described as “second slavery,” or “semi-slavery” (*The Souls of Black Folk* 11, 56).

7 Cornel West too observes the need to record, as does Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, “the best of one’s past without romantic nostalgia” (19).

8 For instance Robert Crossley’s introduction to *Kindred* tackles science fiction and slave narrative. Trauma and neo-slave narratives are joined by Naomi Morgenstern’s comparison of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*.

9 Yet in generic terms my definition of neo-slave narrative is more restrictive than that used by preeminent critic of neo-slave narratives Ashraf Rushy, who defines the neo-slave narrative that is based on preexisting slave narrative characteristics as only one of several kinds of neo-slave narratives (“Neo-Slave Narrative”). What Rushdy calls neo-slave narratives, then, I call postslavery literature, as defined by George Handley. Postslavery literature, according to Handley, is “the impressive body of literature that has examined slavery’s legacies since abolition” (18) in a type of “history-in-progress” (148), “[revealing] parallel narrative anxieties about genealogy, narrative authority, and racial difference” (5), and differing from postcolonial writing in its focus on slavery. It can (but is not bound to) use slave narratives or antislavery writing; therefore it includes neo-slave narratives. It is therefore a much looser category with few generic signals, as it includes historical novels depicting slavery, contemporary novels dealing with the legacies of slavery, genealogical narratives, and novels that imitate the slave narrative form itself. As I argue that neo-slave narratives go far beyond imitation in their revisions of generic strategies, I reserve the term neo-slave narratives for only “those contemporary novels that assume the form and loosely adopt the conventions of the antebellum slave narrative” (Rushdy 535).

10 Unlike fellow postslavery literature critic Handley (18), I prefer not to discount the important contribution of nationalist movements in African-American, Caribbean, and Canadian literature. As Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out, “all post-colonial studies continue to depend upon national literatures and criticism. The study of national traditions is the first and most vital stage of the process of rejecting the claims of the centre to exclusivity” (17).

11 See Rinaldo Walcott, “Who is She” 40.

12 “Diaspora sensibilities resurrect all that communities and nations destroy, foreclose and prohibit in their dominating narratives of collective belonging” (*Walcott, Black Like Who?* 22). An implicit need for an Atlantic approach is also evinced in Walvin’s and
Genovese’s histories of slavery, as these authors find they must respectively include American as well as British, and British as well as American, responses to slavery.  

13 “[T]he USA moves from a dominated to a dominating position, giving its literature greater affinities with those of Europe in terms of its power to produce ‘canonical’ texts and to influence other literatures” (Ashcroft et al. 32; see also Handley 24, and Hall 21).  

14 Although not pursuing a bilingual (polyglot) study, I do agree with postslavery literatures critic George Handley, that “the sites of knowledge production must be plural and varied in their geocultural locations so as to avoid an expanding and subsuming appropriation of difference” (29).

15 It is also possible that the diaspora in West Indian studies may echo early assessments of West Indian literature that “usually include West Indian writing only as part of a wider unit” and that notice only the rudimentary features: the “centrality” of the black characters, the “aftermath of slavery and colonialism” (Ramchand 14).

16 “Feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other” (Ashcroft et al. 31).

17 See S. E. Ogude’s article on Equiano. As Rosemary Coombe reports, slave narratives are not alone in this plagiaristic aspect: in the late eighteenth century, “by far the greatest part of publishing output involved reproduction and reiteration, reworking the prior texts of others for an emergent working-class audience,” and “[m]ost cultural production was formulaic, involving stock characters, predictable styles, variation of routine plots, and standardized narratives revolving around practices that today would be deemed plagiarisms rather than original works” (256). This period coincides with the emergence of the slave narrative as a genre. According to critic Robert Stepto, this is slave narrative’s phase of “eclectic narrative” (4), because of its inherent genre mixing; note that even the “integrated narrative” of later development and the “generic” or “authenticating narrative” still include many other voices, thus corresponding to my sense of genre development over time and the position articulated vis-à-vis dialogism.

18 In approaching these fictional adaptations of autobiography, I have found Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s survey of life-writing and related criticism, and William Spengemann’s articulation of historical shifts, useful in thinking through autobiography’s subgenres, subjects and personae, components (especially the characteristic interplay of recollection and invention), and changes over time. Leigh Gilmore’s study of trauma memoir bridges autobiography and trauma studies, and reminds us of that aspect of autobiography that is not liberatory but disciplinary and “self-monitoring” (20).

19 A contemporary review of Ball’s book notes anxiety over autobiography/fiction, beginning, “It has sometimes been made a question whether more truth can be communicated in real or fictitious narrative,” and lamenting Ball’s absence of “documentary evidence” (“The Life and Adventures of a Fugitive Slave” 8).

20 See Robin Winks’ study of the complicated relationship between Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel and Josiah Henson’s narrative to further confound the sense of what is fact and what fiction, and how may influence the other.

21 See Franny Nudelman’s article, “Harriet Jacobs and the Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering” for a study of how this author is “repeatedly marginalized in relation to the
very conventions she employs” (942). Interestingly, Jacobs’ narrative “was dismissed as a fraud and a fiction” (Smith and Watson 30) until Jean Yellin’s work reestablished its status as “fact.” See Jean Yellin’s “Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs’ Slave Narrative” and her introduction to the edition of Incidents.

Yellin’s Women and Sisters and The Intricate Knot are fascinating studies of the broad American formulations of and responses to proslavery and anti-slavery movements.

Also note the collection of essays, The Discourse of Slavery (eds. Carl Plasa and Betty Ring), which includes thoughts on race and gender within American slave narratives in addition to canonical British authors’ responses to slavery.

Other than suggesting a greater appreciation of the finer distinctions with which discourse and genre are employed in neo-slave narratives, I am wary of offering readings of the novels in order to support or critique prevailing critical trends. I recall Toni Morrison’s pithy comment: “The point is to clarify, not to enlist” (“Unspeakable” 19). Ultimately, Bakhtin extends varying degrees of heteroglossia to characterize all utterances, and a dialogic quality is understood to permeate all language; however, it is the novel that is of most concern in this study. In the novel, “this internal dialogization becomes one of the most fundamental aspects of prose style and undergoes a specific artistic elaboration” (284). More precisely, the combination of images of dialogues defines the novel, since a voice therein is not the thing itself, but an image of it (51). To the speakers, genres or discourses “denote and express directly and fully, and are capable of expressing themselves without mediation; but outside, that is, for those not participating in the given purview, these languages may be treated as objects, as typifications, as local color” (289). According to Bakhtin, readers therefore determine artistic merit by the degree to which a novel has achieved the stylization of language, elevating it into images (278) and providing “artistic calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of this heteroglossia” (279).

Dialogism thus differs from a black sense of dialogue, “the sharing of speech and recognition” that takes place between black women, between equals, according to bell hooks (Talking 6).

“Bakhtin saw the relation between individual and society not as a binary opposition, but as a continuum, because the contents of the psyche and of culture were the same: signifying forms that simultaneously demand and elude closure as fixed signs with certain meanings.” (Coombe 83). African-American author Audre Lorde famously explains the difficulty with the “master’s tools,” or the language itself, saying “we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also [ ] those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves” (135). Similarly, another influential author articulates the inner dynamic of language: “I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work.” (Morrison, Playing xii-xiii).

As Elizabeth Spelman puts it, “guilt is not an emotion that makes us attend well to the situation of those whose treatment at our hands we feel guilty about. We’re too anxious trying to keep our moral slate clean.” (109). From another point of view, Toni Morrison
has explained the professional critic’s responsibility not “to exchange [one’s] professional anxieties for the imagined turbulence of the text” (Morrison, “Unspeakable” 10).

Despite the problems with terminology outlined below, Genette’s classification of intertextuality – what he calls hypertextuality – is otherwise indispensable to my study. Genette admits that certainly, “a simple understanding of the hypertext never necessitates resorting to the hypotext,” for the hypertext “is invested with a meaning that is autonomous and thus in some manner sufficient. But sufficient does not mean exhaustive” (Genette 397), and thus, “since I persist in thinking that hypertextuality adds a dimension to a text, it seems to me that here – for once – scholarship can enrich one’s reading” (Genette 200).

The purpose of genre study is not to come up with a list of necessary elements, not to define and classify, but rather to identify and communicate (Fowler 38). Jean Viviès outlines the potential flaws of genre study:

Either, setting out from a precise, historical definition one refrains from seeing analogies between other works with common features, or a definition is drawn up from the study of a wide variety of texts. In the second case, however, the very choice of the works to be examined is motivated by an implicit or unconscious definition of the model in question. (93)

West Indian literary critic Kenneth Ramchand comments that “[t]he pleasure of recognizing the familiar is a legitimate pleasure for readers of literature, but it will only serve conservatism and self-indulgence if there is not a readiness for literature’s exciting other side – the process by which it deconstructs and defamiliarizes, and so promotes transformation both in the lives of individuals and in the structures of societies” (vii). Post-colonial critics reaffirm the argument that genre “cannot be described by essential characteristics, but by an interweaving of features, a ‘family resemblance’ which denies the possibility of either essentialism or limitation” (Ashcroft et al. 182).

As does Genette, Gates distinguishes between motivated and unmotivated signifying practices; both of these have “profound intention” but only the first contains “negative critique” of the texts it signifies upon (The Signifying Monkey xxvi). This distinction may roughly parallel Genette’s between parody and pastiche, although Genette allows the pastiche more capacity for critique of its hypotext.

For example, Roger Abrahams introduces his collection of folktales:

To the outside world, such signifying is sometimes regarded as a mark of irresponsible irreverence; it may make serious matters seem playful, the subject of banter. But this is exactly what is intended in the world of nonsense, to use the West Indian term for signifying; it provides a context in which the community encourages its wits to test the limits of meaning by exploring the edges of believability, all of this in the service of expressive resilience and improvisational creativity. Nonsense or signifying, then, is not always merely playing around, for the most serious concerns of community life are brought into the discussion, and much is learned about how life ought to be lived, even when the illustrations for the virtuous life are couched negatively and are laughed at as acts of negation. (6)

I am mindful of Rinaldo Walcott’s linkage of the black Atlantic and signifying practices: “black diasporic cultures are most engaging and critically affirmative when the
practices of (re)invention are highlighted and displayed in a complex fashion” (*Black Like Who?* 25).

For example, Davis and Gates assert in their introduction to *The Slave’s Narrative* that the slave narrative is “the formal basis upon which an entire narrative tradition [in African-American literature] has been constructed” (xxxiv), ignoring the capacity of black authors to access a number of forms.

The practice of coupling and the model of the roundabout also serve to create an awareness of multiple, not fractured selves:

That is the logic of coupling rather than the logic of a binary opposition. You can be black *and* British [or black *and* Canadian, or black *and* American], not only because that is a necessary position to take up…, but because even those two terms, joined now by the coupler “and” instead of opposed to one another, do not exhaust all our identities. Only some of our identities are sometimes caught in that particular struggle. (Hall 29)

These critics and others have placed African-American writing into a broader social and cultural field: W. Braithwaite (1925) and Sterling Brown (1938) provided some early observations on the presence of blacks in American literature. Next to Jean Yellin’s and Leonard Cassuto’s efforts to sketch out the larger background of writing by black and caucasian authors about slavery (which slave narrators and neo-slave narratives often revisit and disrupt), I would place William Van Deburg, whose thorough examination of slavery in American popular culture and in the works of white and black authors crosses disciplinary boundaries in providing context for slave and neo-slave narratives.

Bell hooks has suggested that “the politics of location’ necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of re-vision” (*Yearning* 145).

Lionnet discards the translation of this concept of *méétissage*, declaring that “the word does not exist in English,” except in words and phrases – creolization, hybridity, mulatto, half-breed, mixed blood – with strongly negative connotations (13; see also 4 and 10): “The Anglo-American consciousness seems unable to accommodate miscegenation positively through language” (14). Thus Homi Bhabha’s model of postcolonial *hybridity* requires revisiting, as does Gérard Genette’s characterization of generic mixing as “contamination” (210) or characterization of such mixing as “blurred” (Cohen 14). The negative associations are evident. The alternative word, *métis*, simply means *mixed*, and refers to cloth made of two different fibres (Lionnet 14). This distinction is particularly important to remember in a Canadian context, where *métis* is often (mis)understood as “mixed blood.” Nevertheless, because George Elliott Clarke observes that “so-called Métique” are recognized by Canada’s Constitution Act of 1982, and that this may amount to a “legitimization of bicultural status” (*Odysseys* 220), even in the Canadian context *métis* is preferred to other potential terms.

*Métissage* is thus one of postcolonial criticism’s “comprehensive comparative models,” as it argues for a recognition of literary syncretism, where “syncretism is the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories, and, by extension, cultural formations, merge into a single new form” (Ashcroft et al. 15).
40 Other writers have expressed support for syncretic views: according to Walcott, Wilson Harris also "posits that notions of community as sacred have become the grounds upon which freedom is impingement, and it is only through 'cross-cultural resonance(s)' that any hope might be possible at the twilight of the twentieth century" (Black Like Who? 77). Conversely, according to Cornel West, objections to cultural syncretism "[re]st upon two political concerns: that cultural hybridity downplayed the vicious character of white supremacy and that cultural hybridity intimately linked the destinies of black and white people such that the possibility of black freedom was farfetched" (West 102).

41 Moreover, "hybridity is no guarantee of postcolonial self-determination; it is as available to the colonizing practices of capital as it is to local strategies of resistance" (Rosemary Coombe after Annie Coombes 215).

42 With respect to the first, Gilroy has isolated the "pervasive idea" that "defines [b]lacks as forever victims, objects rather than subjects, beings that feel yet lack the ability to think, and remain incapable of considered behavior in an active mode" (Gilroy, There Ain't No Black 11). In other words, black does not equal victim, black does not equal slave. For Gilroy, what intervenes is "this reintegration of history," because ultimately "[r]acism rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past" (12). Slavery contained outlets for agency. But there are limits to agency as much as there are limits to victimhood. Stressing agency can "deny the lingering effect of black history – a history inseparable from though not reducible to victimization" (Cornell West 14). The notion of coupling can alleviate the perceived essentialist polar pull of victimhood and agency. Audre Lorde perhaps puts it most strongly in her assertion, "...I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior" (41).

43 Rosemary Coombe chimes in with Hall's and my own valorization of ambivalence: it is ... necessary to avoid a position of left romanticism that views all forms of local cultural expression as 'resistance.' Resistance is simply too broad and unnuanced a category to incorporate the diversity of attitudes and practices illustrated by subcultural appropriation of media forms. Furthermore, it may mislead us by elevating relations of antagonism over those of ironic appreciation, complicitous critique, affectionate annoyance, sympathetic intervention, and grudgingly respectful grievances. Culture is created in such activities. (271)

44 Rosemary Coombe offers that [t]he postmodern celebration of pastiche and montage – mimetic juxtapositions of alterity in recodings and reworkings of regimes of signification – must remain cognizant of the imperialist theories in which many commodified forms of available cultural difference were originally forged. Increasingly, it is necessary to attend to the postcolonial claims of those who refuse to put their alterity at the service of a mere mimetic multiplication of possibilities or abandon it to those who would celebrate a merely syncretic hybridity at the expense of historical consciousness and critique. (Coombe 206-207)

45 As Hall writes, "we cannot forget how cultural life, above all in the West, but elsewhere as well, has been transformed in our lifetimes by the voicing of the margins" (Hall 23).
In fact, “[i]t is the paradox of postmodern genre that the more radical the dissolution of traditional generic boundaries, the more important the concept of genericity becomes” (Perloff 4).

I am indebted to student Andrea Pearce’s suggestions of Judith Herman’s and Leigh Gilmore’s studies of trauma.

Ralph Ellison describes also the complacency in the audience of films taking blacks as their subjects:

It is as though there were some deep relief to be gained merely from seeing these subjects projected upon the screen…. The temptation toward self-congratulation which comes from seeing these films [about blacks] and sharing in their emotional release is apt to blind us to the true nature of what is unfolding – or failing to unfold – before our eyes.” (Ellison, Shadow 280)

One author of postslavery fiction, Dionne Brand, has commented on visiting slave sites in the West Indies:

This is where it happened and all we can do is weep when our turn comes, when we meet. Most likely that is the task of our generation: to look and to weep, to be taken hold of by them, to be used in our flesh to encounter their silence. (Bread 6-7; my emphasis)

The body can be understood as the physical or the real, as opposed to the intellectual or transcendent or metaphysical. This could be called the “fetishization of the concrete” (after Spivak 296).

At its most concise, Scarry’s elaboration of this point reads as follows:

So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegiably present is it that ‘having pain’ may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to ‘have certainty,’ while for the other person [outside the sufferer’s body] it is so elusive that ‘hearing about pain’ may exist as the primary model of what it is ‘to have doubt.’ Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. (Scarry 4)

While Stuart Hall recognizes that the body was “the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation” (Hall 27), and that there may be a role for “strategic essentialism” (Hall after Gayatri Spivak 29), he argues that “we tend to privilege experience itself, as if black life is lived experience outside of representation” (Hall 30): “[t]here is a politics there to be struggled for. But the invocation of a guaranteed black experience behind it will not produce that politics” (Hall 32; original emphasis).

In other words, authors like those described here create alternative truths:

Truth is what counts as true within the system of rules for a particular discourse; power is that which annexes, determines, and verifies truth. Truth is never outside power, or deprived of power, the production of truth is a function of power and, as Foucault says, ‘we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth’” (Ashcroft et al. 167).

Furthermore, “[p]ower is invested in the language because it provides the terms in which truth itself is constituted.” (167-68)
Chapter 2

Balancing Slave Narrative and Travel Writing: Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge*

Like other fiction analysed in this study, Caryl Phillips’ fiction has a complex relationship with slave and/or freedom narratives, and authority, authenticity, fictionality, history, and memory. Indeed, Phillips has called slavery “the biggest of those shadows where the history of Europe meets the history of the Americas” (“Interview” 74). Furthermore, his complicated nationality, comprised of his birth on St. Kitts, his upbringing in Britain, his periodic return to St. Kitts, and his teaching and long-term residence in the US, is suggested in the diasporic range of his work and is an apposite reminder of the diasporic aspect of my research into generic transformation. I am greatly indebted to the foremost critic of Phillips, Bénédicte Ledent, for her thorough study, imbued with the history of literary criticism from the West Indies, of Caryl Phillips’ diasporic and polyphonic sensibilities as West Indian, and of the “hidden affinities” of his disparate characters (*Caryl Phillips* 100). His novels begin with *The Final Passage* and *A State of Independence*, in which Phillips depicts in a single narrative consciousness the difficulties in his parents’ generation of both departing and coming back to the West Indies. Since these, he has moved toward writing much more structurally complex historical novels, each of which is centered around three or more characters’ experiences, and each of which concerns slavery (in the West Indies and in the US) and its varied manifestations and legacies. These novels do not place a central narrative function in any one narrator; the numerous narratives are organized only by paratextually divisive (and simultaneously linking) silent spaces between sections. As well, the stories each novel collects are often radically divided by geography and chronology. Phillips goes further than most in
illustrating what is, for Louis Mink, “the view of historical knowledge most widely shared in our time”: “[i]nstead of the belief that there is a single story embracing the ensemble of human events, we believe that there are many stories, not only different stories about different events, but even different stories about the same events” (140).

This section of the thesis, divided into two chapters, discusses two of these later novels: *Cambridge* and *Higher Ground.*

**Pastiche and symmetry: the aesthetics of confrontation**

Whereas Octavia Butler’s and Lawrence Hill’s generic *métissage*, as we shall see, directly evokes genre through allusion to other books and authors, and indirectly evokes genre through loose employment of a genre’s given range of characteristics, Phillips’ technique is an explicit pastiche of hypotextual documents: he borrows recognizable passages, incidents and sentiments from them. Phillips takes representative sample quotations from his sources and tightens the structures. Phillips compresses the historical world, thickening and reducing historical ingredients to their essential combination, thereby maximizing their fictional use. The novel thus intensifies and interrogates hypotexts. Phillips’ hypertextuality is unmarked by conventional paratextual signs of attribution: there is neither acknowledgment note, nor quotation marks, nor footnotes. The text is employed “not as a quotation, but as primary material” (Michel Butor qtd. in Genette 54).

Hypotexts (accompanied by all of their vexed questions about authority and resistance, naming and identity, literacy and discourse, fact and fiction, genre type and individuality) form, inform, and reform many of the themes of Phillips’ novels. The “apparent spontaneity” of Phillips’ literary productions “is in fact sustained by a premeditated diversity which gives both form and content,” as is true of literature generally according
to Pierre Macherey (60, 39). Due to his heavy reliance on existing documents, the changes Phillips makes to the material in creating his pastiche – altering a key moment of a narrator’s life, adding words or phrases, compressing incidents or passages to their paradigmatic components – can be tracked in detail, and their effects analysed. Although many critics have noted evident source material in passing or in reference to a particular work, as will be enumerated, many of Phillips’ sources have been overlooked, and no critical assessment of his approaches to hypotexts and their kin has yet been attempted with a sustained attention to the significant selections and alterations Phillips makes and a thorough understanding of the critique of genre these dramatize. Macherey’s notation that the effects are not “entirely premeditated” (41) opens the texts beyond author’s intentions to readers’ interpretations. Phillips’ work therefore provides a uniquely unrealized opportunity to analyse an author’s choices in relation to slave narratives, and to articulate a series of possible responses to these narratives.

Through my reconstruction of this process of selection (the dialectical relation between hypo- and hypertext), certain patterns of emphasis emerge, patterns of both inclusion and omission. These patterns might be said to build towards an aesthetic of confrontation. Aesthetic, because for Phillips the confrontations between men and women, between European and African, between master and slave, between guard and prisoner, between German and Jew – in short, the “highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 4) – are shaped by rhetorical flourishes and conditions of language. Therefore a preeminent theme of his work is the (often thwarted) desire to shape particular experience and memory for expression; in short, the urge to communicate. Textual and paratextual elements alike are incorporated into Phillips’
style. Even typographical features, such as italics in *Cambridge*, are lifted from source material to contribute to narrative tension in the economy of Phillips’ novels. Confrontations are unavoidable, to the extent that not only are there confrontations within all the pairs listed above, but there are also confrontations between the pairs. Put simply, Phillips builds comparisons between relationships of power but refutes easy analogic leaps. In many ways this is one of his most impressive achievements: he is able to move beyond the African diaspora into other incidences of oppression, yet he retains total specificity of experience in such a way that readers cannot easily substitute one expression of oppression/resistance for another, though they do note parallels. At most, Phillips suggests an uneasy and shortlived symmetry between the experiences of members of different oppressed classes, sexes, and races in his reconstitution of slave narratives in neo-slave narratives.

**Polyphonic fragmentation of dialogic and monologic narratives**

To articulate further this aesthetics of confrontation in Phillips’ novels depends not only on a general understanding of Mikhail Bakhtin’s views on dialogism, but on a specific distinction drawn between dialogism and polyphonic fragmentation. Ledent claims that Phillips’ “most original innovation lies in the polyphonic and dialogic structures” of his novels (*Caryl Phillips* 277), and that the structures “signal respect for the various sensibilities they represent, for they reveal a refusal to impose upon them a totalizing model, in the very way slavery did” (278). Phillips himself has referred to this aspect of his work as “polyphonic”, as well as (more pathologically) “structural paranoia and schizophrenia” (“Crisscrossing the River” 94, 93). *Cambridge* and Phillips’ other novels are both dialogic and polyphonic in that, first, the author dialogically borrows from and
stalks or merges a set of other, competing voices to create each dialogic narrator, and second, each narrative voice is placed in juxtaposition with several others into a postmodern structure of polyphonic fragmentation. Dialogism, heteroglossia, and polyphony alter the reader’s relationship with the text’s hypertextuality as it licenses multiple interpretations. As feminist postcolonial critic Françoise Lionnet puts it, “a given space (text) will support more life (generate more meanings) if occupied by diverse forms of life (languages)” (18).

While the slave narrative is central to many of Phillips’ novels, it is not the only genre of literature whose parameters he challenges through polyphony and dialogism. In Cambridge, the first novel discussed, Phillips juxtaposes travel writing – journals and letters – to the slave narrative, and, in so doing, demonstrates the participation of each genre in wider circles of discourse and cultural exchange.3 Phillips’ work often involves rewriting the experience of slavery from the perspective of Euroamericans involved in the slave economy, such as slave traders and slave owners. His polyphonic fictional universe does not precisely give voice to unheard and oppressed peoples; rather it pays homage to a literary lineage of the oppressed, and places these voices next to the opinions of their (willing and unwilling) oppressors, perhaps in part to contextualize the voices of the oppressed, in part to show with specific examples what they resist. Postcolonial readers need to be aware of the stages in personal and cultural acquiescence with systems of oppression as well as with the stages of awareness of and resistance to those systems. “For what were the slave trade and the plantation system if not massive experiments in social engineering and discipline, serial production, the systematizing of human life, the standardizing of persons?” (Pratt 36). Involved in a particular exchange within the novel
between Emily, a member of the plantocracy, and Cambridge, an educated slave, these
genres articulate difference and similarity. Phillips adopts particular characteristics of
each genre in order to expose the weaknesses and strengths of the competing forms of
expression. Through his compression or distillation of a number of documents in each
genre into single narrative strands, Phillips both quotes wholesale from specific sources
and borrows passages that testify to trends within the genres and also to a larger
discursive field which includes both genres. In a close reading, we see that ultimately
slave narratives and travel writing not only complement each other thematically, but they
also overlap in discourse, as they frequently share subjects, rhetoric, diction. The familiar
genre of the slave narrative is not defamiliarized in _Cambridge_, but rather contextualized,
attaining its fullest historical and literary significance as it is recognized explicitly in
juxtaposition with contemporary competing and occasionally overlapping discourses.
Other effects are radically disruptive: Emily’s and Cambridge’s (and in the next chapter,
Rudi’s) crumbling characters are at odds with the seamless self-presentsions of other,
more self-reliant chroniclers; also, Emily and Cambridge participate in the oppression of
each other (Emily by adopting a racist, pro-slavery stance, Cambridge by advocating the
possession of wives by husbands). This difference has important implications for our
reading of contemporary historical fiction as it illustrates our particular relationship to the
psychology of the individual and to debates over identity politics. As Phillips thus
examines the context of genres, and also “the ideological character and function” of
genre, he may be said to produce a sociology of genre (Duff xvi). In Genette’s terms, the
_architextuality of genre, the oft-silent relationship between text and genre in which “the
text itself is not supposed to know, and consequently not meant to declare, its generic quality” (4), is voiced implicitly through Phillips’ juxtaposition of genres.

*Higher Ground, Crossing the River,* and *The Nature of Blood* suggest that the gulf between different experiences in history is too great to be leaped, that experiences are too disparate to be yoked together without gaps, strain, and tension. In contrast, *Cambridge’s* structure implies a reliance on a single set of events, a historical common denominator or extrinsic referent, which four varied interested parties or stakeholders contest. These four points of view depend on four distinct voices or discourses; moreover, each of the four is associated with a particular genre. First, Emily Cartwright keeps a travel journal on her father’s plantation in the West Indies, recording the gradual indoctrination into a slave owning mentality that accompanies her own desperate efforts to emancipate herself from the prospect of a loveless marriage arranged by her father. She converses with various white members of the community, befriends Stella, the enslaved housekeeper, and confronts Christiania, the overseer’s enslaved mistress. When Christiania retaliates by working obeah, Emily obtains the protection and intervention of Cambridge, a “Hercules” of a slave who is Christiania’s husband. Emily has an affair with the previously despised Mr. Brown, the estate’s overseer, and she describes some of the distressing events leading up to the murder of Brown. Phillips works here primarily with the conventions of travel writing. But where “a travel narrative can just simply come to a halt” (Vivès 103) – and does so here – a novel requires dénouement, hence the other sections of this novel. In the second section, Cambridge pens his memoirs before his execution for the murder, including his initial capture in Africa, his slavery, education and qualified freedom in England, his eventual recapture while on his way to act as missionary to African natives,
and his perspective on the events leading up to Brown’s death. Cambridge’s writing owes much to the early British slave narratives, whose “urgent task was to address and convince a British readership of the human values that resided in black communities. The writer was thus a missionary in reverse, coming to Britain to educate and civilize the ignorant” (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 83). Cambridge’s writing is a “corrective” to Emily’s, according to Phillips (“Caryl Phillips” 34). It also owes something to slave confessions, albeit more to fictional than historical versions. Together, Emily’s and Cambridge’s accounts could be said to “dramatize relations of overwhelming indenture” (Lionnet 21). Emily herself is, like Cambridge, “oppressed and excluded by metropolitan politics”; however, “patriarchal oppression [takes] on a specific meaning” (Maria Olaussen qtd. in Handley 159) for a white Englishwoman that differs significantly from that oppression Cambridge experiences. Third, an historical/journalistic account describes the murder of Brown by Cambridge in sensationalist and incendiary terms. This contrived account is akin to the monologic assertion discussed in the introduction, as it displays public power to convey events in a reductive, misleading and misinformed, yet authoritative imperial discourse. It is an attempt to “rapidly” incorporate threats to “the exclusive claims of the centre” (Ashcroft et al. 4). This monologic account is precisely what is contested (and ironically marginalized) by the polyphonic juxtaposed fragments of the overall novel. Coming after two private narratives, its failure to adequately grasp the complexity of relations and motivations and its efforts to exclude the “noise and heteroglossia” (Lionnet 24) of othered female and black discourses are extremely pointed. Yet, as Paul Sharrad points out, this is the kind of document “most likely to survive” as “most ‘official’ and also the most unreliable” (214). Fourth, the prologue and epilogue
focus the reader’s attention on Emily’s plight before and after her experiences on the sugar plantation. These last depend upon the modes and tropes of postmodern fiction and fragmentation, and are written in “the language of the twentieth century…a language that can talk about certain things suddenly bursting through Emily’s own language in which she can’t” (Swift in “Caryl Phillips” 35).

**Precursor texts of *Cambridge* and the case for a analysis of hypertextuality**

Despite the fascinating involvement of Phillips’ work with the themes of broken histories, displacement, disillusionment, forced exiles, incarceration and imprisonment of the material world and the mind, and love and loss, and despite his experimentation with the forms of the historical novel, *Cambridge* (1991), which is Phillips’ best-known work, and the novel which brought him to the attention of North American readers, has received little critical attention. There are some helpful interviews with Phillips, but they can hardly take the place of rigorous and detailed critical investigations.⁷ All of Phillips’ novels have a high degree of hypertextuality, as they use historical sources extensively – Rudi’s letters in *Higher Ground* allude to George Jackson’s letters from prison, published as *Soledad Brother*; the log book in *Crossing the River* is based on John Newton’s *Journal of a Slave Trader*; and the account of the Portobufole Jews in *The Nature of Blood* is based on two historical narratives. However, critical discussions of the intertextuality are nearly nonexistent.⁸ One rare article discusses Phillips’ use of source material in *Cambridge*. Evelyn O’Callaghan’s “Historical Fiction and Fictional History: Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge*” indicates that Phillips is heavily reliant upon Lady Nugent’s *Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805* (published privately in 1839 and publicly in 1907), Matthew Gregory (“Monk”) Lewis’ *Journal of a West India Proprietor*
(published 1834), and Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African, written by himself* (published 1789), “a most powerful indictment of slavery in the literature of the period” (Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe 124).

I have been able to bolster this list with several texts whose influences on *Cambridge* have not been critically discussed at all. To travel writings, I add Janet Schaw’s *Journal of a Lady of Quality* (privately circulated in the late 1700s, published in 1923) and Fanny Kemble’s *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation* (1863); to slave narratives, Ukawsaw Gronniosaw’s *A Narrative of the Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince, related by himself* (published in 1770). These are unquestionable hypotexts for some portions of Phillips’ novel. There are other texts that corroborate the travel and slave discourses of *Cambridge* in more subtle ways, including Lady Anne Barnard’s letters and journals from her residence in South Africa and Anna Maria Falconbridge’s *Narrative of Two Voyages to the River Sierra Leone During the Years 1791-1792-1793* (published 1794); also Ottobah Cugoano’s *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*. The consideration of additional hypotexts made possible through this original research cannot fail to be of assistance in sounding the depths of Phillips’ novel. I repeat Gérard Genette’s dictum: “The hypertext thus always stands to gain by having its hypertextual status perceived – even when the gain is assessed in negative terms, as can happen to certain quantities” (Genette 398), and I shall explore these later with reference to the critical practice set out by Pierre Macherey. Rather than simply experiencing “déjà vu” (O’Callaghan 43) while reading *Cambridge,*
those who delve into British-West Indian eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel
literature and slave narratives will reach Phillips’ critique of the parent narratives.

O’Callaghan’s approach, which involves a brief investigation of similarities
between the historical material and the novel, works quite well when Phillips appears to
be using his sources for their wealth of historically accurate detail and description of sea
journeys, foreign fauna and flora, living conditions of enslaving and enslaved persons
(including their food, clothing, and housing arrangements), and social practices and
customs. Noticeably, the historical accuracy of such detail is often located more readily
in the recorder’s attitudes than in the actual explanations provided. The trivia recorded by
observers, particularly diarists, provide Cambridge with its ability to approach historical
accuracy of approach as well as subject or event. One of the most vivid examples of
replicated historical detail involves the British ritual of tea-drinking. Schaw and Lewis
both comment on the difficulty of preserving the proper form of the rites on board ship,
and Emily follows suit (Schaw 22-23; Cambridge 10). Of course, Phillips
accomplishes much more than the preservation of the physical sensation of a teacup
banging against one’s teeth: he parodies the absolute cultural centrality of the ritual in
reiterating it for his contemporary audience. In passages like these, Phillips builds up the
minutiae of the novel, establishing historical veracity in its smallest parts. More
importantly, he realizes that the form of the diary necessarily results sometimes in this
flattening effect: trying to drink tea is as important one day as immigrants forced by
persecution to leave Scotland are the next day (Schaw); the possibility of slave rebellion
is as important one day as a child’s bath is the next (Nugent), and so on.
But Phillips rarely uses his sources for merely this kind of historical research. Instead, Phillips often demonstrates the shared or standard metaphors – the figurative forms of discourse – operating within a community as well as the shared technical or literal information. He frequently adopts examples that are politically loaded, and he rewrites them in order to write back against the politics of the travelogues he reads. For example, within an extended *three-page* description of Emily’s tour of the sugar works on his estate corresponding precisely with Lewis’ account with the minor exception of several words (Lewis 79-81; *Cambridge* 82-84), Phillips interjects Emily’s qualification:

> Under the guidance of Mr Brown I was able to observe all the tools, utensils and instruments employed in this industry, but it not being the season I was unable to see the process in full operation. However, Mr Brown’s explanation was so thorough that not only do I feel confident that I might explain the mysteries of this process to any stranger, but I am persuaded that I must myself have observed it in action! (83)

This is the only substantial addition to the description of the works, and is very important. Description alone, for its aspect of eyewitness authority, “is the most important arsenal in the convention of travel writing, and also functions as a camouflaged form of ideological projection and imperial mythmaking” (Gikandi 54; see also 52). Yet “[o]ften the description of sites visited was paradoxically the least authentic aspect of travel narratives at the time. Descriptive passages were frequently copied from guidebooks or reference books” (Vivès 73). Such a description was *de rigueur* for every travel account of the West Indies at the time, its inauthenticity paradoxically required to secure authenticity. Put another way, “the narrative of travel derives its authority from its pre-texts as much as from original observations” (Gikandi 56). Clearly, merely identifying to the adopted passage as hypotext alone is insufficient, as is referring to it as an example of the typical
scenes depicted by the European visitor, since Phillips so evidently marks the restrictions operating on the viewpoint of the European traveller to the West Indies: limited access to observation, constant mediation between the condition of slavery and its would-be impartial appraiser by those who have heavy investment in its continuance, and of course the traveller’s own overwhelming arrogance. Phillips’ ultimate addition to the description clearly indicates the description’s function as “ideological projection” and underscores its repetitive presence in travel writing. This crucial moment of field observation is entirely dependent on preexisting assumptions. In effect, Phillips subtly conforms to travel narratives and points out their limits. O’Callaghan shows distinct similarities between passages and recurring tropes in the original journals or narratives and the corresponding segments of Cambridge (and her conclusions are apt), but makes no attempt to assess the differences, such as the interjection just described. As he borrows words, phrases, sentences, and pages, Phillips is, as O’Callaghan argues, probably simultaneously borrowing the authority of the sources as historical documents and undermining the structures of historical authority, but the texture of hypertextuality is far more layered and nuanced than a studied ambivalence. When and why does Phillips change the source material? Are there any patterns to these changes? Furthermore, I borrow Pratt’s questions about travel writing: “How do such signifying practices encode and legitimate the aspirations of economic expansion and empire? How do they betray them?” (5).

**Travel writing and Cambridge**

The examples of travel writing I among others have been able to identify as hypotexts participate in a particular type of travel writing that involves intellectual, manual, and
emotional work. According to Mary Louise Pratt’s survey of travel writing, after 1750 European travel writing partakes of a new “planetary consciousness” that is “marked by an orientation toward interior exploration and the construction of global-scale meaning through the descriptive apparatuses of natural history” (15). Both sentiment and science solidify and commingle into the anti-conquest travel narrative, which seeks liberty, knowledge, and feeling. In this ideology the traveller is “a seemingly benign observer [producing] order out of chaos” (30) through the exercise of reason and morality. Pratt uses the term “anti-conquest” to signal “strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (7). These strategies can be scientific and/or sentimental.11 “[T]he system of nature as a descriptive paradigm was an utterly benign and abstract appropriation of the planet. Claiming no transformative potential whatsoever, it differed sharply from overly imperial articulations of conquest, conversion, territorial appropriation, and enslavement. The system created…a utopian, innocent vision of European global authority” (38-39). Pratt sees this vision as rooted in historical context: “The histories of broken treaties, genocides, mass displacements and enslavements became less and less acceptable as rationalist and humanitarian ideologies took hold. Particularly after the French Revolution, contradictions between egalitarian, democratic ideologies at home and ruthless structures of domination and extermination abroad became more acute” (74). Therefore the anti-conquest travel narrative “turns on a great longing: for a way of taking possession without subjugation and violence” (57). Lawrence Sterne identifies the goals of such sentimental narrative:
to learn the languages, the laws and customs, and understand the government and interest of other nations, – to acquire an urbanity and confidence of behaviour, and fit the mind more easily for conversation and discourse; ... and by shewing us new objects, or old ones in new lights, to reform our judgments – by tasting perpetually the varieties of nature, to know what is good, – and by observing the address and arts of man, to conceive what is sincere, – and by seeing the difference of humours and manners, – to look into ourselves and form our own.”

(*Sentimental Journey* qtd. Viviès71)

A sentimental protagonist puts him- or herself “at the center of a discursive field” but is still “a non-interventionist European presence” (Pratt 78). The introduction of sentiment to travel writing means an “opening up to otherness,” the “seeking [of] not sameness but otherness” in a reciprocal relationship (Viviès 71), or, in other words, the drive of the “ethnographic mission” (Gikandi 52). It should not be surprising, then, that “[s]ex and slavery are great themes of this literature” (Pratt 86), for men and women, whose “identity...resides in their sense of personal independence, property, and social authority, rather than in scientific erudition, survival, or adventurism” (159). Travel writing most often results in reinscribing received ideas of difference and Otherness, in “executing the colonizing mission” (Ferguson, *Subject* 141). To sum up, Emily’s journal and the hypertexts her journal pastiches, fit into a category that, after Pratt, I call the anti-conquest sentimental travel journal.

The alterations Phillips makes to historical material and the resultant emphasis on the inherent violence of colonial/enslaving enterprises are accompanied by changes necessary to create a recognizably late twentieth-century historical narrative out of texts which often are more chronicle than narrative. Some of the crucial effects of the chronicle are preserved, though they signify differently in Phillips’ version than in the historical text; for instance, the flattening of event and description in Emily’s journal or
diary preserves the effect of journal life-writing, while in the framework of a novel these
testify to the inability of Emily to situate and interpret her impressions with relation to an
externally-imposed order. The travel journal can be seen as travel writing’s equivalent to
Hayden White’s historical chronicle; it “aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to
achieve it” or to achieve “narrative closure” since it “breaks off in medias res, in the
narrator’s own present” (5); “[t]he end of the discourse does not cast its light back over
the events originally recorded in order to redistribute the force of a meaning that was
immanent in all of the events from the beginning” (20). It does, however, have “a central
subject” and it retains “the chronology as the organizing principle” (16). Events possess
sequence in the journal, but not structure. Or, in Ricœur’s terms, they possess an
“episodic dimension” but not “the configurational dimension” or plot that “construes
significant wholes out of scattered events” (qtd. in White 51). That structure,
configuration, or plot is provided in this novel by the juxtaposition of the travel journal
with other forms of discourse. It is that juxtaposition which moves beyond “the
topography of imperialism” instead of simply “[reliving] its trauma” (Gikandi 49). The
juxtaposition exposes the naivety of Emily’s journal. A chronicle can “give the
impression of a stage-by-stage discovery. Knowledge of the subject does not appear to
precede its narrative exposition” (Vivès 57). This appearance is fallacious, according to
Gikandi, who argues that travel writing is inherently ideologically circular: “[t]he goal of
teach … is to confirm an a priori theory about colonial subjects” (64). The juxtaposition
of travel writing with slave narrative in the novel makes this circularity transparent.

Upon close examination, Cambridge demonstrates a range of uses of the source
material. In some cases the novel’s hypertextuality provides historical accuracy and
detail; sometimes, specific words or phrases; in some cases, a characteristic stance or attitude; in others, modified incidents; in still others, thematic concerns. Some uses are necessarily much more complex than others and they can overlap; thus isolated words and phrases might be repeated for no other purpose than historical linguistic verisimilitude, while other words and phrases might be repeated in crucially different contexts, occasioning a reappraisal of Phillips’ attitudes toward the source material.

The conventions of travel narratives require the opening of the piece of travel writing with the voyage itself (Gikandi 53) and details of navigation including storms and seasickness, etc. (Pratt 43). This is exactly how Emily’s journal opens. In an example of simple verisimilitude of vocabulary, both Janet Schaw and Emily poetically describe the cock on board ship as the “harbinger of day” (Schaw 24; Cambridge 9). Monk Lewis’ total collection of twenty-two sea-terms (windward, leeward, starboard, etc.) are almost perfectly reiterated by Emily, though Phillips drops two terms, perhaps to preserve a balance between two sets of ten terms apiece (Lewis 18, 27; Cambridge 8, 10). The weather for both Lewis and Emily as they near the West Indies is “close” and “sultry” (Lewis 42; Cambridge 15) and both their vessels at length “[crawl] into the Caribbean Sea” (Lewis 47; Cambridge 16). In a slightly more complex inheritance, Schaw’s repeated description of the ship as a “wooden kingdom” (Schaw 23, 47, emphasis added) is slightly altered to Emily’s “wooden society” and “wooden world” (Cambridge 7, 18, emphasis added). But Emily also refers to the ship as “our kingdom” (10), drawing here not only on a metaphor of authority unique to Schaw but on an apparently common practice, for John Newton, a slave trader in the eighteenth century, refers to his ship as “my peaceful kingdom” (Journal 9). A case such as this appears to be a matter of
merging or stylizing instances of discourse, of Phillips’ “[appropriation of] fragments of received historical and aesthetic discourses and [working] them into the text under his own signature” (Viviès after Bakhtin 62).

In a similar instance, Emily anthropomorphizes the voracious West Indian mosquitoes as “gentry” (28). The most obvious source of this figure of speech is Schaw’s narrative (85), but another provides corroboration: in South Africa, Lady Anne Barnard inadvertently infests her house with spiders, which she labels “gentry of this unpleasant kind” (85). Unlike either Schaw or Barnard, Emily italicizes her version, to emphasize the irony. In this way, with domestic metaphors, vocabulary, and phrasings, the “lettered” and “European” eye “that held the system could familiarize (‘naturalize’) new sites/sights immediately upon contact, by incorporating them into the language of the system” (Pratt 31).

**Shared discursive spaces: travel writing and slave narrative**

Similar patterns are enacted in the hypertextual relations with slave narratives. Equiano’s slave narrative also provides some of these words and phrases that are simply reiterated by Cambridge. For instance, like Equiano, Cambridge finds on ship “a mind superior to prejudice” (Equiano 41; *Cambridge* 140); and Equiano’s beautification of one African phenotype, describing a slave as “carved in ebony” (24), is recast by Cambridge as “cut in ebony” (150). Three times Equiano uses the word “smattering” or variants to mean basic knowledge (23, 40, 63), while Cambridge uses it only once, but this once a direct quotation of Equiano: “to help me smatter a little imperfect English” (Equiano 40; *Cambridge* 140). Though Phillips quotes directly from a particular source, there are indications of common usage in contemporary texts: Schaw uses the phrase “smattering
of Mechanicks” (165), and John Newton “smattering of books” (The Life of the Rev. John Newton 24). Thus the hypotextual source for such an archaism as smatter is by no means restricted, particularly since we are aware that these other contexts for usage in Schaw’s and Newton’s narratives are well-known to Phillips. The hypotexts and discourses may in fact be multiple: “in a double-voiced discourse, the two voices may co-exist within the limits of a single syntactic whole, or even within the same word” (Viviès 63).

These examples of basic repetition establish linguistic authenticity and reinforce the more significant forms of repetition and change discussed below. As an instance of the latter, Olaudah Equiano’s description of the horrors of the hold of the slave ship – “there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life” (Equiano 33, emphasis added) – is transposed to Cambridge’s experience: “[o]nce below our bodies received a salutation of supreme loathsomeness in the form of a fetor” (Cambridge 137, emphasis added). However, it also becomes a link within the novel between Cambridge’s experience on board ship and Emily Cartwright’s. For, as Cambridge writes earlier that “[t]he sea saluted our reddened and miserable eyes, and pain assaulted our proud African hearts” (136, emphasis added), Emily writes, “[a]ll night we were saluted by streams of brackish water which poured over our faces,” and later, “[i]n the morning I am agreeably saluted by the peaceful calm of a new day” (12, 15, emphasis added). The same word – “salutation” – identifies Cambridge’s and Equiano’s experiences as nearly identical; then the differing grammatical inflection in Cambridge’s and Emily’s accounts links their narratives and styles, but at arm’s length. This manipulation of polyptoton (repetition of the same root word with different grammatical inflections) is strikingly resonant, adding to the novel’s historical and textual
verisimilitude while it snags the fabric of the dominant discourse. As Bakhtin argues, “any direct word and especially that of the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical, and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal” (The Dialogic Imagination 60). The similarity between Emily’s and Cambridge’s terrible voyages is outweighed by the crucial difference between those experiences: though they participate in the same language practices and share a vocabulary, Emily’s ability to be greeted by the day or the weather is not matched by Cambridge, captive in the hold of a slave ship. There is no such thing as a meaningless greeting, point of contact, or salutation for a slave such as Cambridge.

This kind of wordplay on Phillips’ part reinforces one of the main tensions of the book, that existing between members of two distinct groups oppressed by dominant patriarchal control. There is a bridge between the states of an Englishwoman and a West Indian slave, but it is far too attenuated and shaky to be crossed without extreme relativist vertigo. The wordplay indicates ambivalence toward analogy, toward the recognition of similarity between the two characters. The wordplay gestures toward it then refuses it, which is entirely typical of Phillips’ practice in other novels such as Higher Ground, as we shall see in the chapter following. The vocabulary of travelogues and slave narratives is adopted, then, for more reasons than the replication of various eighteenth-century English literary voices.

Phillips’ use of a hypotextual phrase to polar purposes demonstrates his efficient use of repetition to help link the parts of a journal whose keeper, Emily, is morally and mentally unstable. As in the example of “salutation,” another suggestive phrase of Schaw’s is repeated exactly by Emily within a radically different context. Schaw, in
describing the moral laxity of the British in the West Indies with regard to the men’s alliances with mulatto mistresses and the families generated thereby, refers to the European inhabitants as “children of the sun” (112) who have this one major fault in their “mortal” makeup. Phillips grotesquely parodies Schaw’s moral indulgence and condescension by parroting the phrase, first in sympathy with the slaves (not the British): early in her journal, Emily avers, “The torn roots of these children of the sun has occasioned the stain of the institution to mark first their native soil, and then bleed across the waters to deface the Americas” (16; original emphases). The parody continues when the phrase is twisted into a justification for physical punishment of the slaves on the Cartwright estate: later Emily writes that “[t]he children of the sun are mortals, and accordingly possess their share of failings and must endure the crack of the inhuman whip” (41; original emphasis). As Schaw indulges what she sees as immoral behavior, Emily indulges whipping, though she thinks it “inhuman.” In Phillips’ version, the Other is not demonized but infantalized “in a new sentimental stereotype, as benign, ingenuous, childlike victims” (Pratt 65). Both diarists, disturbed by these disruptions to their moral certainties, are somewhat unsuccessful in their attempted reconciliations of theory and practice.

Observe also the differences between Lewis’ and Emily’s accounts of the final entry into harbour. Arrival scenes, “potent sites for framing relations of contact” (Pratt 78), are an important convention of travel writing. Lewis exclaims, “At length the ship has squeezed herself into this champagne bottle of a bay!” (52); Emily states, “the negro pilot skilfully brought us around the rocks and squeezed us into the wine bottle of a bay” (17). Though both previously record the arrival of the “black pilot” in a canoe, Lewis
attributes the necessary manoeuvring to the ship; Emily, on the other hand, attributes the skillfulness to the pilot. Emily, daughter of a West-India proprietor such as Lewis, and aware as she is of popular antislavery movements¹³, travels with the partial purpose of observing and evaluating the state of slavery and her relation to it. She hopes to “encourage Father to accept the increasingly common, though abstract, English belief in the iniquity of slavery” (Cambridge 8). Initially, she is full of the sentimental desire for innocent reciprocity, and she may begin with fewer – or at least different – biases than Lewis, travelling to supervise two plantations he owns.

Contested discursive spaces: divergences between travel and slave narratives

However, Emily’s racial biases are shown to solidify almost immediately, as she has an experience much like one described by Schaw in 1774:

Just as we got into the lane, a number of pigs run out at a door, and after them a parcel of monkeys. This not a little surprised me, but I found what I took for monkeys were negro children, naked as they were born. (Schaw 78)

Emily records the following incident:

Just after we turned ... into a small ascending lane, a number of pigs bolted into view, and after them a small parcel of monkeys. This took me by surprise, and I must have jumped some considerable space, for the gentleman took my arm as though to steady me and prevent my falling from the carriage. However, on resettling my position, I discovered that what I had taken for monkeys were nothing other than negro children, naked as they were born, parading in a feral manner to which they were not only accustomed, but in which they felt comfortable. (Cambridge 23-4)

As though Schaw’s confusion of children of African descent with monkeys alone weren’t problematic enough for Phillips’ reader, Emily tags on an explanation which might account for the crime of nakedness: she convinces herself that the slaves are wild, animal-like, “feral,” and that they prefer their degraded and oppressed positions as more
“accustomed” and “comfortable.” This, her first day on the island. Readers perhaps
moved by Emily’s initial plight and her seeming gentle lack of authority abruptly run up
against the none-too-gentle cultural authority she does exercise. As Moira Ferguson
notes, whatever their favorable intentions, “white writers tended to see themselves as
separate from slaves by virtue of their class and gender – as well as their race – position
within British society” (Subject 303). More specifically, “[e]mploying zoological
vocabulary to describe the black population is a well-known device to construct
otherness” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 86). Emily continues throughout her journal to treat
the enslaved people she meets as dogs, pigs, wolves, etc. Instances like these may owe
their specific phrasing to particular sources, but the attitudes they express are far more
culturally widespread: I also quote Lady Nugent, who writes, “One of the black women
produced two boys, this morning. Went to see them, and they were exactly like two little
monkeys” (42), and Lady Barnard, who writes, “we found a small clean house on the
same little plan with the rest, kept by a black woman, . . . . she keeping in her turn a slave,
who was mother of eight little naked mice that run about the gardens and offices just as
they came into the world, without being ashamed” (47). Thus Emily, with her changing
attitude toward slaves and black people, can be made to occupy several different positions
on the range of articulate English women’s attitudes toward slavery. What almost all
positions share is the centerstaging of the women, “split between acting as agents and
identifying with victims” (Ferguson, Subject 163).

Pointedly and uniquely offensive though each scene of animal/human confusion
may seem to us, Phillips is both quoting Schaw and drawing from a number of similar
responses which suggests Schaw’s/Emily’s racism is by no means isolated. In fact, this
example shows how Phillips compresses history and hypotexts, and stylizes discourse, as I claimed earlier. While revealing the startling extent of the dehumanizing rhetoric utilized not merely by slave owners, but also by a larger British public of the time, the animal motif forms connective tissue, transforming Emily’s journal from a chronicle into a narrative. In addition, the animal comparisons join Emily’s narrative to Cambridge’s. He writes back against this treatment by describing its *material*, not *metaphoric* impact on Britain’s displaced, unwelcomed black residents, who may be “eventually condemned to London’s *bird and beast shops* where, sad to say, negro children are sold for amusement like parrots or monkeys” (150-151; original emphasis). Indeed, in 1756 one Matthew Dyer advertised his services in providing “silver padlocks for Blacks and Dogs” (qtd. by Adams and Sanders 14). In short, Cambridge demonstrates what happens to slaves when they *are* treated like animals. His emphasis on literal materiality as the logical destination of metaphor fits into the model outlined by the thesis introduction and anticipates Phillips’ more sustained critique of metaphor and analogy in *Higher Ground*. As Sharrad comments, Cambridge’s narrative “succinctly contradicts or undermines almost every confident assertion Emily has made” (203). Cambridge’s confession enters into a conversation with Emily’s journal, and the conversation aids in producing a thematically unified, if polyphonically fragmented, novel.

Emily’s and Cambridge’s accounts diverge on the question of antislavery. Emily’s sensibilities owe much to other sentimental travelling ladies. When Lady Anne Barnard sees the body of a slave on the gallows in Africa, she writes, “it froze my blood at first, but habit hardens the nerves, I hope without hardening the heart” (26). While Anna Falconbridge is in Africa, she is appalled during a dinner by the view of several
hundred slaves eating together: “Offended modesty rebuked me with a blush for not
hurrying my eyes from such disgusting scenes...; be assured I avoided the prospects from
this side of the house every after” (23-24). Emily writes, “there can be little more
offensive to the human spirit than to observe” – note, observe, not suffer – “the cattle-
whip being inflicted with all the severity of vindictive malice” (41). Yet hers is a heart
“whose sympathies leapt instinctively to this poor unfortunate” (41) being whipped.
Emily is rather like Mary Boykin Chesnut, watching the civil war in the Southern US,
anticipating the end of slavery yet justifying it in more or less subtle ways.

To wear the color of slaves is the worst. The misery of poverty is alike
everywhere; many a person can be beaten with many stripes, by his own family,
his father or mother, his schoolmaster, his superior officer by land or sea, his
master if he is an apprentice, her husband if she be a woman, or everybody who
chooses, if she be a child. Wherever there is a cry of pain, I am on the side of the
one who cries. (Chesnut 221-22)

The pressure of sentimentally-informed relativism propels slavery into a levelling vortex
of oppression. The observing woman’s work is a kind of benevolent paternalism, with
responsibilities to sympathize, and to object to women’s own domestic space being
violated by slavery’s practices, but to withdraw from observation and to refrain from
action for fear of violating gender codes.

“Sentimentality and humanitarianism are marshaled in the course of anti-anti-
slavery” for Emily as for Anna Falconbridge (Pratt 103). While Cambridge’s sympathies
are abolitionist, Emily’s begin there but quickly come under pressure from the British
West Indians she meets. Phillips is clearly attuned to the seeming contradictions of
travelling sentimental women in a slave milieu: Emily tries to find a larger degree of
female freedom when she proposes a lecture tour in which she will speak about the
“unpropitious future of the West Indian sugar industry” and suggests that she “might even compose a short pamphlet framed as a reply to the lobby who, without any knowledge of life in these climes, would seek to have us believe that slavery is nothing more than an abominable evil” (86). Her anti-anti-slavery stance strongly echoes Falconbridge’s:

For a length of time I viewed the Slave Trade with abhorrence – considering it a blemish on every civilized nation that countenanced or supported it, and that this, our happy enlightened country, was more especially stigmatized for carrying it on than any other; but I am not ashamed to confess, these sentiments were the effect of ignorance, and the prejudice of opinion, imbied by associating with a circle of acquaintances, bigoted for the abolition, before I had acquired information enough to form any independent thoughts upon the subject, and so widely opposite are my ideas of the trade from what they were, that I now think it in no shape objectionable either to morality or religion, but on the contrary consistent with both… (Anna Falconbridge 133; original emphasis)

The debate over slavery that takes place dialogically in Emily’s diary undermines the single-voiced utterances of proslavery (such as that articulated in the third section of the novel). Phillips sets up Emily’s negativity and racism as what Lionnet would call “an insidious form of dependence on the racist discourses” (16) only so that he can expose and denounce such dependence.

**Speaking silences in hypertextuality: reproduction and consumption**

If the above responses are historically mediated incidents that promote the reader’s sense of Emily’s participation in and subjection to the dominant racist English culture, there are others highlighting her individual character. In analysing the changes Phillips has made to specific material, the reader finds that Emily emerges as significantly less polished and less self-sufficient than those we might call her contemporaries. For example, both Lewis and Emily hear and adhere to the same set of principles governing healthful behavior in
the West Indies, but they vary greatly in their levels of independence from received wisdom. Emily obtains “certain elementary precautions” from an estate bookkeeper:

First of all, one must never take exercise after nine in the morning. Second, one must never expose oneself to the dew after sundown. And third, one must never take rest in a lodging house, unless of course that lodging house is managed by a trustworthy person with whom one is familiar. The gentleman insisted that his final caution was most important because of the lack of common cleanliness that one often finds among the negroes. (*Cambridge* 22)

Emily makes “a mental note of all that he said,” internalizing the warning and its underlying stereotype about free blacks’ behavior. Compare her strident series of “nevers” with Lewis:

There were three things against which I was particularly cautioned, and which three things I was determined *not* to do: to take exercise after ten in the day; to be exposed to the dews after sun-down; and to sleep at a Jamaica lodging-house. So, yesterday, I set off for Montego Bay at eight o’clock in the morning, and travelled till three; walked home from a ball after midnight; and that home was a lodging-house at Montego Bay; but the lodging-house was such a cool clean lodging-house, and the landlady was such an obliging smiling landlady, with the whitest of all possible teeth, and the blackest of all possible eyes, that no harm could happen to me from occupying an apartment which had been prepared by her. (63; original emphases)

Both receive the same advice, and determine to carry it out. Yet Lewis shows an ability to bend such rules when it suits him to do so – and does not suffer in consequence. In fact, he amusingly flouts his disobeying of such warnings under cover of his own lack of self-restraint. Lewis’ projection of independence from European mores, especially where their application is absurd, is not echoed in Emily’s diary, wherein the internalization of patriarchal law is enacted. Emily’s subjection to this law is evident from the outset, when her father sends her away, and becomes increasingly overpowering as she “[creates] mutually exclusive categories of ‘reality’ (male/female; white/black; primitive/civilized)” and so forth (Lionnet 18). And though literary analysis of a story that is *not* told may be
limited and I would not like to exaggerate the effect of these traces of omissions, I would like to show how our awareness of them leads us to understand how Phillips emphasizes certain elements of the story that is told.

The methodology for appraisal of silence in the midst of a discussion of multiple discourses emerges in the work of Macherey.

The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it traces a figure. Thus, the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it would not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence. (Macherey 85; original emphasis)

This consideration appears to be driven by a paradox: “we investigate the silence, for it is the silence that is doing the speaking” (86). More precisely, then, silence “informs us of the precise conditions for the appearance of an utterance, and thus its limits, giving it real significance, without, for all that, speaking in its place” (86). Macherey even indicates the potential of critical study of what the work “refuses to say”: “that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of measuring silences, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged” (87; original emphasis). The study of silence is no clever parlour-trick, but a rigorous notation and analysis of instances of silence.¹⁴ For this study of Cambridge’s hypertextuality, what is occasionally involved is the measurement of ellipses, elisions, and other reductions (silences) between the hypotexts and the hypertext – in other words the act of becoming postmodern and “exquisitely literate in calligraphies of silence and negative space” (Retallack 272); the results crystallize into meaningful or “speaking” patterns.

The emphasis that omission suggests also can be apprehended when we compare Schaw’s character to Emily’s. On the voyage, each glimpses a hawk-bill tortoise (Schaw
59; *Cambridge* 15). In Emily’s chronicle, this sighting is a part of her catalogue of strange beasts, which could be eliminated with no appreciable impact on the narrative. But the same sighting prompts Schaw to challenge the captain’s and her brother’s navigational readings and to assert their proximity to land. She proves to be correct, and the tortoise signals the end of an excessively long and perilous Atlantic crossing. Again Emily is in some ways less resourceful, less certain, than her fellow diarists. Within a curious and significant pattern of exclusion of thought and activity in the hypotexts, Emily’s already-shaky character as a diarist and as an independent thinker is further destabilized.

This uncertain and impressionable identity manifests itself still more vividly in a comparison of Emily’s behavior with that of Maria Nugent. Both Nugent and Emily, newly arrived from England, try to make polite conversation over a meal with their respective ill-mannered interlocutors, Lord Balcarres and Mr Brown:

> I could not help laughing at a reply of Lord Balcarres, when I went down to breakfast. I remarked to him that it was a very fine day; to which he answered, “Yes, it is, but I assure you, Mrs. Nugent, you will be tired of saying this before many weeks are over.” (Nugent 11)

... the normal intercourse one might expect between host and stranger was sadly lacking in this instance. For example, I remarked to Mr Brown that it was a very fine day today, to which he replied that I would be tired of saying this before the week was over. I then observed the multitude of black servants, and commented that they all seemed good-humoured, and that I found it pleasant to observe them. His only response was to cackle rudely and attack his meat with renewed vigour, as though it might quit his plate were he not to impale it. (*Cambridge* 30-1)

Though Nugent is able to laugh at Balcarres, Emily is affronted by Brown’s rudeness. Also, while Nugent makes a single comment that is repulsed, Emily follows up one failed attempt at small talk with another cheerful observation, this time on the subject of the
domestic slaves. Phillips uses the Nugent incident as a pattern or model for conversation, then cases into one of the major thematic concerns of the novel – the presence of West Indian slaves within the British consciousness and conscience – through Emily’s timid exploration of domestic relations between enslaved persons and their enslavers. As indicated above, the sentimental travel narrative tends to move away from the political realm into the intimate space. The violence captured in Brown’s table manners also develops this theme by suggesting the planters’ aggressive appetite for resources and by underscoring the planter class’s brutally oppressive responses to slave insubordination; in short, if they do not impale the objects of their greed, those objects may escape. There is one more crucial difference with relation to this conversation, which manifests itself in Nugent’s diary entry of the very next day. She writes, “It rains quite a torrent, and I have had a great triumph over Lord B., in varying my remark; and I exclaimed, ‘What a sad rainy morning, my lord’” (12). Nugent takes advantage of the change in weather to turn the joke against the seasoned West Indian who would remark her naivety. Nugent, like Lewis, presents herself in her diary as sharp, opportunistic, witty, well able to defend herself with words. How different is Emily, who never gets to respond to Brown in like manner, and whose attempts at a sophisticated self-presentation in narrative are more obviously cracked and flooded with her passive acceptance of and uncertainty within the West Indian situation. Phillips does not want Emily, as a character struggling to find herself within and against social restrictions, to have the polished poise of Nugent or Lewis, and so she is transformed, revalued. Emily is not an icon of resourceful fortitude but a realistic woman whose strengths and vulnerabilities sometimes pull in opposing directions.
One of the most interesting aspects that Emily's narrative shares with Nugent's journal is a coded silence of sorts on the subject of pregnancy. Nugent's journal actually has to be read backward in order to see the signs of her pregnancy: not until she's about 6 months pregnant with her first child does she acknowledge the fact openly in her chronicle. Previous to her open acknowledgment, only this detail is provided: "called upon Dr. Lind, to consult him about my health, which has of late been a little deranged, and I have lost my appetite; we were afraid that the climate had seized upon me, but Dr. Lind says, that I shall probably be quite well in time, and that I had better take no medicines, but leave myself to nature" (59-60). When isolated from the body of the journal, the signs of pregnancy are clearly coded in the loss of appetite, the indications of recovering "in time," and leaving oneself "to nature," and the following daily health report; however, in the journal's mass of detail and overall health concerns, these are easily missed. Similarly, there are passages in Cambridge that can be read as fairly clear indications of pregnancy, but, within a mass of information involving the outcome of the conflict between Cambridge and Arnold Brown, they are easily missed. The motivation for Emily's reticence is different from Lady Nugent's, for Emily is an unmarried English woman of a certain class, while Nugent's coding of pregnancy is presumably due to fear of miscarriage or other complications. Unlike Nugent's, Emily's refusal to name her pregnancy is based more on moral grounds, her shame at having violated certain codes of conduct in her quest for personal freedom. Shame plays an important role in her reluctance to name her malady when she writes, "Mr McDonald has paid me a brief and disturbing visit. Surely Arnold will not consider abandoning me now" (127) and "[h]is [Mr McDonald's] shame was such that he was unable to meet my eyes. His shame! It is
clear that I am in no condition to contemplate a long sea-passage” (128). But the
diagnosis is not named. Not until the epilogue does Phillips reveal the fact that Emily has
given birth, exposing what she has dissembled, and here the free indirect discourse of the
limited omniscient narrator gives more than one account of the stillbirth, thus confirming
the place of prologue and epilogue as postmodern anchor for the floating, jarring
polyphonic fragmentation of the other three sections. Phillips’ obliqueness works against
the grain of Emily’s reticence.

This silence is the ironic complement to a positive vociferousness in Lewis and
Emily when they discuss the reproductive strategies of slaves.¹⁶ Once the reader begins
to read backward, the logic of Emily’s focus on childbirth, generation, and propagation is
transparent. The local terms Lewis notes to describe miscarriages – “half children” (98) –
and pregnant women – “one belly-woman” (108) – are also picked up by Emily
(Cambridge 68). Such terms are part of an enormous imperial project of observation and
invigilation of, and sometimes intervention in, the slaves’ reproduction, heightened by
fears of loss of labour after the international abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. For
instance, planters such as Lewis offered “incentives … to encourage slaves to breed”
(Walvin 76). Yet Emily and other anti-conquest travellers are not unsympathetic; in
sentimental fashion, she records that the “joy” of the slave mother

will not endure beyond a few weeks, for these women are soon pressed again into
serviced and driven afield. I heard complaints from one such bearer who claimed,
‘Misses, me have pickaninny two weeks in de sic-house, den out upon the hoe
again and we can’t strong that way, misses, we can’t strong.’ (68; my emphasis)

Here Emily’s account echoes the more adamantly antislavery Fanny Kemble, who
attempted unsuccessfully to ameliorate conditions on her husband’s plantations:
One poor woman, named Molly, came to beg that I would, if possible, get an extension of their exemption from work after childbearing. The close of her argument was concise and forcible. “Missis, we hab um pickanniny – tree weeks in de hospitl, and den right out upon the hoe again – can we strong dat way, missis? No!” And truly I do not see that they can. This poor creature has had eight children and two miscarriages. All her children were dead but one. (245; my emphasis)

While Kemble names the advocate and justifies her argument, Emily consoles her aggrieved sense of the sanctity of motherhood with the thought that the pleasures of gossip for the slave soon outweigh lost motherhood. And both Lewis and Emily make speculations such as this: “I really believe that the negresses can produce children at pleasure; and where they are barren, it is just as hens will frequently not lay eggs on shipboard, because they do not like their situation” (Lewis 76; Cambridge 68). That surveillance of slaves was connected with animal husbandry is corroborated by the testimony of Cuban ex-slave Esteban Montejo, that “[t]he women had to produce healthy babies every year. I tell you, it was like breeding animals” (39). In Emily’s narrative, Phillips puts the frank curiosity and active involvement of an European in the slaves’ reproductive strategies next to her own personal reticence, with interesting results amounting to “an alternative articulation of the colonial subject [which] arises from the slippages inherent in what would appear to be the totalized apparatus of imperial discourse” (Gikandi 65). The novel’s emphasis on pregnancy and childbirth occasions a reevaluation of much of the novel’s detail, for when we examine this detail closely – for instance, the description of dogs, or instructions on the grafting of fruit plants – we see that Phillips is exposing the underlying anxiety in the European consciousness over the generative abilities of this West Indian world.
In other words, such items of Emily’s journal as her mention of the importation of the breadfruit tree (44) and her hope to cultivate mangoes upon her return to England from seeds gathered in the West Indies (82) are intimately connected with human pregnancy underneath the umbrella interest in production and reproduction. Emily’s remarks have specific antecedents: her description of the shaddock and mango fruits (81-82) relies heavily on Lewis’ (174). But the enthusiasm on the part of the British to transplant organic samples can be glimpsed elsewhere: for instance, in Lady Barnard’s wish to bring the delicious springer fish to England (50), and, more generally, her exclamatory desire to find applications for the components of environments: “but how many useful things lurk in Nature all around one, which the eye of ignorance sees not, and which the eye of the skilful botanist and chemist has not yet discovered!” (206). Barnard’s willingness to experiment with organic materials reads now, as does Emily’s, as a foolhardy disregard for delicately balanced ecosystems. In Phillips’ novel, produced and consumed in the late twentieth century, there is a contemporary cultural subtext of the impact of such interference in environment and subsistence ways. That is to say, Phillips means for his reader to be aware of these negative consequences and to see Emily, who is the advocate of both casual and systematic biological intervention, as the proponent of the values of a certain class and racial group at a particular time. Europeans participating in the colonialisit project are consumed by the notion of production, and we shall see later how this connects with the culture of consumption. But Europeans – specifically Emily, whose womanly biology makes her vulnerable – cannot remain outside of production and reproduction.
A particular example of European observation of reproduction can be found in
Monk Lewis’ and Emily Cartwright’s educational disquisitions on dogs:

The best mode of destroying rats here is with terriers; but those imported from
England soon grow useless, being blinded by the sun, while their puppies, born
in Jamaica, are provided by nature with a protecting film over their eyes, which
effectually secures them against incurring that calamity. (Lewis 146)

Stella informed me that the best mode of extirpating rats is with terriers. Sadly,
those imported from England soon grow useless, their eyesight weakened by the
sun. Their creole puppies, although provided by nature with a protective film
over their eyes which effectually secures them against this calamity, grow less
inclined to terrorize the vermin than their forebears. (Cambridge 45; original
emphasis)

The first passage is an observation of only casual interest to Lewis himself. One would
think it is absolutely insignificant to any of the hypertexual novel’s characters, whose
lives, voices, and happiness are at stake in the grinding system of slavery. Yet however
trivial this pseudo-scientific information might seem, it bolsters Phillips’ accumulation of
pseudo-data about reproductive strategies and reproductive control. The passage
moreover highlights the secondhand nature of much of the information Emily is
supposedly gathering herself. The addition of the adjectival “creole” especially assists to
fictionally integrate the content of such observations into a recognizable scheme of
classification. (Indeed, it is a term often used by both Emily and Cambridge to try to fix
origins by differentiating between native-born West Indians and others.17) Phillips
exploits the common preconception of the physical and moral deterioration suffered so
frequently by the British inhabitants of the West Indies, and an apparently throwaway
comment appreciates in value as readers construct the overall sense of Emily’s
engagement with the processes of production and reproduction. Indeed, this strain of
thought is so central to her, and her own perceived distance from these processes, except
as director, so absolute, that her narrative breaks down and breaks off precisely at the point when she realizes that she too is implicated in and subject to the system of monitored reproduction. “The ideology that construes seeing as inherently passive and curiosity as innocent cannot be sustained” (Pratt 67). Emily’s own illegitimate pregnancy is irreconcilable with detached observation.

Above, I pointed out how strategies of inclusion and omission between Phillips’ novel and travelogues might help the reader to better apprehend Emily’s character. This argument applies equally to Phillips’ use of slave narratives in his creation of Cambridge’s character. Olaudah Equiano develops sympathy by presenting his own innocence of European culture, particularly the culture of consumption, as naivety in his earliest autobiographical self. He repeatedly alludes to his fears that his enslavers would kill and consume him (33, 37, 40-41, 42), despite assurances from others that the Europeans are not cannibals. Likewise, Quobna Ottobah Cugoano feared cannibalism (134). Cambridge records similar fears (135, 137, 140), but he accepts the assurances of others, to an extent. In so doing, he presents himself as less excessively naive than Equiano. I qualify his acceptance because what Cambridge does with his fears of European cannibalism is transform them into an interrogation of more general patterns of European consumption. For instance, he terms the slaves’ march to the African coast a “feast of suffering” (136) and exclaims on his arrival in the Carolinas, “What a feast of benevolent hearts we had been marooned with!” (139). While feast refers here to a transcendent spiritual gathering, its more recent meaning evokes greedy appetite for excessive amounts of food. Europeans might not eat the bodies of other humans (at least, not unless shipwrecked), but the grinding jaws of the system of slavery do feast (that is,
find pleasure and sustenance through observance of ritual) on human labour, human bodies, human suffering. This critique provides a much-needed purgative to Emily’s epic catalogues of food and drink consumed by West Indian planters. Emily’s menus from the planter’s table, her pseudo-scientific and -objective interest in animal husbandry, slave breeding, and horticulture, and her reticence about her own reproductive liability are intricately counterpoised to Cambridge’s fears of European cannibalism in Phillips’ aesthetics of confrontation. The imbricated roles of consumption, production, and reproduction require the participation (willing or unwilling) of all characters, and implicate and involve all in the complex dynamic of slavery and its perpetuation.

**Slave narratives and Cambridge: confessional silences**

Thus far I have focused primarily on Emily’s portion of the narrative, which occupies the greater part of the novel. Phillips’ adoption of Equiano’s words, as shown above, hints that he can be equally adept at altering the slave narratives to suit his fictional purposes, though this process has less to do with converting chronicle into narrative, as the slave narratives already provide continuity and closure, and more to do with working in thematic connections between Cambridge’s and Emily’s accounts and developing Cambridge’s character and form of expression within the “sentimental mode” or “manner of representation or enunciation” (Duff xv) on which both anti-conquest travel narratives and slave narratives rely (Pratt 5).

In turning to the slave narrative, again I will be tracking the complex interactions among stylistic devices, emplotment, and Phillips’ critiques of racial barriers. One of the characteristic stylistic forms of expression in eighteenth-century travel writing is the use of italicizing to indicate irony. In passing, I have noted Emily’s use of this technique, and
I add here that it is continual and marked. Nugent, Schaw, and Lewis also use italics in this way, although the writers of British slave narratives tend to use italics differently, to give emphasis to religious doctrine or to indicate reported dialogue. In fact, the only clear example of ironic italics that I could find in examining Equiano, Gronniosaw, and Cugoano was in a passage from Gronniosaw, a passage which is one of the most poignant testimonials to Britain’s rejection of black British people and which derives much of its power from the bitter sting in its tail. Like Cambridge, Gronniosaw has been baptized and has married a white English woman with whom he is struggling against desperate poverty, when the following transpires:

Nor did this misfortune [of unemployment] come alone, for just at this time we lost one of our little girls, who died of a fever. This circumstance occasioned us new troubles, for the Baptist minister refused to bury her because we were not their members and the parson of the parish denied because she had never been baptized. I applied to the Quakers, but met with no success. At length I resolved to dig a grave in the garden behind the house, and bury her there, when the parson of the parish sent to tell me that he would bury the child, but did not choose to read the burial service over her. I told him that I did not care whether he would or no, *as the child could not hear it.* (Gronniosaw in Edwards and Dabydeen 22; original emphasis)\(^{20}\)

When Phillips adapts Gronniosaw’s experience to Cambridge’s experience, he does not preserve that stinging ironic phrase at the end. Instead, Cambridge’s wife and his single newborn child die, and he, refusing to allow their bodies to be separated in death as the minister would have it, and also pretending not to mind that the minister refuses to read the burial service, refers scathingly to the latter as a “Christian man” (153; original emphasis).\(^{21}\) Such irony is “oppositional”; according to Ledent it “[functions] as a radical corrective that exposes and revises the partial truths generated by ideologies, mostly colonial but not exclusively so” (*Caryl Phillips* 83). Cambridge’s ironic thrust hits home,
though it might be argued that the Christian position from which he judges others’
behavior ultimately makes him a target for this irony as well, since Phillips intends
Cambridge’s Christianity to be a flawed and inadequate tool which fails to defend him
against the mentally, spiritually, and physically violent depredations of the enslaved
condition. The emplotment of Phillips’ novel requires the death of all of Cambridge’s
English family in order for this educated and Christian slave to leave England and be
betrayed and sold once more into slavery as an articulate and literate observer.

The death of the newborn child and mother are inventions of Phillips’ that link
Cambridge’s narrative and Emily’s narrative. For Emily, we learn in the epilogue, has
had a stillborn child and will probably soon die herself, like Anna, Cambridge’s white
English wife. Although no sympathy can exist between Cambridge and Emily, a fictional
balance between their respective narratives of confinement is created by a woefully short-
lived symmetry between the parts of their individual tragedies, a bridge too weak to stand
on to reach the Other side. And when Phillips has Cambridge speak against Emily’s
ironic italics with his own versions, another aspect of this symmetry is performed, this
time stylistically. The ironic italic becomes as much an expression of racial identity
among freed persons used to critique dominant European cultures as it is a prized
convention of those same European cultures. Italicized ironies in Phillips’ three
narratives in Cambridge, especially when they are used (as they so often are) to police
and invade racial boundaries, create a stylistic unity across the narratives while the
friction between their versions of events sparks into conflict and debate.

For example, Cambridge’s memoir includes a description of his being robbed of
gold ornaments upon his initial capture. “About my neck I sported a decoration of gold
placed there by my mother’s own *fair* hand, and from my ears hung larger and less
delicate gold pieces” (135; original emphasis). This faintly echoes Equiano’s early life in
Africa, in which, he writes, “my mother adorned me with emblems, after the manner of
our greatest warriors” (25), and Gronniosaw’s also (34). But African heritage, as
Kenneth Ramchand, a specialist on West Indian novels, has commented on another work,
is here invoked “not to make statements about Africa but to explore the troubled
components of West Indian culture and nationhood” (149). More immediately, then, in
the West Indian milieu the phrase subverts Emily’s contemptuous and ironic description
of “*jet*” Stella as “*fair* Stella,” after a disagreement between the two (26 and 77; original
emphases). Emily’s own italics here owe much to Lewis’ comic attempts at the expense
of an elderly female slave, “a certain (I was just going to say *fair*) lady” (212; original
emphasis). Lewis patrols his own use of racially-inflected language, drawing his
interlocuter’s attention to it and exploiting the understanding that ‘*fair*’ must mean both
beautiful and white. Cambridge’s “*fair*” mother draws the reader’s attention to Emily’s
attempt to patrol racial boundaries with irony-charged italics, but unlike Lewis’
preservative self-consciousness, Cambridge actually attacks these boundaries, by
inserting an adjective the metropolitan arbiters of imperial aesthetics would consider
inappropriate (hence the italics), and by asserting that fair means beauty beyond the
confines of racial phenotype. In Pratt’s terms, early slave narratives “undertook not to
reproduce but to *engage* western discourses of identity, community selfhood, and
otherness” (102), partially collaborating with and partially critiquing “the idioms of the
conqueror” (7).
Phillips has altered the hypotextual British slave narratives considerably by introducing this element of style – the ironic italic – to Cambridge’s narrative. As Phillips plays with quotations from travelogues, making significant alterations to produce Emily’s voice, so does he play with quotations from Equiano’s narrative, with similar effects. During his naval service, Equiano meets with a “press-gang” (44), a kind of official group of kidnappers that coerced men to serve in the army or navy, and Cambridge refers to himself as “press-ganged” by the alien whites on board (139). Here, Phillips sees in Equiano’s story the evident if implicit connection between slavery and other enforced servitudes, and transforms it into an explicit, metaphoric comparison. Equiano enthusiastically discusses his education in Britain: “I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement .... I took every opportunity to gain instruction .... I had soon an opportunity of improving myself” (Equiano 52). This enthusiasm for literacy is a crucial and fixed element in the genre of slave narratives, and Equiano can be taken to represent dozens of slave narratives in this particular regard. Phillips compresses Equiano and others into Cambridge’s eager statement, “I embraced this magical opportunity of improvement” (143). Equiano claims that when the ship arrives at “Old England” (89; see also Falconbridge 130), “Every heart on board seemed gladdened on our reaching the shore, and none more than mine” (42). To the present-day reader, this adoption of nationalist identity seems forced or awkward, especially given that Equiano’s shipmates had earlier raised his hopes by telling him they would return him to his homeland in Africa (40). It certainly must have seemed forced to Phillips, for he alters “Old England” to ironic “merry England” in the account of Cambridge’s arrival there: “Some time later every heart was gladdened when sight of merry England was announced. Every heart but
my own, for now I was obliged to give up my [friend and teacher] John Williams” (Cambridge 141). Phillips employs the qualification, “every heart but my own” for two purposes: one, to register the depth of Cambridge’s human attachments; and two, to introduce that wicked little pause before the explanation, and to imply that, however glad a captured African might be to see land again after the Middle Passage and another Atlantic voyage, he could not be truly glad to see any shore other than that of his native land. Thus, Phillips shows himself as willing to convert the slave narratives to his fictional purpose as he is the travelogues.

Like the sentimental travelers Nugent, Schaw, and Lewis, slave narrators are not beyond Phillips’ implicit criticism. This is made abundantly clear in Cambridge’s rejection of Mr Brown’s offer of the position of head driver, a position much like that which Equiano as a freedman held on a plantation in South America. Cambridge writes, “Not wanting to be master to any, I declined” (161). Cambridge thwarts Mr Brown and the entire logic of slavery’s trickle-down authority by refusing to fill this role, by refusing to sell his active participation in the oppression of others. (How unfortunate, then, but how predictable, that in the third section of the novel, the monologic report on the murder of Mr Brown should claim that Cambridge had “held the poor Christiania in bondage” and was enraged by her refusal to “submit to his thraldom” [171, 172].) Again, Phillips twists the sources, and traces are left in which we can see patterns. Though a flawed character who is limited in many ways, Cambridge nonetheless sees enough to recognize the inseparability of his actions from the situations surrounding him, and he struggles to take responsibility for these.
He ends his confession and memoir with a biblical quotation (Acts 16:26) in one final effort to reconcile his Christian identity with his violation of a Christian commandment, to reconcile his enslaved condition with his hopes for a better life: “Praise be the Lord! He who ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth’” (167). Curiously, Equiano uses the same quotation at the end of his first chapter (24), and his protégé Cugoano employs it to powerful effect (140)\textsuperscript{22}, as do other antislavery black authors.\textsuperscript{23} “The book of Acts to which Equiano appealed was of special importance to many blacks and their white abolitionist friends for its strong message of Christian universalism” (Potkay and Burr 13). The strongly religious sensibility mobilizes a profound political agency. Cambridge’s citation of this powerful line – and Phillips’ citation of Cugoano and Equiano – falls at the end of his narrative, in some respects the most impressive place.

One last case of Phillips’ modulations involves the name changes Equiano endures. Some slave narrators, such as Frederick Douglass or Solomon Northup\textsuperscript{24}, grant privilege of place to alterations in name, whether from an African name to an English one, or from a master’s name to a name chosen in freedom, for obvious reasons. As historian James Walvin observes, “[r]e-naming involved an attempt to change a slave’s identity, a denial of his or her former self, and offered both a convenience for white owners and a confirmation of their power” (63). Equiano’s African name is exchanged for a series of European names, and after already having received one English name, he rebels against another attempt to control his identity:

While I was on board of this ship my captain and master named me GUSTAVUS VASSA. I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him, as well as I could, that I would be called
JACOB [his first English name]; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus. And when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and by it I have been known ever since. (40)

“Ever since,” that is, until he publishes his narrative, in the title of which his African name precedes his English name, and even the English name is qualified by “the African,” as though the English name could not adequately contain or express his identity. As we might expect, Cambridge undergoes a renaming in a virtual transposition of the passage just quoted. This stands out in contrast to Emily, who names herself in pity – “Poor Emily!” (129) – only just before her journal concludes, and whose full name is revealed in use by the doctor in the epilogue (180). However, the name Cambridge wants to retain is not one in a series of English names, but rather his African name, Olumide. Equiano’s gesture of rejection is not lost on Phillips, but he may have felt that the gesture would be less clouded if the name fought for is the one given to Olumide as an African. Indeed, Olumide/Cambridge tells us that the only word he remembers of his mother tongue years later is his own name. “Olumide” is thus a synecdoche for his African heritage. Conversely, given the violent abuse accompanying and enforcing the act of renaming, the very name “Cambridge” expresses violence instead of a peaceful and authoritative centre of English learning: it is a stand-in for the ravages of European nation and person on a human being.

The title of the novel, which retains the English name and not the African, may suggest a return to England that is never realized. With no homecoming to “England. The truth” as set out by the prologue (Cambridge 4), “the inherent circularity of imperial discourse” (Gikandi 67) is disrupted, and Englishness loses its position as stable and ever-
present point of reference, as does the “ethnocentrism [that] was part and parcel of
everyday Anglo-Saxon life” (Ferguson, Subject 276). The title presents an imperative to
think about “the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis” (Pratt 6).
Cambridge’s “focal position” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 82) and the doubleness of the title
expose two illusions: “The seduction of England is the illusion of its romantic or fabulous
history, and the illusion that the West Indian could participate in that history” (Dabydeen
and Wilson-Tagoe 145). It is probable that Phillips, in addition to geographically
embedding the problematic of slavery in England, wants to emphasize the precise nature
of the violence inherent to such moments of transition, especially when we recall the
thematic concern of his larger body of work with moments of passage. Travel narratives
often end with the superficial transformation of the traveller and the journey home; slave
narratives with a freedom marred with homesickness. The comforting closure of
homecoming is denied both Emily and Cambridge just as, in the chapter on Kindred, we
shall see it denied to Dana, the time traveler. In the epilogue, the doctor asks if Emily
will return to “our country,” which is “England, of course,” and she thinks that he
“delivered the phrase as though this England was a dependable garment that one simply
slipped into or out of according to one’s whim….Did he not understand that one day a
discovery might be made that this country-garb is no longer of a correct measure?” (177).
As Ledent comments in regard to another of Phillips’ novels, “Phillips touches on the
predicament of a group of people who… sit on the fence between Britain and the
Caribbean and must perforce break the myth of an idealized motherland before it can sort
out its identity dilemma” (Caryl Phillips 50). The reader will find what is essential to
“England” not in Cambridge the place but in Cambridge the character, in the peripheral
Other that imperial England projects and seeks to define and control.

There is a structural parallel between Emily’s confinement and Cambridge’s
confinement. Both the pregnancy of Emily and the imprisonment/execution of
Cambridge have resulted from acts that these fragmented characters cannot reconcile with
their relative self-representations, or with the discourses they employ. Cambridge’s slave
narrative is framed with indications of its confessional object. As Potkay and Burr
observe of historical British slave narrators, “Freedom from bondage – both the shackle
of chains and… the prison of sin – is the theme, petition, and prophecy of these works”
(1). Cambridge begins with an apology:

Pardon the liberty I take in unburdening myself with these hasty lines, but thanks
be to God for granting me powers of self-expression in the English language. I
humbly beg that those of my dear England, Africans of my own complexion, and
creoles of both aspects, might bear with me as I attempt to release from within my
person the nature of my extraordinary circumstances. (133; original emphasis)

Doubly addressed to God and to “the human reader who needs a narrative explanation of
sinfulness and redemption” (Smith and Watson 192), Cambridge’s story evinces a kind of
self-policing, a “tragic self-alienation” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 98). Thus the religious
framework Cambridge has adopted in his conversion to Christianity has both enabled his
freedom – literal and discursive – from slavery and resulted in his continuing subjection –
discursive and literal – to slavery and racism.27 Although Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin
suggest that in literature produced by the first generation of colonial authors, “the
potential for subversion … cannot be fully realized” (6), “confession can come off the
tracks and become self-declaration” (Gilmore 37), and the slave about to die, Ferguson
notes, “paradoxically exercised a form of agency that could not be gainsaid” (Subject
237); Cambridge’s story exceeds the bounds of apology and confession by testifying to
the accumulative cruelties of slavery and challenging the dominant discourse exercised by
the journalist in the third section of the novel and integrated by Emily in the first section.

As I hope to have made clear, considerations of genre – of both travelogue and slave
narrative – are of paramount importance in distinguishing and connecting Emily’s journal
and Cambridge’s confession, two narratives of mobile subjects attempting to assimilate
identities to alien surroundings. Admittedly, both compare conditions and quality of life
at home and abroad, and both rely on careful realistic descriptions of places, practices,
and the journey. But if the narrative arc of white men’s travel leads to independence, that
of women’s travels may lead to vulnerability, and that of slaves’ travels leads to
oppressive indenture. The characters are locked into ineffectual positions and are
ideologically limited by the forms of discourse available to them. While Phillips may
choose and reject portions of the pluritextual source material or compress and reduce
events to a considerable extent in creating his pastiches, he maintains affiliations to genre.
The novel results from a central conversation between and juxtaposition of the slave
narrative and the travel narrative, where the “‘mutual erosion’ of the relationship between
the dominated and dominating cultures [is] the source of the peculiar energy of the
Caribbean experience” (Ashcroft et al. 51). Moreover, as I indicated earlier, there are
peripheral conversations between these and the journalistic report, and between these and
the postmodern historiographic metafiction’s framework of prologue and epilogue.
Emily’s diary is absolutely a sentimental travel narrative with all of the expected
components and something more that opens the travelogue and the complementary slave
narrative to critique. Cambridge’s narrative conforms in many ways to the elements of the slave narrative, and it does something more that enables it to critique its own limitations as well as those of the travelogue form. Most of the conventional demands of these genres are perfectly satisfied. But that something more is what makes these genres coalesce into a historiographic, polyphonic novel. The novel “aims at a complex revision rather than wholesale reversal of roles” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 106), and makes “the antagonistic energies of that [Caribbean] past transform themselves, in the present, into a creative syncretism” (J. Michael Dash qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 150). We may appreciate that syncretism through two routes in the next chapter: one, by recognizing the difference between Phillips’ symmetry between genres and that sympathy or analogy which is frequently forced on discussions of race, class, and gender; and two, by focusing on the violence of the subject matter. Phillips alters and changes, he wrenches and twists historical sources into new shapes. Like Phillips’ other novels, Cambridge is less a correction of history than a rejection of the final knowability, the final certainty, of historical facts.
Endnotes

1 I am indebted to George Handley for his description of the differences between slavery in the West Indies and that in the American colonies/US (38-39), as well as to Eugene Genovese and James Walvin’s more specific distinctions.

2 Though I do not discuss these two novels in depth here, summaries may be of interest. In Crossing the River, a separation of subjects and stories in time and place occurs that is similar to that in Higher Ground, although a prologue and epilogue (as in Cambridge) provide more direction for finding connections. This novel employs slave letters from Liberia and an account of a fugitive slave: the form of the slave narrative itself changes as Phillips uses it to tell otherwise inaccessible stories. Furthermore, the novel includes an Englishwoman’s WWII diary and the journal of an English captain on a slave-trading voyage. The Nature of Blood also contains several clusters of stories: that of the Stern family including Eva, a young Jewish woman who survives a concentration camp and her uncle Stephan, who is a doctor in Israel and who has an affair with an African-Jewish woman there; Othello in Venice, with its “original ghetto, the model for all others in the world” (Phillips, The European Tribe 52); and a Jewish community in fifteenth-century Italy charged with the ritual murder of a Christian child.

3 Mary Louise Pratt lists kinds of writing comprising travel narratives before 1750: the “varied profile of travel-related writing on the frontiers of European expansion at mid-eighteenth century” includes: “[o]ral texts, written texts, lost texts, secret texts, texts appropriated, abridged, translated, anthologized, and plagiarized; letters, reports, survival tales, civic description, navigational narrative, monsters and marvels, medicinal treatises, academic polemics, old myths replayed and reversed” (23). She notes that “as bourgeois forms of authority gained momentum, [these] would be thoroughly reorganized” (24) into more coherent documents combining an interest in natural science and/or sentiment.

4 See Ledent, Caryl Phillips 102.

5 As far as I can ascertain, Cambridge’s confession owes more to the British slave narratives I mention than to black confessions, but nevertheless it is worth mentioning the body of “last words” confessions by slaves condemned to execution for crimes of burglary, rape, and murder, often published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain and the US. These include the confessions of Arthur, “a Negro Man” (1768), Joseph Mountain (written by David Daggett, 1790), Edmond Fortis (1795), Pomp (written by Jonathan Plummer, 1795), Stephen Smith (1797), Abraham Johnstone (1797), John Joyce and Peter Mathias (1808), Nat Turner (1831), and Madison Henderson et al. (written by A. B. Chambers, 1841). William Styron’s Confessions of Nat Turner seems a more likely antecedent than these, although its more diffuse influence is not discussed here.

6 Suggestively, “[s]everal bluestockings themselves described arranged marriage as a slavery and deplored its dramatic impact on women’s lives” (Ferguson, Subject 105). Phillips’ novel appears to both invite this analogy between the status of women and enslaved blacks and refute it.

7 See Phillips’ interviews with Kreilkamp, Jaggi, Davison, Bell, and Swift.
8 Paul Sharrad suggests that “Cambridge’s story almost exactly parallels that of the protagonist in a well-known abolitionist poem, ‘The Dying Slave’… in which a London negro is baptized, marries a white servant and is then shanghaied onto a slave ship” (211-212). I do not discuss Thomas Day’s poem here, as my interest lies in prose slave narratives.

9 Phillips indicates that reading Schaw’s journal was his initial impetus for the novel (“Caryl Phillips” 32).

10 While I aim to put hypertext next to hypertext on numerous occasions to measure the distance between them, I hope that I do not supply “a negative corroding criticism by which the work is destroyed or dismantled to reveal the centre around which it had been built” (Macherey 51). Rather, as the work is “the product of a rupture, it initiates something new. If we have properly grasped this quality of novelty we will not confuse the work with what is extrinsic to it; we will want to distinguish it emphatically from what surrounds it” (Macherey 51).

11 In the sentimental travel narrative, “[i]nformation is textually relevant (has value) in so far as it bears upon the speaker-traveler and his quest. In scientific narrative, by contrast, information is relevant (has value) in so far as it attaches to goals and systems of knowledge institutionalized outside the text” (77).

12 In addition, Lady Anne Barnard also uses the phrase, “children of the sun” (155).

13 James Walvin summarizes the presence of antislavery in England at the time as follows:

In the attack on the slave trade between 1787 and 1807…the nation was bombarded by tracts and pamphlets at a time when literacy was growing apace; petitions – most originating in churches and chapels – were signed by millions of people. There was, quite simply, no political campaign to compare to that of abolition. Abolitionists also perfected the modern tactics of lobbying Parliament and pressurizing MPs. They held public meetings and mounted brilliant press campaigns. They joined with, and gave strength to, a parliamentary abolitionist lobby led by William Wilberforce. (305)

14 The study of silence might be set next to Paul Sharrad’s assessment of patterns of speech and silence in Cambridge. He sees both Emily and Cambridge as essentially silenced but “[i]f silence can indicate lack of power, it is also a sign of liberation and resistance” (214). He concludes, “[i]ke Soekarno under house arrest,…Cambridge is comprehensively ‘silent in a thousand tongues’ rather than shouting a partial message in only one” (216).

15 That is to say, invested “by way of pragmatic or psychological transformation – with a more significant…role in the value system of the hypertext than was the case in the hypertext” (Genette 343).

16 The manifestation of Emily’s unwilling implication in systems of reproduction is characteristic of sentimental modes: “to seek to resolve political uncertainties in the sphere of family and reproduction” (Pratt 101) is precisely what occurs.

17 Emily’s definition of creole is worth repeating here:

In England the term creole is generally meant to describe those of mongrelized origins, but here the term relates to any, black or white, who is either well-
seasoned, and thus deemed to have safely entered this new tropical life, or has
been born in this zone and is therefore a full participant in the day-to-day
commerce that surrounds the production of American sugar. (38)

18 In addition to concerns about literal acts of cannibalism, contemporary accusations of
figurative cannibalism among slave traders also exist. Moira Ferguson cites a 1737
English poem addressed to Bristol slave ship captains:
And as a Punishment so justly due,
Which you deserve, henceforward each of you,
As a Reproach, shall be nicknam’d by all
An unrelenting Bristol-Cannibal. (Subject 16)

19 Rosemary Coombe sees the fear of white cannibalism of black bodies as part of a
continuum of black diasporic legend:
To Africans it was clear that “Europeans maintained a seemingly insatiable
appetite for the bodies of their brothers,” and, in places where the
commodification of human labor was unknown, the idea of cannibalism explained
a reality: “slave traders kept coming back for live bodies to satisfy their hunger for
human flesh.” (Coombe 150)

20 Note that these italics are not present in all editions.

21 Use of ironic italics in this way may be more common in American slave narratives.
Just as a brief instance, Kate Pickard, who wrote the narratives of Peter and Vina Still,
designates a particularly violent slave mistress as a “delicate lady” (102) and a slave
master who loaded up a young male runaway slave with rods of iron as a “pious man”
(308). This last example echoes Cambridge’s emphasis on the “Christian man.”

22 Paul Edwards suggests that Cugoano’s narrative, given its repetitive qualities, is in fact
a collaboration with Equiano (185-87).

23 Like Equiano and Cugoano, Zilpha Elaw, a black free female preacher who traveled in
the Southern and Northern US and Britain, wishes that “men” would “learn that ‘God
hath made of one blood all the nations of men that dwell upon all the face on the earth’”
(86).

24 Douglass draws attention to the changes in his name as indicative of changes in status
(71-72). At the moment Platt virtually regains his freedom by being identified as
Solomon Northup, he comments, “not until this hour, the last I was to remain among [the
slaves], had the remotest suspicion of my true name, or the slightest knowledge of my
real history, been entertained by any one of them” (237). In this admittedly unusual case,
the preferred name is not that taken after slavery, but the name held before it.

25 Vincent Carretta has observed, however, that Equiano may have preferred Gustavas
Vassa, as he signed personal letters with this name (as reported by Moynagh, e-mail).

26 Emily’s last name, Cartwright, may be an allusion to the physician Samuel A.
Cartwright, who diagnosed runaway slaves as suffering from drapetomania and listless
slaves as suffering from dysesthesia ethiopica (Genovese 650, 308).

27 In this respect it displays what Eugene Genovese has described as “the formulation of a
world-view sufficiently complex to link acceptance of what had to be endured with a
determined resistance to the pressures for despair and dehumanization” (183).
28 This antagonism can perhaps be more clearly glimpsed in an early play of Phillips’, *The Shelter*, in which two eighteenth-century characters “reminiscent of the protagonists in *Cambridge*” are simply named “Him and Her” (Ledent 12).
Chapter 3

Balancing Slave Narrative, Prison Writing, and Holocaust Writing:

Carvl Phillips’ *Higher Ground*

With an indepth analysis of *Higher Ground*, the composition and publication of which predate *Cambridge*, the second chapter of this exploration moves further within Phillips’ narrative methodology. In *Higher Ground* Phillips creates a slave narrative, written by an African translator/collaborator\(^1\) with the slave trade, that has no recognizable precursor texts; it stands alone, but also comments implicitly on – and is critiqued by – the two sections following, one of which is comprised of the letters of an African-American man in prison in the 60s, and one of which is the story of a female Holocaust survivor. With consideration of the increased distance between the parts of this novel, my appraisal moves beyond the previous chapter’s assessment of development of and resistance to slavery specific to the West Indies at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as seen in various genres of literature of the time. Where *Cambridge* exposed the shared space and tensions between synchronous genres and counter-discourses – travel journals and slave narratives – in the same zone of time and space, *Higher Ground* brings the slave narrative into diachronic, diasporic and fractured comparison with other types of literature, notably other forms of life-writing. It is through reading *Higher Ground* that we can approach more abstract questions of the sources and effects of racial prejudice – including anti-Semitism – and the troubled growth of racial identity – including blackness and Jewishness – shown by Phillips’ novel to operate throughout modern history and to approach the present day.
Whereas *Cambridge* presents a single set of events from several different perspectives, the experiences of the characters in *Higher Ground* seem at first sight wholly unconnected. This novel does not pool different characters’ perspectives on the same events; instead, it yokes together different characters experiencing entirely different realities. *Higher Ground* includes three unique tales: “Heartland,” the slave narrative (albeit an unusual one) of a nameless eighteenth-century African who lives with British slave traders, translating on their behalf for the native Africans; “The Cargo Rap,” the letters of Rudy/Rudi, a young African-American man incarcerated for armed robbery in the 60s, whose political sensibility is heightened while his mental deterioration is exacerbated by his imprisonment; and “Higher Ground,” the story of Irina/Irene, a young Jewish Pole who, as the sole member of her family to avoid the death camps, is in a manner of speaking a Holocaust survivor. She finds herself unable to adjust to life in London and connects only briefly with the recently-emigrated West Indian, Louis, who has decided to return home. The particular combination or *métissage* of genres in this novel makes the slave narrative (and slavery) meaningful in retrospect. Clearly, the events presented are far more disparate and dispersed than those described in *Cambridge*. The paratextual gaps between the novels’ different sections are similar to those of *Cambridge*, but temporal and geographical distances are greater in *Higher Ground*. This sense of distance demands a different response from the reader, one which employs abstraction as a method of mapping, which summons a consciousness that has to work on a “higher ground” – though not in a universalizing sphere – in order to generate meaning and wholeness – in short, to generate a novel.
The centrality of prison letters in fractured fiction of slavery and the Holocaust

These three disparate sections are linked together by the subtitle of the book: “A Novel in Three Parts.”

[To] claim that Higher Ground is a novel – not short stories on the same theme – is to urge readers to see the stories as a unity. The work is a triptych, and it is not only that when we place the three parts together they form a unity – of damaged and hurt lives – but that there emerges a significance which no one part by itself can communicate with such clarity and force. (Sarvan and Marhama 40)

Similarly, Ledent writes that the subtitle is “a paratextual clue to its inherent unity” (Caryl Phillips 77). Once we accept the work’s status as novel, we see the importance of the second section of Higher Ground, “The Cargo Rap,” as an eruption of narrative that signals the cultural force of the traumatic experiences of slavery and the Holocaust.² The separation of these three protagonists in space, time and narrative underlines Phillips’ desire to respect the specificity of the different protagonists’ experiences and especially their understanding of their sufferings. Nevertheless, the second section of the novel refers to thematic and stylistic features established in the first section, and anticipates themes and aspects of style developed more fully in the third section. Rudi’s analogies of slavery and his refusal of subjection build upon the tale of the collaborationist-slave told in “Heartland,” Part I of the novel; his comparisons of prison with the Holocaust and his inability to resist the effects of violence foreshadow the story of Irene’s physical survival and mental deterioration in “Higher Ground,” Part III. As Cambridge invites comparisons between slave narrative and travel journal, and between hypo- and hypertexts, Higher Ground energetically opens my discussion to the influence of documents that speak of slavery and their generic juxtaposition. With the lack of hypotexts for the slave narrative in Higher Ground, not slave narratives but African-
American prison writings are the focus. Phillips signifies on such writings, underlining Rudi’s abilities and his limitations: as Emily’s and Cambridge’s flaws in *Cambridge* are more pronounced than those in the hypotexts, Rudi’s are also. Though I pay some attention to slave narratives and Holocaust writing, I focus on the patterns of slavery and Jewishness in Rudi Williams’ prison letters as the crux of the novel, as Phillips’ transformations of prison writing in Rudi’s section allows him to move between the specificities of the experiences of slavery, prison, and the Holocaust to reframe slavery’s wider significance to the modern world. A particular moment in black men’s prison writing is crucial both generically and thematically in this novel as it functions to create a shared yet splintered discursive space of neo-slavery that might be occupied by blacks and Jews. While the prison letters stand alone, they also mediate between the first and third sections, the slave narrative and the Holocaust survivor’s tale. As one of my project’s primary foci is identifying the uses of preexisting documents, the first task is to closely compare what Genette would call the hypertext (Rudi’s letters) with certain identified hypotexts. After indicating the common characteristics of prison writing, I will pay more detailed attention to the ways in which the prison writing provides commentary on the slave narrative and on the Holocaust narrative.

I concur with Ledent that “[t]hough these stories make sense in isolation and seem at first to have little in common, their full meaning emerges when read as parts of a single narrative with a dense web of interconnections” (*Caryl Phillips* 56). Ledent also points out briefly that “[t]he three stories indeed pastiche well-known literary genres in post-colonial writing” (76): the slave narrative, prison letters, and the Holocaust narrative.

Where my reading differs from Ledent’s is on the grounds of the unifying and liberatory
potential of alienation. Using mainly West Indian frames of theoretical reference, Ledent argues that the dimensions of alienation affecting the lives of the exiled – “(un)naming, captivity and language” – at once “inform the exilic predicament of the colonised” and “paradoxically offer a way out of it when examined from a contrapuntal perspective” (57). Ledent reads the overlapping references and themes as bridges indicating a “submarine” unity between the three novellas (Braithwaite qtd. in Ledent 56). The changes in each character indicate the possibility of “qualified optimism” in Phillips’ fiction (Ledent 62). Ledent argues that the novel’s objective is to “comment on the transformative role of art and imagination as capable of transcending isolation and differences, without however erasing them, and placing us on a moral ‘higher ground’, a vantage point from which we can better comprehend human suffering” (77). The novel provides “tools for understanding the mechanisms of modern racism” and “some ethical insight into human suffering” (70).

However, the connections are tenuous and short-lived, as they point to the withering of creativity and tragically silent ends for all three protagonists in Higher Ground (and for Emily and Cambridge as well). While Phillips’ novel certainly contains thematic continuity and “intricate cross-referentiality” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 67), and preserves individual isolation and differences, I find that allusions to slavery and the Holocaust, generic parallels between slave, Holocaust, and prison literature, and the final breaking down of communication in each narrative ultimately indicate the failure of transcendence as a model to overcome the submarine fractures (not unity) between individuals. To me, both novels seem more open to postmodern “despair and exhaustion” than Ledent would have it (170). What slavery and other forms of incarceration share in
this novel is their fractured recollection of traumatic losses, losses that “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning,” according to practicing trauma therapist and theorist Judith Herman (33); their protagonists share the experience of exploitation among corrupt, even insane, people and settings reinforced by racial boundaries and underscored by the failure of narrative and other strategies to overcome isolation.

All of the prisoners I consider – Rudi and his hypotextual forbears – make allusions to other famous captives and conditions of imprisonment, most commonly – and critically for my argument – to the Holocaust and to slavery. Phillips forms and reforms male African-American prison writers’ views on slavery, signifying on their comparisons between imprisonment, slavery, and anti-Semitism. There is a lengthy, troubled history of black-Jewish relations, particularly in the US, against which such allusions have to be read. In abolitionist propaganda/literature, part of the appeal to the public depended upon the abolitionists’ assertions of Christian values and, on occasion, the concomitant vilification of other religions. Jews were an occasional target of abolitionist writing, especially due to widespread stereotypes of Jews as over-valuing money and property, and as participants in a capitalist economy of which slavery – the ownership of human beings – was an integral part. Maxwell Whiteman’s historical analysis shows that some individual Jews were implicated in and contributed to the system of slavery, and that some individual Jews contested the system, but that by and large no general conclusions about Jews as a group are possible, given the lack of national networks (religious organizations, newspapers, etc.) in nineteenth-century America for Jews to debate a collective stance. Nevertheless, the perception in African-American communities of
Jewish support of racial oppression has resisted qualification, particularly in places such as Harlem where some African-Americans, rightly resenting conditions of life in the ghetto, have blamed these conditions on Jewish ownership of businesses and housing. Overlapping these historical economic considerations of chattel or real estate property is the growing sense of cultural property, not simply participation in but of ownership of one’s culture.

Based on this assumption, some cultural critics argue that the adoption of ethnic perspectives other than one’s own is a political act of appropriation and exploitation (see Ziff and Rao for a summary of this position). Yet invoking recognized paradigms of imprisonment and suffering can attract sympathy and alter political will, as slave narrators and singers of spirituals recognized when they alluded to the predicament of Hebrew slaves in Egypt. As African-Americans struggled to find a discourse of oppression and to make their ancestors’ experiences meaningful and relevant to a postwar audience, they turned to the Jewish experience in Europe. For instance, Chester Himes’s *Lonely Crusade* (1947) explores connections between different expressions of racial hatred (see 155-62). The protagonist Lee Gordon’s thoughts on “this dirty hell of race” are placed into a powerful parallel structure in which white oppressors, lynchers, and Nazis are opposed to the black oppressed, the lynched, and Jews (369). Such comparisons were part of a larger public outcry of horror at the specter of genocide, and testimony to its lasting historical impact; they also redirected public sympathy toward the specter of oppression of blacks. Such comparisons also qualified public outcry: how could any nation which so cruelly treated a minority within its borders take the moral high ground when it came to protesting racial oppression? But any redirection of focus can be seen as
cultural poaching. In the two groups’ efforts to articulate the effects of violence and victimhood, and to gain historical recognition, they come into conflict. In recent times, this conflict has come into visible form in questions about anti-Semitism in the Nation of Islam, in the 1991 Crown Heights incidents dramatized by Anna Deveare Smith in *Fires in the Mirror*, and in debates over the meaning of Toni Morrison’s “Sixty Million and More” dedication to *Beloved*.4

A showdown between the fugitive slave Quicksill and the Jewish immigrant Mel Leer in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* explicitly exposes the victim stakes:

> The Immigrant looked at him. “Your people think that you corner the market on the business of atrocity. My relatives were dragged through the streets of St. Petersburg, weren’t permitted to go to school in Moscow, were pogrammed [sic] in Poland…. Your people haven’t suffered that much. I can prove it, statistically.”

> “Oh yeah? Nobody’s stoning you in the streets here. You are doing quite well…. What are you bitching about….”

> “There are more types of slavery than merely material slavery. There’s a cultural slavery. I have to wait as long as two weeks sometimes before I can get a *Review of Books* from New York…. Your people! Requesting wages and leaving their plantations. They should pay for themselves. Look at us. We were responsible. We paid for ourselves. Paid our way. I earned myself! We never sassed the master, and when we were punished we always admitted that we were in the wrong. The whole world, sometimes, seems to be against us. Always passing resolutions against us. Hissing us. Nobody has suffered as much as we have.”

> “Nobody has suffered as much as my people,” says Quicksill calmly. The Immigrant, Mel Leer, rises. “Don’t tell me that lie.”

> The whole café turns to the scene.

> “Our people have suffered the most.”

> “My people!”

> “My people!”

> “My people!” (67-68)

The degenerating argument is illustrative of the contention frequently at the heart of Jewish- and African-American relations.
Whereas Reed’s technique is to polarize and thereby satirically deflate representative combative perspectives in the struggle to own suffering (perhaps directing more satire at the Immigrant, Mel Leer), Caryl Phillips creates architectural symmetries among three unique and distinct stories. These stories do not readily extrapolate to universalist musings on the human condition. As Ledent argues, “in spite of the all-embracing quality of the novel genre, Higher Ground stands in opposition to totalizing discourses by its polyphony and its foregrounding of the individual voice” (78); “[t]his epistemological relativity foregrounds fluctuation and diversity and partakes of the diasporic aesthetics which informs the novel” (Caryl Phillips 79). Ledent follows Paul Gilroy’s lead in noting that “the parallels between the black and Jewish experiences have often been disregarded… for reasons such as ethnocentrism (both black and Jewish) and the fear of cultural absorption” (70). What restores significance is comprehension of the particular ways anti-Semitism, and anti-black racism, have operated and how Jews and blacks have created identities. The analysis of Phillips’ characters’ local and isolated ravings into and across the breach between individuals and communities shows that his linkage of the black diasporic experience (including slavery) and the Jewish diasporic experience (including the Holocaust) delicately juxtaposes the Jewish experience with the black experience in Higher Ground.

**Influences on Caryl Phillips’s fiction**

Phillips found the Jewish Holocaust personally and positively identity-forming. He has written that, “[i]n British schools I was never offered a text that had been penned by a black person, or that concerned the lives of black people” (The European Tribe 1). Instead, he says, “the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to
exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them” (The European Tribe 54). However, his awareness of race and identity struggles also grew in response to riots throughout urban Britain in 1976 in which young West Indians expressed their dissatisfaction with the limitations and privations of their existence, in response to the apparent lack of literature available at Oxford which could incorporate his own and others’ experiences growing up “black in the Union Jack,” and in response to an introduction by an African-American friend to the works of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Though he later learned to appreciate the members of the generation of West Indian writers preceding him, his early identification with black literature was with the urban experience of race described so vividly by writers like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. No doubt these writers’ references to the “ambivalent” relations between African-American and Jewish-American (Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son 59) also influenced Phillips, though his British upbringing and West Indian roots give him some distance from their perspectives.

Phillips sees instances of oppression distinctly, but is open to symmetries. For example, he recalls that “something that was at the back of [his] mind” for the slave narrative was Sophie’s Choice (in which a young Jewish mother is forced to choose upon arrival at the camps which of her children will be taken away from her) (Phillips, “Worlds Within” 601). The citation of Sophie’s Choice, a novel written by William Styron, castigated for his treatment of Jews in this novel as well as for his treatment of the revolutionary figure of Nat Turner in The Confessions of Nat Turner (see John Henrik Clarke and Rushdy’s chapter on Styron in Neo-slave Narratives) suggests that Phillips rewrites Styron’s novels and their reception history, reaching past contentious hierarchies
of cultural appropriation to creative lateral connections. For Phillips, "the notion of the disruptions, perhaps even the destruction of the family base, the family unit....and the choices [slaves] had to make" were essential parts of the slaves’ experiences, as they were for Jews during the Holocaust, and yet slaves "weren’t given a choice."

I was aware of some parallels to the great twentieth-century crime against the Jews. It had some parallels and echoes for me as a black kid growing up in Europe. I felt that if white people can do that to themselves, what the hell are they going to do to me? I became interested in Jewish history, and I subsequently visited Auschwitz and Dachau and Anne Frank’s house. I was interested in these places as monuments, for they existed. From reading I knew that physical edifices of the slave trade also existed. I started putting together this notion of the family unit breaking down. The idea of the lack of choice. (“Worlds Within” 601)

Phillips’ own development as a writer, and his indebtedness to both Jewish and black American models of identity, history, and their representation, give him an interested yet broad approach to the issue of cultural property. He situates Higher Ground (as well as The Nature of Blood and portions of his travel book, The European Tribe) precisely in this problematic space between black and Jewish identities.

**Common ground in prison letter pastiche: masculinity and re-education**

Part II of Higher Ground, “The Cargo Rap,” is an epistolary segment, composed of letters written by Rudolph Leroy Williams, a young African-American man in prison. Critical comment has established, albeit cursorily, that Phillips’ protagonist is the descendant of at least four men who achieved personal and political transformation in prison: George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, and to a lesser degree Malcolm X. Directly or indirectly, all contributed to the “critical gaze upon society” (Franklin 133) growing alongside black nationalism in prisons in the 1960s and 70s, an attitude and gaze which the observer of slave narratives and prison writing H. Bruce Franklin has called
“the most important single force changing life in prison and the literature emerging from prison, and a crucial historical movement within American society as a whole” (206).

Rudi’s letters prove him to be the contemporary and peer of these men. Though I am indebted to these critics for naming Rudi’s forbears, I believe a more subtle and detailed understanding of prison writing’s structural and rhetorical centrality to the novel is required to grasp the relationship between the neo-slave narrative and hypertextuality in Phillips’ work. This chapter carves out this space. As Jean Genette argues, “[t]he hypertext thus always stands to gain by having its hypertextual status perceived” (398; original emphasis). With the understanding that no list of influences can be comprehensive, I compare Rudi’s letters with four specific texts from a tradition of African-American prison writings: George Jackson’s Letters, Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice, Rubin Carter’s The Sixteenth Round, and Malcolm X and Alex Haley’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X. All of the connecting and fracturing aspects across the novel’s three parts owe a debt to Jackson, Cleaver, Carter and Malcolm X, each of whom adopted a politicized rhetoric of slavery, and some of whom used analogies from a recent Holocaust history to describe their own incarceration. Phillips highlights these aspects by integrating them into Rudi’s thoughts on black history and current events in the late 60s and into Rudi’s personal struggles both to connect with sympathetic people and to communicate the effects and limitations of his imprisonment.

Phillips’ technique for adapting non-fictional prison writing in Higher Ground differs from that used in Cambridge, where entire hypertextual passages appear verbatim. In “The Cargo Rap,” Rudi can be seen to share a considerable number of characteristics, interests, ideas, and foibles with George, Rubin, Malcolm, and Eldridge, but the
similarities are more diffuse than precisely identical. At the time of the writing of *Higher Ground*, the hypotexts used by Phillips were protected by copyright law, so extensive mimicry of the type Phillips occasionally practices in *Cambridge* (or *Crossing the River*) – as for instance when he adopts with minimal changes two pages from a travel letter – would have contravened copyright law and approached a hypertextual relation tantamount to plagiarism. Like *Cambridge*, *Higher Ground* is, in Genette’s terms, predominantly neither parody nor travesty (which transform the hypotext), but rather a pastiche, an imitative synthesis of style which is an “active imitation” of that style (104, my emphasis). “[T]o reproduce is nothing, and imitating supposes a more complex operation, the completion of which raises imitation above mere reproduction: it becomes a new production – that of another text in the same style, of another message in the same code” (Genette 84). An author achieves pastiche through “the acquiring of a perfect competence through absolute identification” with the hypotexts (393). Genette quotes Proust’s phrase that such a text is always a form of “criticism in action” (397). In the case of pastiche, the critical viewpoint toward the hypotexts contains a degree of playfulness but is “the imitation of a style without any satirical intent” (25).

Though literal repetitions are not present, these texts can be seen to share the following characteristics, which may be taken to represent Phillips’ idea of prison writing as a body of work. First, as Bruce Franklin states, this body of twentieth-century American prison writings cannot “be considered a literary genre” as it consists of “novels, plays, poetry, essays, letters, songs, autobiographies, etc.” (234). Nevertheless, it is “a coherent body of literature” (Franklin 233; his emphasis) because “there are certain unifying and predominant formal characteristics, determined not only by the background
of the writers but also by their intentions” (234-35). It is an established type of literary
discourse with certain distinguishing aspects. Franklin notes the prisoners’ tendency “to
write in an autobiographical mode” as “it is their own personal experience that has given
them both their main message and the motive to communicate it” (250). This is
especially true in the case of Phillips’ selections; Cleaver, Malcolm X, Carter and Jackson
wrote letters, essays, journals, and memoirs and excluded fiction, poetry and drama. A
nonfictional, autobiographical function, which I define loosely as the impulse to shape
and control past events of one’s life through the use of the first person perspective, is
always present. Moreover, these are all “people who because creators of literature
because of their incarceration as victims of American society,” people “whose
understanding of their own situation developed directly as a consequence of their crime
and punishment” (Franklin 147). Carter, Jackson, Cleaver, and even Malcolm X, to a
degree, all became authors in, and partly because of, prison.

Moreover, Phillips’ sources are limited (so far as I have been able to ascertain) to
the words of black prisoners. Therefore, they share an approach to imprisonment that
differs slightly from the white prisoner’s, according to Bruce Franklin. “To the Black
convict or peon, imprisonment did not mean becoming an alien being isolated from the
rest of his people but rather becoming the typical representative of his people” (145),
because “slavery made a prison out of America for all blacks, and made blacks into
criminals” (101). Imprisonment is “the loss of a people’s freedom. The questions of
individual freedom, class freedom, and even of human freedom derive from that social
imprisonment” (Franklin 244; original emphasis). As Franklin traces transitions from
slavery to sharecropping, convict-lease systems, and ghetto life, he argues for a direct line
of descent between plantation and convict work songs, between slave narratives and black prison writing; his cultural genealogy may therefore effectually imprison blacks in history.

Rudi’s letters, like the narrative of Cambridge, are written within a constrained space; like Cambridge’s rhetoric, Rudi’s is also constrained by his gendered, politicized, and religious ideology, though of course the ideologies and discourses differ considerably. The language that prisoners use to record their experiences frequently contains unapologetically sexist and homophobic slang. They deploy masculinist rhetoric that is closely linked to their admiration for physical force. In discussing the past, all comment on the absurd paradox of the justice system’s injustice to blacks, either by maintaining their innocence or pointing to disproportionately heavy sentences for minor crimes. The prisoners’ dependence on an interactive audience – on people outside who send supplies, organize legal challenges, and read and write letters – leads to disproportionately strong emotional attachments. They carefully describe their prison routines, often breaking down a typical day into segments to demonstrate their self-discipline in the face of imposed discipline under violently segregationist and racist conditions detrimental to their health and identities. Franklin notes that the literature of prisoners “expresses the experience of being legally kidnapped, plundered, raped, beaten, chained, and caged – and the understanding that results” (xxii). In addition to practicing physical discipline, all undertake programs of study and reading which lead to political awakening and a growing awareness of ideological indoctrination, the discarding of conventional Euro-American religions and aesthetics, and a surge of interest in current events and global revolutionary history.
Genette writes that “[i]mitation ... is to figures (to rhetoric) what pastiche is to genres (to poetics). *Imitation*, in the rhetorical sense, is the elementary figure of a pastiche. Pastiche – and more generally, imitation as a generic practice – is a texture of *imitations*” (80; Genette’s emphasis). At the level of figures of speech and vocabulary, Phillips’ practice of imitation is evidence of the layered or “textured” quality of the pastiche. This observation applies not only to masculinist rhetoric but also to tropes of allusion to slavery and the Holocaust. The prison writers share a vocabulary infused with a heightened awareness of physical violence and masculinity. Like Rubin Carter (140), Rudi refers to his younger self as a “man-child” (91; see also Jackson 177, 200). Like Eldridge Cleaver, who described his promiscuous youth as the “bull stage” (20), Rudi recalls his first sexual experience: “I felt bullish, confident, and sure of my powers” (104). The title of Carter’s autobiography, *The Sixteenth Round*, refers to his having fought beyond the limit of fifteen rounds set at the time for championship boxing matches: he concludes his book’s protests by asserting that “[t]he sixteenth round is still being fought, and there’s much more at stake here than a mere boxing title, or a big fat juicy purse” (336). Near the end of his letters, Rudi writes, “I am tired. Even Ali never fought past fifteen three-minute rounds. Eight years is the bout for the title of all titles...” (168). Both Rudi (Phillips 163) and Carter (315) threaten they have nothing to lose if they are attacked and promise to take prison guards down with them. Prison is emasculating: one’s masculinity is implicated in resisting power and decision-making. Both Cleaver and Rudi articulate the need to take the initiative in nearly identical terms: Cleaver states, “instead of simply reacting I could *act*” (19; his emphases), and Rudi asserts that “I was provoked and acted; I did not react” (83). Cleaver philosophically
comes to terms with his prolonged incarceration: “If I had followed the path laid down for me by the officials, I’d undoubtedly have long since been out of prison – but I’d be less of a man” (29, my emphases). To Rubin Carter, so-called rehabilitation means “giving up my manhood” (330; see also 309). Rudi puts the sentiment as follows: “Nobody walks out upright and tall like a man. It is against the rules” (70); and he promises to “[walk] like a man out of this compound” (85), taking his “soul, manhood, and pride” with him (113, my emphases). Clearly, the hypertext imitates the masculinist rhetoric characteristic to the hypotexts.

Such rhetoric is qualified on occasion. Both Jackson and Rudi suggest that a black “superman” is an impossible and intolerable ideal, blinding blacks to their humanity and increasing their dependence on others (Jackson 328; Phillips 168). Similarly, Cleaver’s prolonged discussions of the “Supermasculine Menial” type of unthinking black male physicality (171-175) are condensed in Phillips. Cleaver argues that “what white America demands in her black champions in a brilliant, powerful body and a dull, bestial mind” (91-92); by comparison, Phillips dictates that “We should play sports for recreational, physical and financial purposes. But we must not do so at the cost of underdeveloping our mental, intellectual, or business faculties” (143). The hypertext is subtly transformed from a statement to an imperative through the introduction of modal verbs of necessity and obligation. Although the rigidity of the masculine model is tempered somewhat, Rudi’s didactic edge is sharpened in his “moralising and didactic speeches” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 66).

All hypotextual prisoners attempt within the confines of prison to ‘re-educate’ themselves and, more visibly, Jackson and Rudi attempt to re-educate members of their
families into the ideology and rhetoric of Black Power. In so doing, they express
suspicion of celebrations such as Christmas or birthdays and of popular black
entertainers; support family members’ night school educations; hope for a post-colonial
African homeland; reject pacifism and optimism in favor of violent resistance; talk of the
need to train potentially treacherous women to support men’s revolutionary goals; note
derogatory epithets directed toward African-Americans – including one day spent
counting the white prisoners’ and prison guards’ use of the word “nigger” (Jackson 305;
Phillips 71); and counter these with derogatory epithets for the guards such as “pigs” and
positive epithets to describe African-Americans, except any reactionary black who might
be called “Uncle Tom” (Malcolm X 182; Phillips 81) or “quisling” (Jackson 237; Phillips
77). For the prisoners themselves, one of the most crucial points of their reeducation is
the rejection of (mis)education already received. Malcolm X and Rudi tacitly contrast
their prison reading with the insufficient encouragement provided by white educators.
Rudi disparages the “quiver-livered fade” Mr. Wilson, who told the teenaged Rudi that he
“might one day become a clerk” (76), vividly recalling the disheartening words of a white
teacher who told the young, bright Malcolm that he should aspire to be a carpenter rather
than a lawyer (36-37). As Jackson puts it, “No consideration was or has ever been given
to our being anything other than what we were originally intended to be (I ask for
electronics or drafting and I’m told to be practical)” (52). All of the prisoners develop
programs highlighting stoic self-discipline through established routines (Jackson 70-72;
Carter 165; Phillips 67-68; also see “A Day in Folsom Prison,” Cleaver 49-56). These
routines emphasize both physical and mental agility. For instance, both Malcolm X and
Rudi build their vocabularies by studying the dictionary in detail (X 172; Phillips 68; see also Jackson 190).

Another part of the educational project is building an arsenal of internationalist contemporary and historical figures and writers as role models, with an emphasis on the revolutionary masculine: Che Guevara (Jackson 263; Cleaver 31; Phillips 165), Karl Marx (Cleaver 24; Phillips 68), Vladimir Lenin (Cleaver 25; Phillips 68), Mao Tse-Tung (Jackson 195, 201; Cleaver 82; Phillips 68), Franz Fanon (Jackson 160, 201; Phillips 70), Nat Turner (Malcolm X 176; Phillips 117), Kwame Nkrumah (Jackson 270; Phillips 153), and the Mau-Mau (Cleaver 31; Phillips 70). From the perspective of the late 1980s reader, witnessing the collapse of communist states and of independent African states like Ghana, an ironic deflation accompanies the mention of many of these figures. Phillips turns some important figures, such as Marcus Garvey (Cleaver 88; Phillips 123-125) and Paul Robeson (Cleaver 71, 88-89; Phillips 128-30) into a set of educational letters Rudi sends to his younger sister Laverne. Richard Wright is seen as a model writer: while Cleaver deploys him to attack Baldwin’s homosexuality (103-105), Phillips recommends reading Black Boy, Wright’s autobiography, to each family member in turn (94, 138, 140-41). Cleaver argues that Muhammad Ali, the prizefighter who thinks for himself, is a truly subversive personality (90-94), while Rudi lists the reasons for Ali’s preeminent position, dictates that “[b]lack folks must love him” (89; see also 95), and predicts that Ali will return to Africa’s greater glory. They refer to acts of aggression against African-American communities, such as the Birmingham church bombing (Jackson 87; Phillips 64), and they respond to the crises of black leadership caused by the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. (Jackson 167-68; Phillips 149-152) and Malcolm X (Cleaver,
“Initial Reactions on the Assassination of Malcolm X” 57-77; Jackson 310; Phillips 151-52). Jackson and Rudi both reject the use of the term “troublemaker” to describe such publicly prominent black leaders (Jackson 171; Phillips 64). Both Jackson and Rudi devour books, continually requesting more (as well as money, cigarettes, food, and shoes). Curiously, the references in Cleaver and Jackson that are usually testimony to autodidactic revolutionary reading are transformed by Phillips into Rudi’s didactic imperatives to his family to buy, read, and send him books. An appreciation of Phillips’ indebtedness to historical black prison writers thus allows one to highlight Rudi’s principles, resourcefulness, and rhetorical strategies as well as his arrogance, chauvinism, and alienating didacticism.

This digest of the “texture of imitations” establishes the patterns of Phillips’ pastiche practice as central to the novel. More importantly, such texture securely positions the allusions to slavery and the Holocaust I discuss below within the shared matrix of cultural discourses about trauma. In effect, the hypotextual elements of the second section permit the author, through Rudi, to name (but not experience) the evil and its effects that are experienced (but not named) by the protagonists of the first and third sections. Rudi’s comparisons between incarceration and slavery and the Holocaust are disruptively blunt when seen in juxtaposition with narratives that so sensitively explore these conditions. Stylistic and thematic connections between the three separate sections of the novel (and its three discourses) include: loss of family and home, nightmares and nightmarish scenes, incarceration or confinement, initiation to brutal reality, desolate and corrupted landscapes, concomitant disease and weakness in human bodies and morals, struggle over
the loss of human dignity, observations on the absurdity of these individuals’
communities, exploitative sexual relations, difficulty of relationships across interracial
boundaries, loss of supernatural agency, betrayal by language and memory, erosion of
autobiographical control, and escalating individual alienation and even insanity. These
points of comparison should serve not as a means of eliding differences between slave,
prisoner, and Jew; rather than reducing identity to a single representative, they open
identity to multiplicity.

**Abusurdity of legal and religious institutions and decay of physical systems**

In looking more closely at the painful illogic of incarceration, we find that both Jackson
and Rudi Williams are in prison because they were misadvised to plead guilty to armed
robbery; instead of receiving light sentences as promised, they have been sentenced to a
period from one year to life. Due to the inner workings of a racist prison system, with
guards and white prisoners working in tandem to oppress black prisoners who refuse to
conform, the period is life. Other prison writings testify to the absurdity of the legal
system: Malcolm X points to differential sentencing for blacks and whites, commenting
on the judicial jeopardy faced by those involved in interracial sexual relationships; and
the exclamatory style and entire content of Carter’s autobiography are primarily at the
service of explaining his innocence against the prejudices of the police and prosecutorial
forces arrayed against blacks. Reminding readers of the distance and difference between
prison and enslavement, I might compare such comments to slave narratives that
frequently draw the reader’s attention to the absurd logical abyss between American
professions of freedom and legal slave codes\textsuperscript{12}, or to the hypocrisy of slave-owning
Christians. The most prominent instance of both kinds of critique is perhaps provided by
the title of the narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke: *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty Years Among the Slaveholders of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of North America*. The paternal parentage implies the distance between professions of freedom in the “Revolution” and actual “captivity,” while the qualification of “Christian” as “so-called” is an abrupt indictment of the contradictory moral stance of Christian slave owners. Narrators and editors deploy such comparisons not to show weakness in individuals but to condemn the system of slavery. In this novel, the burden of absurd and arbitrary regulation falls disproportionately on the shoulders of those who are incarcerated and subject to racism’s oppression. Not only Rudi and his hypotextual forbears but also the slave collaborator and Irina/Irene all undergo extreme mental strain juggling the demands of their captors and the demands of their own humanity. As will be discussed further below, Phillips glimpses the potential for the observation of absurdity in one’s circumscribed world to lead to insanity in oneself. For the moment, what is important is the testimony prison writings proffer as to the insanity not only of their immediate environments, but also of the larger social fabric.

To put the emphasis on education in a new light, both Cleaver and Rudi begin their re-education with the enthusiastic embrace of atheism. Rudi’s violent atheism continues throughout his letters and is used as grounds to criticize and alienate his family, as he attacks the baptism of his sister (75) and rejects a Christmas card sent by his mother, as does George Jackson (Phillips 126; Jackson 42). Though Cleaver and Phillips both explicitly reject the Christian morality of “turning the other cheek” and offering forgiveness and love to one’s oppressors (Cleaver 47-48, 104, 124; Phillips 149-50), they
differ in the duration and their application of their atheistic sensibilities. For instance, Cleaver would come to call this phase smashing idols (19) as he moved toward renegotiation with more conventional Christian religious expression. Nevertheless, suspicion and questioning of received beliefs is typical of the prison writings reviewed for this study. It is also sustained through the other two sections of the novel: in “Heartland” the narrator asks “Have all Gods abandoned me?” (15), and he does not understand the passages he reads to the Governor from the Bible (51). The Bible is a kind of blank letter, a meaningless text, like the unanswered letters Rudi sometimes sends (Ledent, “Remembering” 32). The slave narrator also dryly records the ineffective, dying governor’s offer of conversion to Christianity as a currency with the power to “[silence] the anti-trading lobby” (52). This gesture echoes observations of the hypocritical fundamentalist Christian slaveholders and the dishonest uses of Christianity to countenance slavery and to pacify slaves common to slave narratives. Phillips has, however, altered the slave narrator’s usual professed faith in Christianity to outright atheism.

In the third section, Irene’s reflections of Jewish faith are shaped by her losses and by the tropes of Holocaust writing which is, as is prison writing, not a genre but nonetheless a significant body of literature and an established form of discourse containing characteristic rhetorical figures and other aspects of style, as described by Clendinnen, Langer, Kremer, and Rosenfeld. When it snows, “Irene laughed and imagined God to be shaking a great celestial salt-cellar before he ate up his children” and she thinks “[w]e deserve to be eaten up….This was Irene’s fantasy, that everyone was deluding themselves, that only the good and the meek would survive, and she knew none
who qualified. She was prepared to be shovelled up on to God’s spoon and devoured” (176). As Clendinnen warns, mentions of apparently trivial things are “charged” in the narrative of one affected by the Holocaust, for their associations with the Holocaust are irrevocable. The relatively neutral snow clearly evokes the image of ash falling from the sky, ash created by the mass cremations in concentration camps. In Irene’s grotesque image it adds flavor to the other “shovelled” bodies. Her blanket dismissal of morality stems from the break between cause and effect in ghetto and camp life, from the Holocaust insight into “the almost totally random nature of death, to the point of extinguishing the significance of the individual” (Langer 249). Herman reports that most trauma sufferers “experience the bitterness of being forsaken by God” (94). Irene also wonders if God is “unemployed” (as she is in danger of becoming), indicating a God who does not work or cannot work on behalf of his children. Irene’s malevolent, greedy and absent Jehovah is one of a trio of gods who obscure meaning and legitimate power in her, Rudi’s, and the collaborator’s narratives.

The weakness of human bodies emerges in all three sections of the novel, crucially recalling the literality of the body’s experience and its place in history, as elaborated in the introduction. The eyesight of Jackson, Rubin Carter, and Rudi suffers as a consequence of torturous lighting and inadequate medical care in prison as well as excessive reading (Jackson 115; Phillips 133, 139; see also Chaiton and Swinton 112). In this respect, Malcolm X, whose vision severely deteriorated during his incarceration (189), is also an inspiration for the character of Rudi.15 This sharing of physical attributes extends to injuries which the letters’ authors cannot explain since to do so would be tantamount to accusing the guards of brutality and lead to further abuse (Jackson 132,
145; Phillips 105, 108, 113). The narrator of “Heartland” connects this process of physical decay to a more widespread corrosion caused by sea-spray at the fort; Lewis’s increasing drunkenness and degenerating physical appearance, the governor’s illness and death, the terrible scarring and sexual abuse of the African girl at the hands of a fort official, the smell and pervasive disease of the slave coffle, and the beating suffered by the narrator himself are described in ways that emphasize physical and moral decay and that recall the overwhelming violations and visceral sensations of the middle passage in slave narratives such as Olaudah Equiano’s. Irene’s contact with “dirty” factory girls shedding dead skin (183) and with the filthy “grime” of London (181) aligns her story not only with the others in this novel, but also with the lack of sanitation and physical deterioration chronicled in Holocaust literature, that “literature of decomposition” (Langer 28). From damaged eyesight and limbs suffered by black prisoners, Phillips moves spiderlike to attach silken threads to the other modern manifestations of physical decay in humans and their environments evident in the slave collaborator’s and Irene’s stories. In each case, the decay is typical of the discourse; thus each version of decay remains distinct while it gestures toward the other two.

**Intimacy and exploitation**

Imprisoned persons in this sticky web of a novel confront physical and social obstacles to intimate relationships. In addition to the physical challenges incarceration presents, communication between members of different races repeatedly meets with particular hostility. The narratives appear to explore a range of possible representations of interracial contact like those delineated by critic Werner Sollors. The African narrator of the first section is suspicious of attempts by Lewis and the governor to befriend him; as
it happens, he is betrayed in both cases by the closeness and trust these men have encouraged. Lewis’s search for the narrator results in his discovery and sexual exploitation of the African girl, and the governor’s words suggest escape routes for the narrator, routes belied by the all-swallowing force of the middle passage. The most vivid expressions in favor of racial purity come from Rudi. Antagonism toward interracial intimacy occurs in his amusing anecdote about a prison screening of the film *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* (which depicts an interracial relationship): “The brothers hated it, the whites hated it, the pigs hated it. It was the first time we have all agreed on anything…. However, we did not like the fact that we all agreed” (154). From Carter’s (324ff) and Jackson’s (219-220) accounts, we know that prison riots might arise during the watching of movies for various reasons; it is important that interracial intimacy causes the uproar in Phillips’ novel. Rudi also expresses anger and suspicion of a white lawyer who writes to him. Finally, Polish Irene and West Indian Louis confront racist slurs and “glares of disapproval” (214) in the public eye of London. All three protagonists document (and sometimes participate in) fears of racial mixing amidst evidence of such mixing. The walls constructed around perceived racial difference are a major contributor to the loneliness experienced by Irene, Rudi, and the collaborator. Thus the hypertextual relationship between Rudi’s and precursor prison writings draws our attention to aspects of the entire novel, to corresponding if not overlapping and symmetrical similarities in the slave’s and Irene’s stories.

The attempted – and failed – relationships in each section suggest that each of the three protagonists is overly dependent on the possibilities presented by his or her intimates. Like Cleaver, Rudi expresses a love interest in a person representing legal
assistance. Where Cleaver openly proclaims his love for Beverly Axelrod, a Jewish civil rights lawyer, Rudi first compliments then later dismisses the black woman involved in his defence committee, Rita Mae Bailey. Both men write to third parties about their sexual “stirrings” (Cleaver 34; Phillips 103), describing the women’s presence in their dreams (Cleaver 33; Phillips 103) and describing the women in superlative terms: Axelrod is a “very excellent, unusual, and beautiful woman” (33) and Bailey is “an ebony goddess worthy of deification” (103). The beneficent sexism continues as women, who are all “delicate, shy” according to Cleaver (35), are described as “delicate receptacles for love and pleasure” by Rudi (107). The growing dependence of Jackson on his lawyer Fay and on Angela Davis, and to a lesser degree that of Malcolm X on Elijah Muhammed, also testifies to the importance for any prisoner of a figure who is “wedged between [him] and who knows what fate” (Jackson 211). In Rudi’s case, as it is impossible for Rita Mae Bailey to live up to his expectations, this dependence leads to disappointment and alienation. This pattern of unfulfilled dependence permeates the other two sections of the novel, just as isolation characterizes most slave narratives and Holocaust writings. The narrator of “Heartland” finds that the African girl’s acceptance of him as lover and peer (both have been “ruined” by contact with Europeans) fertilizes his dream of escape from the slave fort. As he states, “[n]either my long-forgotten wife, nor my disregarded son, discovered a way to minister to my cold heart. The girl channelled an impossible route” (60). Their love constitutes treason of the fort’s rules of behavior, and the narrator is stripped of his precarious existence as translator and made a slave. Last-chance affection also turns up in “Higher Ground,” when Irene seeks a connection with Louis before being forced to return to the mental hospital: “It was cruel of her to attempt to make a friend.
Still, it would soon be over. But she did not want this man to leave her alone. He was kind” (216). From the point of view of Louis, who has already decided to return to the West Indies, “[i]t was probable that this woman would extend and demand a severe loyalty that he could never reciprocate. Not now” (216). Her abortive explanation of her situation is met with his kind but uncomprehending dismissal, and this failed intimacy helps to push Irene into insanity, “for ever lost without the sustaining love” (218).

Not only do these prisoners lack sustaining love, but also they observe and sometimes suffer sexual exploitation. Prison writings are marked by extreme homophobia, imbricated with these authors’ anxiety over masculinity. Cleaver’s takes form in his infamous rejection of James Baldwin. He suggests a political, racial interpretation of sex, as he complains that “Negro homosexuals” are “already bending over and touching their toes for the white man” (100). For Cleaver, homosexuality is a pathological “sickness” (106), “the product of the fissure of society into antagonistic classes and a dying culture and civilization alienated from its biology” (164). According to Rudi, “[h]omosexuality is a sick but everyday fact of life in the camps” (107). Though this echoes Cleaver’s statement, I think the kind of homophobia Rudi expresses is closer to that named by Rubin Carter, which is implicated in the larger condemnation of prison as fostering exploitative practices. Carter calls one boy at a reformatory for youths “a god-damned faggot,” then explains that he was “not a committed homosexual but he did submit, nonetheless, to what, I think, were the degrading desires of stronger inmates in return for cigarettes, food, and favor” (76; see also 102, 170-71). Similarly, Rudi warns of the prisoner’s potential to become “a snivelling faggot pervert ready to go down on anything or anybody in exchange for a pack of cheap cigarettes” (107). In order to avoid
being trapped in this sexual economy, Rudi explains to his father that the uninitiated prisoner must overreact to the first approach: “You must clench up your fist and crash it into his face” (107). Likewise, Carter states that if “one couldn’t protect himself in a sure-fire, devastating manner in a fight, before very long he would find himself switching…” (76). Both characterize exploitative homosexual behavior as rampant: Carter writes that “[homosexuals] proliferated here unchecked. In fact, they owned the goddamn place” (170). Rudi writes that “Most of the captives, black and white, are faggots” (107); however, near the end of his letters he rethinks homosexuality as a viable approach to the problem of intimacy. To these prisoners, homophobia is the focus for their hatred of the most intimate forms of control exercised within prison.

A similar pattern of ambivalent condemnation of sexual exploitation can be observed in the other two sections of the novel. The narrator of “Higher Ground” appears to welcome a dream of homoerotic intimacy (14-15) and saves his disgust for the abuses piled on the African girl by a fort official, though his intervention is an ineffectual rhetorical question: “Will nobody go to her aid?” (32). At the same time, the narrator is implicated in the structures of sexual exploitation in the fort, as he explains that when the fort contains slaves, “it will be possible for me to sate my appetite in secret” (37). Later, his affection for the girl who has been abused induces him to listen sympathetically to her narrative of abuse, to aver that between them sexually “[t]here is no exploitation, only shared fear and insecurity as we rock together” (49), and to intervene to end Lewis’ sexual abuse of the girl. On the whole, the narrator’s growing condemnation of such exploitation of black women echoes slave narratives, which characteristically (though more euphemistically) record white male sexual transgressions against black women.
Even consensual sex is, in this novel, couched in terms of exploitation and abuse. The novel thus abhors but complicates trauma made intimate. Although Irene agrees tacitly to sexual relations with Reg, from the outset “[she] knew already that she would suffer intercourse rather than participate in it” (189). The dark, rainy surroundings threaten her with “heavily muscled trees” and dying flowers (188). Reg’s actions in intercourse – he “began to race,” and “hammered on until he broke into high watery breath” (189) – also suggest the threat of the egocentric storm. The resulting pregnancy “caused her lower spine to curve inwards as though somebody had put a boot into the small of her back. Her body was often numb with pain, her movements heavy, and she would trudge the streets, occasionally stopping and staring and wanting to scream in the vain hope that things might be different when the scream died away” (211). The art of atrocity turns the opportunity for sexual awakening and the motherhood into instances of violence against a woman’s body. The motif of sexual exploitation, as developed in slave narratives and prison writing, in this last instance is developed within the frames of Holocaust writing about women’s experience, in that such writing typically shows “the ways female sexuality and motherhood added burdens to the normative Holocaust ordeal” (Kremer 4). Thus sexual vulnerability expresses itself generically, characteristically, and separately in each of the three sections, and also works to unite all three sections.

Thus far the links I have explored between the three sections have tended toward the structural and thematic, and more of these will be explored below. While these links are all connective tissue, it is important to note that the second section also contains content which explicitly demonstrates how Jewish and slave histories might be articulated in
black experience. Phillips uses the content and style typical of prison writing by black American men within Rudi’s letters in order to bridge the other two sections of the novel, to show the discursive and rhetorical ways in which Jewishness is imbricated with blackness, and blackness with slavery. While the sections are bridged rhetorically and thematically, Phillips’ pointed use of prison writing’s more overwrought metaphors and comparisons between imprisonment and slavery or the Holocaust clearly underscores the gaps between the specific narratives and the different kinds of suffering experienced by prisoner, slave, and Holocaust survivor. Again, there are submarine fractures that work against drawing universalizing analogies and work toward multiple and diverse understandings of trauma.

**Slavery in prison writing**

Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Rubin Carter make occasional reference to slavery. Like them, Rudi tends to only see enslavement in negative terms with little sense of the kinds of strength and subversion that are in evidence in the slave narrator’s tale. For X and Cleaver, the most frequent references are to the historical incidence of slavery. Cleaver also casually refers to American culture at large during the controversy over integration “as a continuation of slavery on a higher plane” (17-18). The emergence of his political sensibility is indicated by his adoption of the flavorful rhetoric of slavery to articulate a continuum of exploitation between slavery and colonization: “Slave-catchers, slaveowners, murderers, butchers, invaders, oppressors – the white heroes have acquired new names” (73). In the simplest, most reductive analogy to slavery, he labels the contemporary “white” man “master,” and calls the “black” man “slave” (86-87). However, the appropriate response to inflamed rhetoric is, ultimately, to free oneself of it:
“the initiative, and the future, rest with those whites and blacks who have liberated
themselves from the master/slave syndrome” (70). Malcolm X told Alex Haley that he
could never forget learning for the first time about slavery: “It made such an impact upon
me that it later became one of my favorite subjects when I became a minister of Mr.
Muhammad’s” (175). The history of slavery becomes an important focus for X’s re-
education. For Carter, submissive prisoners have relinquished their manhood and
adopted slavery: “They were like beaten slaves, no longer possessing the will to resist”
(143). Work is also slavery by analogy, as the prison tailor shop is called “slavequarters”
(165), and prisoners are put to work in a “slavery system” (77). Like Carter, Rudi
frequently uses the word “slave” as a verb to replace the verb “work”; similarly, the noun
“slave” translates into “job.”

Portions of Rudi’s attitudes about slavery owe much to George Jackson’s
approach, which Jackson carefully defines as neo-slavery. This precise thoughtfulness is
characteristic of a man who has been called “the leading theoretician of the prison
movement” (Franklin 273). Neo-slavery is a collective set of conditions under which
people work at jobs they do not enjoy and are totally dependent on an “owner”: “If you
don’t make any more in wages than you need to live, you are a neoslave. . . . If you’re
held in one spot on this earth because of your economic status, it is just the same as being
held in one spot because you are the owner’s property. . . . Succinctly: [neoslavery is] an
economic condition which manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-
determination” (252). This notion is key to his self-development, as he recalls for his
mother his political awakening in these terms: “As soon as all this became clear to me
and I developed the nerve to admit it to myself, that we were defeated in war and are now
captives, slaves or actually that we inherited a neoslave existence, I immediately became relaxed, always expecting the worst . . . ” (111; original ellipsis). More importantly, he utilizes the notion of the continuation of slavery as a catalyst in his tense relations with his father, addressing his father directly: “Robert, can you see how absurd you sound to me when you speak on ‘the good life,’ or something about being a free adult? I know you have never been free. I know that few blacks over here have ever been free. The forms of slavery merely changed at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation from chattel slavery to economic slavery” (68; original emphasis). Later he tells his mother that his estranged father has “a natural slave mentality like so many other black men of his generation” (178). In re-educating his mother, he explains that “our change in status from an article of movable property to untrained misfits on the labor market was not as most think a change to freedom from slavery but merely to a different kind of slavery” (174; original emphasis). It is in the relationship with family that the rhetoric of slavery is most highly developed.

While Phillips does not specifically use the word neo-slavery, Jackson’s recognition of the continuation of slavery beyond emancipation is the forerunner of many of Rudi’s statements about his family, himself, and his society. He tells his father Joe “to start disciplining your mind. Only then can you be truly free and begin to impart to Moma and Laverne the truth about this plantation society” (67). On the occasion of his grandfather’s death, he delivers this brutal anti-eulogy to his father, the son of this grandfather: “Popa was a slave, he behaved like a slave, he lived and died like one, and the sooner our professional slaves die the better for us all. Onwards towards the day of revolution. . . . So Popa Williams is dead. Let us give thanks!” (73). We learn from the
next letter that he has offended his father, as Jackson alienated his. Though Rudi’s version of neo-slavery is weaker than Jackson’s – for one thing, he lacks a precise
definition – it is a powerfully dramatic extension of all the hypotexual references to slavery. That Rudi sees all work as metaphorically equivalent to enslavement – he refers to jobs as “slaves,” as I mentioned above – could be a powerful Marxist analogy between two different kinds of capitalist exploitation of labor. However, in juxtaposition with the terrible details of slavery described in “Heartland,” the experiences of Rudi’s family are transparently less severe. Rudi’s analogy between the conditions of twentieth-century African-American life and the conditions of slavery draws attention to itself as somewhat exaggerated and overwrought, as a brash rhetorical flourish lacking Jackson’s context.¹⁸ This emphasis on the fallacies of representation anticipates that posed by the next chapter on Butler’s novel, *Kindred*, for Dana speaks of the temporary work agency as a slave market, and then experiences slavery first hand. Phillips adopts the rhetoric of Black Power, but he critiques it, too. To borrow from Carl Plasa’s reading of *Jane Eyre*, both Rudi and Dana articulate their oppression in terms of slavery as “a kind of shock tactic, designed to move the reader into dramatic awareness of the severity of particular conditions of disempowerment…. Yet, on the other hand, the simultaneous counter-effect … is to lessen and disguise the true meanings – the literality – of slavery” (68-69). Here, Phillips uses Rudi’s references to slavery to connect this section with the previous one, and he simultaneously questions the way in which the idea of slavery can be itself exploited through casual overuse. If Rudi’s and Dana’s shocking analogies to slavery “not only appeal to analogies between forms of oppression that are ultimately incomparable but *in so doing* also falsify and diminish the true nature of that which is the
ground of their own efficacy” (Plasa 69; original emphases), then the novels themselves seek to restore and amplify the true nature – the literality – of slavery.

Thus, slavery and neo-slavery recover their full meaning in Rudi’s final unanswered and unanswerable letter, wherein Rudi’s prison experience is transformed through a mental breakdown into the slave’s experience. While reading the following, it is important to remember some of the sources for the events and the larger arc of Rudi’s self-sabotaging attempts to keep his family from being lost to him. Signs of illness in his mother, and his somewhat unsympathetic response – in which he dismisses the opinion of the doctor – are indebted to Jackson’s letters (Jackson 75; Phillips 156). The death of Rudi’s mother is the elaboration of a hypothetical situation posited by Cleaver, who begins the article titled “Domestic Law and International Order” with a description of the absolute power and violence in the hands of police and armed forces as imagined in the case of a prisoner whose mother becomes ill: “If your mother is dying, you can’t go to her bedside to say goodbye or to her graveside to see her lowered into the earth, to see her, for the last time, swallowed up by that black hole” (121). Cleaver’s imagined scenario becomes the premise of Rudi’s story: what happens when a prisoner does lose his mother under such circumstances? In his final letter, Rudi addresses his dead mother, and the rhetoric of slavery used throughout previous letters grows out of all proportion, swallowing his perspective on the reality of prison experience.

The incidence of references to slavery in a metaphorical sense increases as Rudi’s narrative unfolds. Genette calls this form of stylistic augmentation of the hypertexts, in which an aspect of style is repeated more often in the hypertext than in the hypotext, amplification (262). Pastiche exaggerates characteristic yet dispersed rhetorical traits of
the hypertexts, amplifying their presence by saturating the hypertext with examples (Genette 88). Initially an analogy, slavery escalates, takes on weight and shape.

Eventually, slavery is no longer a figure of speech, but a factor in Rudi’s deterioration.

From a narrative standpoint, Rudi’s prior mentions of slavery are effective foreshadowing; as well, Rudi’s fall into a state of slavery parallels and recalls that of the narrator of “Heartland.” Rudi’s astounding and powerful final letter demands extensive quotation:

Dear Moma,

The overseer has a horse named ‘Ginger’. The plantation is wide and stretches beyond the horizon. The days are hard and long. We toil from ‘can’t see’ in the morning to ‘can’t see’ at night. The master is cruel, but nobody ‘knows’ him better than his slaves. There is strength in this. I have had to learn a new language so forgive me if I make errors while attempting to temporarily reclaim our own. How are the crops? Have the rains come? Father and sister, are they safe? Thirty feet above me a man sits on a watchtower with a rifle. I remain agile in mind, and fleet of foot, so you must live with the hope that one day soon you will see and hold me again. Remember we who survived are the fittest. Many perished.

What did I do to deserve this? I simply strayed beyond the compound; I was gathering wood; I caused them no harm. But they took me and hacked bloodily at the cord that bound us together. Moma, do not forget me. I may be far away but I shall return. Pray to our Gods, make whatever sacrifices are necessary, but above all believe that I will return and your prayers will come true. Time stumbles. A month in prison is equal to a year of freedom. We use a different calendar. I have fathered a child, but she (it is a girl) and her mother have been sold to a neighboring estate. I may never see them again. . . . Hold on.

*Your son* (172)

Rudi holds on to his hopeful resistance, but the context is almost completely altered from that so fiercely present in earlier letters. He admonishes his mother to “hold on,” echoing Jackson’s closing words (86; see also Phillips 100 and 157). This mother has died and so already has not been able to “hold on” for him. His own grasp or “hold” is slipping even as he attempts to delineate conditions around him and to articulate his discontented struggles for freedom. As Sarvan and Marhama note, “unlike in Jackson’s case, finally it
is not Rudy’s life but his sanity that is killed” (38). Details of prison life fuse with details of plantation life, for instance. The opportunity to gain parole from prison – previously one of Rudi’s primary concerns – metamorphoses into the opportunity to run away. In effect, “The Cargo Rap,” like “Heartland,” is not a freedom narrative, but a slave narrative: the narrative of a man whose reason slips under the recognition of his own slavery. In Rudy/Rudi’s case, his inner insanity leaps to meet the insane absurdity of the prison world described previously; both take the form of slavery. Below, we will see how Irene/Irina also dissolves metaphor into experiential memory under the disintegrating pressure of inner and outer insanities.

The Holocaust in prison writing

Just as Phillips indexes the prison writers’ ideas about neo-slavery, so too does he adopt and alter their views on the Jewish experience during WWII and their comparisons between African-American and Jewish racial oppression and resistance. Jackson calls white prisoners who assault black prisoners “Hitler’s Little Helpers” (226), and says that “the white prisoner who is con-wise joins the Hitler party right here in the joint” (285). Rubin Carter calls white guards “would-be Gestapo officers” (140). Similarly, Rudi Williams calls the prison guards “Gestapo Police” (127) with a “Gestapo-mentality” of cruelty and racism (162), and he wonders “if in Nazi Germany they used to keep the lights on as a form of torture” (72). In response to signs of approaching race war, Jackson writes, “What would happen if large numbers of blacks refused to fight or make weapons, or even say attempted to subvert the U.S. war effort? Remember the Jews of Germany! From what I observe in here, where they don’t have to hide their contempt, we’re moving toward this eventuality” (73-74). He rejects the concept of nonviolent protest, explaining
that “[i]t presumes the possible existence of mercy on the part of a breed whose heart is as
cold as the snows. . . . But history shows no justification for so wild a presupposition. . . .” (223). Jackson analyzes
Nazi division of the classes through racism to illuminate the ways in which racism has
been manipulated in the US to keep the lower classes divided.

As with neo-slavery, the thorough analysis of anti-Semitism by the “leading
theoretician” Jackson is lacking in Rudi’s letters; however, Rudi does use many of the
glib rhetorical strategies that form the superapparent stylistic underpinning of this
analysis. For example, Jackson, Rubin Carter, and Rudi each metaphorically calls his
prison a “concentration camp” (Jackson 26, 115; Carter 65; Phillips 76, 92). Jackson
even begins to sign his letters “From Dachau with Love” (304; see also 307), and
explains that “[t]hese prisons have always borne a certain resemblance to Dachau and
Buchenwald” (26). Rudi repeatedly calls Max Row “Belsen” (69; 84; 145). Phillips’
substitution of Bergsen-Belsen for Dachau is illustrative. While Dachau was an
extermination camp, Bergsen-Belsen was a ‘labor’ concentration camp, a residential or
transit camp for the more ‘valuable’ prisoners, especially those who might be traded for
prisoners-of-war. Late in WWII, this camp also absorbed the populations of the
evacuated death camps. As in the prisons Rudi and Jackson describe, conditions within
labor camps were much harder for some than for others (Langer, Clendinnen). The
tyranny of racial hierarchies, with white criminals frequently in positions of power ‘inside
the wire’ in addition to that of white prison guards or SS guards ‘outside the wire,’
resulted in further hardships for blacks in prisons and Jews in camps. Also, Bergsen-
Belsen’s horrors were documented and widely disseminated when the British filmed its
liberation. Belsen provides a better working metaphor than Dachau, because it is the more recognizable of the two camps, and because its professed purpose (whatever its actual results), like that of a prison, was not extermination.

**Alienation and incarceration: the betrayal of representation and communication**

Rudi’s rough analogies to slavery and the Holocaust plant the seeds for considering the ways in which people are imprisoned in slavery in the first section and in concentration camps in the third section. The obstacles to keeping together family and communicating with others contribute to the loss of moorings that makes alienation and insanity possible. One determining characteristic of this prison writing is the heavy reliance of the men on letter writing for social and educational purposes: all of them testify to the importance of making and maintaining a link through letters with the world outside prison. The style and content of prison writing is constrained, whether by prison regulations governing length of letters or by official censorship (Jackson 57n; Cleaver 136, Malcolm X 171); as Rudi puts it, he is “subject to the usual restrictions of expression” (Phillips 91; see also 63 and 69). Enunciation is provisional. The structural irony of the genre of prison letters is precisely this: a letter establishes the need and desire for communication, while the same letter often fails to show sympathy, understanding, or forgiveness to its addressee. This self-defeating complexity is true of every letter Rudi writes. Cleaver’s description of his early self easily could be used to introduce Rudi (all the more so perhaps as Cleaver’s first name, Leroy, is Rudi’s middle name): “I had a profound desire for communicating with and getting to know other people, but I was incapable of doing so, I didn’t know how” (138; see also 33). Rudi’s final letter quoted above, although it restores the significance of the slavery motif, is in other ways a blank or dead letter, written to an
absent addressee. Moreover, as its writer asserts, it is a faulty translation falling between 
two languages. Ultimately language (especially in the textual form of the written word) 
betrays the one who depends on it overmuch.

This pattern of betrayal by language is maintained in “Heartland” and “Higher 
Ground”: the narrator of the first receives a blank letter ostensibly written by the fort’s 
governor and delivered by Lewis (who is sexually abusing the narrator’s sexual partner) 
and calls it “a stupid deceit. It is the first letter that I have ever received but there are no 
words….For such as I, who only acquired the skills of writing and reading in their 
language by the application of much effort, it is a cruel joke” (55, my ellipses). Later, 
when the narrator is sold in America, he decides to “feign ignorance of their language” 
(60). Irene/Irina’s speeches are more missed communiqués, unrecorded monologues of 
whose existence the reader receives a negative impression, made aware of them only 
through the significantly repeated hostile response through the wall, “Shut up, you crazy 
Polish bitch” (218; see also 206). Irene, who as the child Irina could lose herself in 
reading books in her family’s home, as an adult refuses to own or to find “comfort in 
books” (176) and feels distanced from her temporary job in the library. Her final attempt 
to communicate her alienation to the West Indian migrant Louis is partly expressed in 
terms of her relations to books: “No library. No more. And this time books won’t help. I 
can’t forget Irina” (217). Inga Clendinnen has noted that “[n]ormally we expect the 
magic of art to intensify, transfigure and elevate actuality. Touch the Holocaust and the 
flow is reversed. That matter is so potent in itself that when art seeks to command it, it is 
art which is rendered vacuous and drained of authority” (164-65). The written word does
not command or control trauma. Art does not, as Ledent argues, transform or transcend isolation and difference.

Phillips shows that where situations parallel to the Holocaust such as enslavement and unjust incarceration are described, here also art – the attempt to communicate through word and form in a text – is “drained of authority.” Whether in prison, in concentration camp, in slave fortress, art – here understood as narrative function – records the breakdown of sanity, and the narratives of the oppressed thereby contain a subversive threat to systems of domination. The contradictory double recognition for readers of *Higher Ground* is that we recognize the intelligence and humanity of the polyphonic voices, as we also see how these voices are ultimately silenced. The struggles to maintain language and humanity under obliterative pressure are one and the same. Where narrative fails, its breakdown not only signals approaching loss of reason but may contribute to it. In each case, the protagonist is betrayed by language, the audience departs, and the communicative function breaks down. What the reader is privileged to see is that when a trauma victim such as Holocaust survivor, slave, prisoner, or battered woman, “is already devalued...she may find that the most traumatic events in her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable” (Herman 8). At the end of each section, the loss of the protagonist’s autobiographical function performatively ends his or her story.

The loss of home and family in all three cases is another significant force for alienation. Rudi loses contact with his child and her mother in prison, and begs his mother to send a message to them. The family members he is in contact with – his father, mother, and sister – are distanced from him geographically and emotionally by his
impractical expectations. The loss of Alice, Rudi’s mother, is directly linked to Rudi’s complete mental alienation from his situation. Rudi’s loss of family reflects that of his sources but is also an explicit nod to slave narratives, as he writes in that crucial final letter that his child and her mother “have been sold to a neighboring estate. I may never see them again” (172). Certainly the separation of families is a frequent motif of slave narratives. As expected, it emerges in “Heartland,” as the narrator tells us that he too is separated from his wife and child. This characteristic is shared by Holocaust writings as well; Lillian Kremer writes that women’s narratives emphasize the “loss of family” (8) and the “violation of home” (9). Furthermore, “[t]he dilemma of whether to try to send children to safety among strangers or to remain together as a family is a recurrent theme” (Kremer 13). It is precisely this dilemma that animates discussions in Irina’s family and results in her being sent away to England. Irene cannot let go of her home and lost family members. She relives memories of their affection and dreams nightmares in which they “callously” ignore her (216), and, like trauma survivors, she cannot conceive of a life “if she no longer devotes her life to remembrance and mourning” (Herman 195). Loss of family results in loss of self, loss of sanity for each protagonist, though the articulation differs in each discourse.

The barriers to effective communication contribute substantially to each character’s isolation and alienation. In fact, as in Rudi’s case, the attempts of each character to reach out to others secure their own final alienation. “[C]aptivity is not only undergone but, at times, also created by the characters themselves” (Ledent, Caryl Phillips 60). The narrator of “Heartland” complains early that “[l]oneliness scales the walls of my being and threatens to destroy my soul” (15). His efforts to assuage this
loneliness by reaching out to and saving an African girl abused by a fort official result in making the girl vulnerable to further sexual exploitation and both being sold into slavery. Similarly, Irene’s acceptance of a date with factory manager Reg is “her first attempt to emerge from behind the wall of shyness that she knew she would have to leap, or step around, or be hauled over, for she could feel it growing higher by the day: she worried that unless she acted it would one day begin to curl around her and eventually become her brick and mortar shroud” (185). Images of death and incarceration collide in this description of isolation. As the reader learns, the relationship with Reg eventually alienates Irene even more as he abuses her and she leaves him. Not only are family members lost, but surrogates too. Rudi loses his family members and legal assistance; the slave collaborator loses his family, then the girl to slavery, Lewis to greed, the governor to death; Irene loses her dead family, refuses to speak to her social worker (perhaps displacing her rage toward perpetrators onto caregiver)19, and loses the audience of Louis, who refuses to comprehend her plea. As audiences disperse and languages disintegrate, the stories end in deliberate, resonant silence.

Though she has escaped the threat of the camps, Irina/Irene’s memories and dreams powerfully propel her to inhabit a concentration camp of her own devising. Irina’s supposed journey to freedom in fact shares many topoi with journeys of displacement in Holocaust writings: there are her family’s photographs, the “winter coat, the hastily gathered possessions, the docile, even eager travelling towards an increasingly problematic destination” (Clendinnen 165), the destination in this case not Auschwitz but England. The ship’s terrain maps out not escape but death: “When they finally boarded the ship a man led them with jailer-like silence through riveted corridors which to Irina’s
tired eyes resembled long iron coffins” (201). Many aspects of concentration camp life are reproduced in Irene’s experiences of England: the smoking chimneys of the factory/death camp (183); the layer of cigarette/human ashes (200); the cats screaming like children, and the skeletal lamp-posts and naked trees (176). There is little to choose between the desolate and icy landscape of postwar England as Irene apprehends it and that of the gloomy horror of the camps. In a discourse in which references to human hair are resonant (because of the cutting and uses of human hair in the camps), Irene finds a single hair inside a book and wonders whose it is (182). Like camp residents, Irene lives under the judgmental observation of others who have the power to intensify her misery. She also often has a headache like an “iron handcuff” (177). The images recall the journey to, and the conditions of life in, the concentration camps. As well, Ledent has pointed out that the handcuff in particular echoes the “yokes, branding-irons, metal masks” (“Remembering” 15) described by the collaborator that characterize the slave trade and, I would add, the heavy metal shackles and chains of prison life.

As in Irene’s story, the slave collaborator’s story centers on a journey into incarceration, the details of which are vivid. When the narrator of “Heartland” gives the new governor a tour of the slave fort’s dungeons, he exposes the conditions of imprisonment for slaves awaiting the middle passage: the dungeons are airless, foul-smelling, rat-infested, disease-smeared, ringed with chains. As the dungeons are empty at the time, these masks and irons are eerie signs of potential violence. The narrator observes that there is no human, animal, or even bird life near the fort. The desolate plain is a scar caused by the fort’s presence. The narrator’s own room – “three short paces” long (14) – is also prison-like, particularly for the African girl, who must remain hidden
there. Once they are discovered there, they are moved into the still-more-restrictive
dungeons, now full of other enslaved Africans. What were once merely threats of
enslavement enact enslavement at the end of this tale.

In distinction from the slave collaborator’s and Irina’s travels, Rudi’s story is the
geographically still center of the novel, as he neither journeys to nor away from the barren
prison in the South. Following Genette, we might consider Rudi’s location in the South
as an extremely suggestive transposition of Phillips’, for the prisons in the hypotexts
identified here are located in the Northern US or California. As Franklin comments,
since the nineteenth century, slave narrators, African-Americans more generally, and
others have seen the South simply as a larger prison. Rudi’s journey, as suggested above,
is a mental and emotional one. Nevertheless, we might connect Rudi’s failure to make
parole, the slave collaborator’s aborted plans to escape, and Irina’s flawed escape as
multiple variations on the escapes of slave narratives. Typically, a slave narrative
includes the episode of a failed escape (sometimes, but not always, the narrator’s own, as
with Frederick Douglass [56-61]), and then the successful one, the success of which is
highly qualified, occasionally by the narrator’s encounters with racism in the so-called
free North20 and more frequently by concerns for family and community left behind.21

Irina’s escape, we gradually realize, is also a failed one. The operation of memory
itself becomes a rough journey in which “the train jerked forward, the carriages nudging
into each other” (213). Memory, in other words, delivers her to the very suffering she
was to escape. Her mind melts under the transformative heat of memory’s pressure. At
the end of her sanity and her freedom, Irina/Irene relives the journey almost certainly
taken by the rest of her family, a journey that parallels her own: “In her nightmare there
was never any air. Bolted, suffocating, and trying to survive a journey. Then they waited and wept and asked for water. To be burned not buried, to have to wait for a high wind. And then a scattered peace” (218). To paraphrase Lawrence Langer, insanity often seems the only sane approach to such a deranged world (205). Just as the rhetoric of slavery escalates in the second part of the novel to become in Rudi’s final letter the primary vehicle for the articulation of the individual’s extreme isolation, so do references to the Holocaust gather tangible strength in the third part. Like the slave collaborator and Rudi, Irene has come to recognize her own incarceration; like Rudi, she translates this into the terms of a crisis larger than her own: the probable destruction of her family in the camps, the attempted annihilation of the Jewish Poles in the Holocaust. Irina has suffered not only the trauma of separation from her family but also of witnessing her family’s destruction, beginning with the assault on her sister, Rachel.²²

**Trauma, memory, and the pastiche**

Memory dysfunction, the fragmented operation of memory, affects all three protagonists in the novel. This, accompanied by the extreme mental states and the failures of language – “complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness” or “dissociation” (Herman 1), is what distinguishes the novel sharply from slave narratives and conventional prison writings. The authority of these autobiographical writings often depends heavily on a straightforward setting forth of events and faithfulness to chronology, a “mechanical form” that is “imposed by generic rules” (Duff xii). Fiction – especially modern or postmodern – can rearrange timelines, however, without impairing its claims to the reader’s attention. Moreover, the collapse of linear memory and
narrative are symptomatic of, and affiliate the three sections of the novel with, trauma writing. Judith Herman’s introduction to *Trauma and Recovery* explains that

The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom.

(1)

Phillips explores the dysfunction of memory in the traumatic state of incarceration (whether the incarceration is real, anticipated, or imagined). Given his subject matter, the use of fractured narrative constitutes “organic form,” or an “individual form generated by the internal forces within a literary work” (Duff xii). While Herman’s study is largely concerned with trauma and recovery, each section of Phillips’ novel presents a different version of the symptoms of trauma, including “profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory” (Herman 34). The characters’ unknown, fractured identities (the unnamed slave narrator, Rudy/Rudi, Irina/Irene) name their splitting selves. 23

Rudi’s letter, as shown above, addresses his dead mother, conflating the form of a slave narrative with points from his own history. The resulting document disrupts the temporal order of life and death and presents what, in this context, are the anachronisms of plantation slavery. The slave collaborator of the first section deliberately excises all time but the present, telling “most of his story in a sometimes clumsy present tense” that expresses the “stasis caused by a system that transforms men into pieces of property deprived of an access to time” (Ledent, *Caryl Phillips* 61). The collaborator writes:
I sit and wait and try hard not to throw my mind either backwards or forwards into new territory, for it is almost certain to be territory too painful to inhabit. Draining the mind is a tedious but necessary business. I am grateful, and would thank the Gods (if there were any to thank) that I have finally mastered this art of forgetting – of murdering the memory. (24)

For him, forgetting the past translates into an inability to navigate the future. In contrast to his willed memory dysfunction, Irene’s “memory-haemorrhage” is involuntary (180). As Lawrence Langer puts it, “memory ceases to offer consolation but itself becomes an affliction” (78).

Through free indirect discourse, in a language tinted by the character’s own thoughts and diction, Phillips breaks down conventional chronology and indicates Irene’s mental breakdown. There are many disorienting interruptions from the past or the present. Hence, on Irina’s journey by sea to England,

Then she withdrew the photograph album from its hiding-place and lay her palm against the front cover. It was still warm. [She is at sea.]

Irene stood up and walked over to the door. [Now she is in London years later.] Her room was one of those that never seemed to get any brighter when a light bulb was switched on. She picked up a towel and crushed it into her face. A wheel turned slowly in the cloying mud, faces smiled, and bread was passed from hand to hand. [A recollection perhaps of the journey to the Polish port, or of the ghetto.] Irene pulled back the curtain [London], rubbed a round porthole [sea journey], and peered down into the street. [London] (209-210; also see 213-214 for a longer example)

This instance of memory fracture points to a characteristic of Holocaust writing: the disruption of both memory and narrative. “[T]here partial, contested memories, this past and present pain,” Inga Clendinnen writes (179), are indicative of “memory in process,” not memory as “sacred relic” (178). The Holocaust disrupts temporal sequence. As Langer argues, “[t]imes past ... persistently intrude on and corrupt the purity of time present, and cast a ... cloud of uncertainty over the prospects for the youngest generation
in the future” (267). In fact this attribute is shared among most survivors of trauma: Herman writes that “[l]ong after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts” (37), the trauma here being Irina’s separation from her family. Aberrant memory function inhibits one’s survival; it is one of the ways in which atrocities continue to have a negative impact well after their cessation. In other words, all three sections are symptomatic of trauma, without the resolution of said trauma. Although each describes a glancing moment of connection (the slave narrator with the African girl; Rudi with his lawyer; Irene with Louis), none restores connections between individual and community (one step essential to healing trauma’s scars according to Judith Herman24); there is no “healing of traumatized communities” (Herman 241) as in the resolution found in Sethe’s restoration to her community and Paul D. in the final scenes of Toni Morrison’s Beloved.

The prison writing exhaustively delineated above illuminates Rudi’s consciousness, in which “the principal unfolding contradiction is between a collective revolutionary consciousness based on black historical experience and the loneliness of the isolated convict ego, branded and cast out, seeking either to reintegrate with the social order or to defy it in anarchic rebellion” (Franklin 262); this contradiction is also played out in this and the other two sections as the oscillation of a trauma victim between silence and truth-telling, between coercion and subversion. By ending each section in a mental space overwhelmed by trauma, pressured more or less forcibly into silence and insanity, Phillips may appear to provide a rather dismal outlook for trauma victims and witnesses. “Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and
divine systems of care and protection that sustain life” (Herman 52). From Franklin’s point of view, however, we might find a kind of integrity in the fact that these criminals (here understood as those who defy social as well as legal restrictions) are not rehabilitated, as literature about criminals’ points of view is fundamentally outlaw literature itself (see 222-23). Phillips may in fact preserve some of the subversive potential of the genres by stopping short of reconstruction. “The price of official acceptance [of a genre is] the loss of a genre’s subversive potential” (Duff x).

*Automatization* or *habitualization* is the term given to “the process whereby literary devices or entire genres lose their potency and cease to be perceived as artistic entities as a result of formulaic repetition and over-familiarity” (Duff x). As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Phillips bends and redefines the novel itself. He also defamiliarizes three forms of discourse (or coherent bodies of literature): the slave narrative, prison writing, and Holocaust writing. In each section this is accomplished by writing with and against the grain of generic expectations, and in the whole by yoking together or juxtaposing the three. He thereby challenges and refreshes the accepted versions of these genres. The neo-slave narrative for Phillips, as for other authors discussed in this study, is in fact not reliant merely upon slave narratives for its patterns of meaning; instead, it is reliant upon genre hybridization, “the process by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work” (Duff xiv). As indicated in the introduction, the term *métissage* is preferred to *hybridization* to describe generic blending; in this case, we might more accurately use the term *generic* or *discursive juxtaposition* to distinguish between Phillips’ work and the blending of slave narrative and science fiction of Butler or
Lawrence Hill’s capsule of slave narrative enclosed within family novel. Because none of Phillips’ characters reconcile with the community, tell their stories, or otherwise become assimilated to their surroundings, they and their experiences – and the genre that espouses them – remain outlaw, subversive, never reaching an establishment or canonical position.

“Survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events” (Herman 3). Caryl Phillips remembers and synthesizes black men’s prison writing published in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, and deftly sharpens its often blunt remembrances of slavery and the Holocaust. It is worth recalling Genette here: “Imitation, in the rhetorical sense, is the elementary figure of a pastiche. Pastiche – and more generally, imitation as a generic practice – is a texture of imitations” (80; Genette’s emphasis). Analysis of the “texture of imitations” present in the pastiche of prison writing in the second section maps out fault lines that reach out underneath the seemingly separate islands of the first and third sections. As Langer contemplates Holocaust literature, he observes that

The literature of atrocity introduces ancestral voices which echo through time despite the survivor’s desire for silence, and the result is a temporal dissonance which no modern harmonics – neither reader’s nor character’s – can resolve into a satisfactory pattern of sound. (252)

The ancestral voices of Jackson, Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Carter echo in Rudi’s account; the wife, child, tribal affiliations, and girl echo in the slave collaborator’s account; and the family and surrogates echo through Irene’s head. Put another way, Phillips borrows liberally from Jackson, Carter, Cleaver, and Malcolm X to describe a kind of no-man’s
land between the entrenched cultural territories of slave and Jewish experiences. As Kremer has observed of Holocaust fiction, “no satisfactory analogy exists” for the articulation of atrocity in incarceration (25). Rudi’s (and his hypertextual ancestors’) abrupt comparisons to slavery and the Holocaust gesture rudely toward the other two stories, but they also alert us to the inadequacy of analogy. Rudi’s brash formulations challenge our expectations of two artistic discourses of atrocity and endurance: the slave narrative and Holocaust writing. Phillips thus passes on the responsibility to “reconnect fragments, reconstruct history, to make meaning” of incarceration narratives, as readers work to find symmetry deeply, generically, structurally – not superficially. What all three stories make clear is that without remembrance, without narrative, stories of suffering and endurance wither in the “impotent creativity” of captivity (Franklin 204). Once there is no receptive audience, once there is no communicative speaker, the stories end.
Endnotes

1 I have used this term for convenience, echoing Phillips’ own term, “someone who collaborated” (“Worlds Within” 594), although “‘complicity’ and ‘cooperation’ are terms that apply to situations of free choice. They do not have the same meaning in situations of captivity” (Herman 116).

2 Judith Herman’s definition of trauma may be useful here. “[T]raumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death,” and they are “extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman 33); just because these things are commonplace does not mean that we should be complacent about their occurrence. They can be single or repeated (“chronic”), as in prisons or concentration camps (74). Trauma shows up in a number of symptoms, including a negative effect on “the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community” (51). Finally, the symptoms of trauma can be identified in larger communities: “Denial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well an individual level” (2).

3 An 1859 abolitionist poem, for instance, speaks of the audience surrounding the slave auction block as follows:

The brutal trader, sly and keen,
The planter with his sunburnt hue,
The idle townsman, and between,
With face unwashed, the foreign Jew.
(William Allen Butler, “At Richmond,” qtd. in Van Deburg 32)

4 See Naomi Mandel’s article, “‘I Made the Ink’: Identity, Complicity, 60 Million, and More,” for a summary of this debate. As an instance, in a 1987 review Stanley Crouch called Beloved “a blackface holocaust [sic] novel. It seems to me to have been written in order to enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings context” (205).

5 In this sense, the debate between the immigrant and Quicksill is moot, because the question is not who has suffered more in slavery or the Holocaust: rather, “the facile equation of the destruction of the European Jews with any and all other atrocities ‘obscures’ the role of anti-Semitism in accomplishing that murder’” (Lucy Dawidowicz qtd. in Spelman 129).

6 Phillips’ other novel linking Jewishness and blackness, The Nature of Blood (1997), is a more conventional novel, as the narrative focus shifts periodically between its disparate characters. This novel uses first person narratives, a disembodied and omniscient historiographic narrative voice, free indirect discourse, medical diagnoses, and encyclopaedic descriptions and definitions to relate three clusters of stories: Eva Stern, a young Jewish woman who survives shovelling human ashes in a concentration camp, is ground beneath the inadequacy and betrayal of displaced persons resources and medical facilities and a sympathetic British soldier, and her uncle Stephan Stern, a doctor who leaves his wife and child to build Israel, works at a transition camp in Cyprus, and has an affair with an African-Jewish woman in Israel; Othello, having left behind his African wife and child, courts Desdemona in unwelcoming, ornate yet rotten Venice with its
“original ghetto, the model for all others in the world” (*The European Tribe* 52), and travels to Cyprus to take up his post; and a Jewish community in fifteenth-century Portobuffole, near Venice, is charged with murdering a Christian child and its men are burnt alive. This novel has a much more European-Mediterranean focus than *Higher Ground*, which overlays the Jewish and African Diasporas.

Though this study deals with hypotexts, for Phillips the actual impetus for writing the story is slightly different:

That came about because I was in Alabama making a film in 1982-83. I was doing a documentary film in Birmingham, nearly 20 years after the bombings in that city. Obviously, I had an interest before that in civil rights, but in Birmingham, I came face to face with the realities of the movement. I went to Birmingham City Jail where King was incarcerated. I went to Jefferson County Jail which is where a lot of black people were held and continue to be held for a variety of reasons. I really am quite interested in the whole process of the psychology of the 1960s in America. A combination of exposing myself to reading about the 1960s, being aware of the martyrdom many Black Americans went through in the 1960s, their struggles and misunderstandings, the difficulties of Vietnam and the hippie movement, and the actual physical horror, for the first time in my life, of being in a couple of prisons which had huge black populations and were primarily staffed by bigoted, Southern red-necks – I had to write something about all of this. (“Worlds Within” 602)

Charles Sarvan and Hasan Marhama call Rudi’s letters “the direct descendants of the prison letters of George Jackson” (38) and suggest the general differences and similarities between the two letter writers. In her analysis of Rudi’s letters, Bénédicte Ledent makes passing reference to Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X (59).

Pastiche does not exclude parody or travesty. Genette’s classification scheme is not meant to describe “separate and absolute categories without any reciprocal contact or overlapping,” but rather “aspects of textuality” (8).

This quality is one which distinguishes *pastiche* from *caricature*. Certain signs which suggest that Genette’s category of pastiche applies to Phillips’ approach include the absence of paratextual commentary. Neither *Higher Ground* nor *Cambridge*, with their lack of paratextual indications of hypotexts, expressly provides a pastiche contract (86), and this is relevant because caricature is “almost always accompanied by a commentary designed to dot the i’s (paratextual prefaces, notes, interviews, etc.). The nonsatirical pastiche, on the other hand, does the same in the contrary direction, or at least abstains from any negative marginal appraisal” (89; original emphasis). Unidentified imitations are less likely to “provoke laughter” (86). Moreover, by way of contrast with the transformative practice of parody, pastiche “appears as a more neutral and a more technical term” (24). The following passage elaborates:

The parodist or the travesty writer gets hold of text and transforms it according to this or that formal constraint or semantic intention, or transposes it uniformly and as if mechanically into another style. The pastiche writer gets hold of a style – an object that is a bit less easily, or less immediately, to be seized – and this style dictates the text. In other words, the parodist or travesty writer essentially deals
with a text, and with a style only peripherally. Conversely, the imitator essentially
deals with style, and with text only incidentally; the target is a style and the
thematic motifs that it involves (the concept of style must be understood here in
its broadest sense: it is a manner, on both the thematic and the formal level). The
text he is elaborating or improvising on that pattern is for him only a means of
actualization – and possibly of derision. The essence of a mimotext, its specific,
necessary, and sufficient trait, is the imitation of style. We are dealing with a
pastiche… when the operations of its text exhibit the imitation of a style. (Genette
82; original emphasis; my ellipsis)

11 One example of the way that prisoners learn to be critical of conventional wisdom and
learn to manipulate the rhetoric of socialism can be isolated in their attitudes toward
capitalism. Cleaver explains that “the social Darwinism of ‘survival of the fittest’ [is] far
from dead” and that this “jungle law” underlies American culture, “proclaiming to the
world that ‘competition’ is the law of life” (85). More colloquially, Rudi writes his
mother that “Darwin … formalized ‘the law of the jungle’ idea that you eats or you gets
eaten [sic]. Claimed it to be a ‘natural’ law. Well Darwinism and Capitalism are
kinfolks – they feed each other” (63). What in Cleaver’s case is part of a sustained
critique of the African-American community’s role in the economy is in Rudi’s case
subordinated to a rejection of his mother’s occupation as a cleaner in white employers’
houses and her conservative political stance.

12 For example, slave narrator William Grimes concludes the 1824 edition of his narrative
by powerfully and ironically linking his scarred body to the body politic of America, in so
doing exposing the hypocrisy of America’ claims to freedom:

I hope some will buy my books from charity; but I am no beggar. I am now
entirely destitute of property; where and how I shall live I don’t know; where and
how I shall die I don’t know; but I hope I may be prepared. If it were not for the
stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will
leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off
and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious, happy and
free America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American
liberty! (82-83; original emphasis)

13 The “so-called Christians” of this title, from the 1846 edition of the narrative, repeats
the title of Lewis Clarke’s narrative published one year earlier, although the “sons of a
soldier of the revolution was apparently a later addition.

14 For other instances of the indictment of Christian hypocrisy, see the following. The
appendix to Henry “Box” Brown’s narrative delivers charges against Christianity-
professing defenders of slavery (i-viii). James Pennington speaks of how “[m]y feelings
are always outraged when I hear [my brethren in the ministry] speak of ‘kind masters,’
[or] ‘Christian masters’… as extenuations of slavery” (196); he strongly asserts that such
Christian masters “are not masters of the system. The system is master of them” (198;
see also 200-201). Aaron’s History records that “Aaron thinks these white friends in the
South that pretend to call themselves christians [sic]” have “hands and feet…stained with
African blood” which will “cry so heavy against them in judgment that it will sink their
poor souls right into hell” (15; see also 6). John Jacobs describes an overseer as “a
member of the Christian church” who “was particularly fond of two things: namely, singing hymns and flogging slaves” (215); Jacobs later exhorts, “[g]ive me liberty amidst savages, rather than slavery with such professed Christians” (227). Solomon Northup more dramatically illustrates the ignorance and hypocrisy of Peter Tanner, a slave owner reading selectively from “Scripter” (94; original emphasis). John Simpson’s account of the life of Dinah vividly depicts slave owners as “monsters in human form, those cowardly ruffians, whose representative men, ministers as well as politicians, appeal to Christ as not averse to their organized slave system” (35). H. Mattison’s biography of Louisa Piquet includes a specific critique of sexual exploitation among Christian slaveowners (51). See also the Interesting Account of Thomas Anderson, A Slave (see 8-12). Critiques of slave owning Christians show up in religious autobiographies by African-Americans as well as slave narratives (see Zilpha Elaw 92 and Julia Foote 167).

15 Ledent interprets this “growing blindness” figuratively as a sign of Rudi’s narrow-mindedness (66).

16 Rudi, however, has “no sympathy” with a fellow prisoner who’s committed rape, and he asks his father, “Can you think of a more disquieting crime?” (148). Perhaps in keeping with changing social mores and liberal intolerance of sexual violence in the 80s, this comment is a significant departure from Cleaver, who had raped women as a political, “insurrectionary act” (26) before returning to prison and realizing that he “could not approve of the act of rape” (27).

17 Black prisoners were not alone in making such analogies, but demonstrate affinity with a wider black culture in this respect, as can be affirmed with a quick glance at, for instance, John Oliver Killens’ Black Man’s Burden (1965), which often refers to contemporary blacks as “slaves” and whites as “masters.”

18 W. E. B. Du Bois usefully outlines the difference between slavery and work:

What did it mean to be a slave? It is hard to imagine it today. We think of oppression beyond all conception: cruelty, degradation, whipping and starvation, the absolute negation of human rights; or on the contrary, we may think of the ordinary worker the world over today, slaving ten, twelve, or fourteen hours a day, with not enough to eat, compelled by his physical necessities to do this and not to do that, curtailed in his movements and his possibilities; and we say, here, too, is a slave called a ‘free worker,’ and slavery is merely a matter of name.

But there was in 1863 a real meaning to slavery different from that we may apply to the laborer today. It was in part psychological, the enforced personal feeling of inferiority, the calling of another Master; the standing with hat in hand. It was the helplessness. It was the defenselessness of family life. It was the submergence below the arbitrary will of any sort of individual. It was without doubt worse in these vital respects than that which exists today in Europe or America. Its analogue today is the yellow, brown and black laborer in China and India, in Africa, in the forests of the Amazon; and it was this slavery that fell in America. (Black Reconstruction 8-9)

19 See Herman 138.

20 Harriet Jacobs, for example, describes expensive yet racially segregated travel between Philadelphia and New York as “the first chill to [her] enthusiasm about the Free States”
as (623). She also records the unsympathetic treatment of her daughter by people living in Brooklyn, NY (626). Finally, and most prominently, she titles an entire chapter of her life after escape from slavery, “Prejudice Against Color” (635-637). For some other instances of the documentation of Northern racism, see William Grimes’ account of being charged with rape and held for months despite an alibi (68ff), Richard Allen’s descriptions of Methodist harassment of black Methodists in Philadelphia, and William and Ellen Craft’s encounters with racism in New Brunswick and Halifax (325-329).

21 Slave narratives often provide striking accounts of enduring love and incredible efforts to track and rejoin family members. For instance, the appendix to Lewis Clarke’s narrative carefully documents the status and character of each sibling. One ex-slave known only as Robert, hoping to locate his first family, visited his hometown after an absence of 20 years (Trumbull, *Life and Adventures of Robert*). After purchasing his freedom and being refused permission to remain in a slave state, Lunsford Lane, like so many others, raised money for the purchase of family members remaining behind. Peter Still, brother of Underground Railroad organizer William Still, resolved to rescue his family out of slavery after he had purchased himself. After the failure of one escape attempt, he raised funds enough to succeed in purchasing his family members (Pickard). In a reversal of sorts, Solomon Northup, a free man kidnapped into slavery, comments that he “was heart sick and discouraged. Thoughts of my family, of my wife and children, continually occupied my mind” (27). Charles Ball escaped slavery, refusing to claim his freedom in preference to joining his family in Baltimore. After seizure and another escape, he again returned to Baltimore, only to discover that his family had been kidnapped into slavery.

22 “Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma” (Herman 2).

23 See Ledent for a thorough analysis of “(un)naming” in all three protagonists (57-60). Pushing the issue of names not given (the collaborator and the girl) and names doubled (Irina/Irene, Rudy/Rudi) further, I would suggest that they are symptomatic of the protagonists’ dissociation or double consciousness (after Du Bois), that they mark the (un)named as sufferers of trauma. In this view, the name Irina/Irene must be an ironic reference to the goddess of peace, for peace is what Irina seeks but is unable to find. Conversely, Rudy/Rudi is certainly, and appropriately enough, rude to and dismissive of those he addresses letters to, yet he seeks to be otherwise. The doubled names indicate confusion of self and perhaps different practices of spelling and pronunciation in different cultures and subcultures (whereas for point of contrast Frederick Douglass’ or Malcolm X’s series of names indicate the progression of self).

24 The other two essential steps to healing are first, “establishing safety,” and second, “reconstructing the trauma story” (Herman 3).
Chapter 4

Modulating Speculative Fiction and the Slave Narrative: Octavia Butler’s Kindred

What I had denied as a child, refused to think about as a woman, was now staring me in the face. Of course it was no surprise. Where else could I have come from? .... Still, the reality of the names scrawled before my eyes, names written in ink that had been dry more than a century, hit me in my heart. This was no classroom discussion, no CORE group debate, no protest slogan. “Before I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave.” I’d sung that line, marching for my civil rights. Now I felt so arrogant. So smug. It was easy for me to sing about a choice I never had to make. But here were people who had lived the life I chanted about. People with my blood in them.

And I realized how close I really was to their lives. Poppa, my grandfather, was born in 1879 – a member of the first generation of his family born free. My mother, Louise, born in 1907, was among the second. And I was of the third. Suddenly the past seemed so near, so immediate. Here I had assumed such a distance from my parents’ world, from the lives they had lived. And now, suddenly, in a very real, very personal sense, time was squeezed, the generations were pushed together. (Dorothy Spruill Redford 56)

Kindred, Octavia Butler’s most sustained exploration of America’s history, deploys conjoined elements of slave narratives and speculative fiction (SF) to bring past and present into startling combinations. Arguably the most popular vehicle for imagining alterity in the nineteenth century was the slave narrative; in the twentieth, speculative fiction. Yet both have been dismissed at times for being formulaic, repetitive, and nonliterary. In Kindred, Butler combines and modifies the conventions of slave narratives and speculative fiction, in so doing imaginatively defamiliarizing and revitalizing each generic cluster as critique of the other’s limitations. This novel participates much less in diasporic or “modal” (Clarke) blacknesses than the other texts discussed; it does, however, center my arguments about the potential for genre critique and the challenge of representing the real.

Fundamentally, the aspects of one genre are often precisely what encourage the questioning of the other genre. Through the insertion of slave narrative elements, Dana’s
experience of slavery is believable, typical in its details. At the same time, Butler’s insertion of speculative elements into the slave narrative gains her exemption from the more stringent demands of documentary historical realism, which are tightly connected with its roots in slave narratives and history, according to Butler’s account (see Interview with McCaffery 66). Time travel enables her to dissect some of the limitations of the slave narrative, such as its chronological rigidity and its emphasis on literacy and education. Butler’s intensely literal questions about slavery also push open the latent content of such structural aspects of SF as time travel, human/nonhuman and master/slave dialectics, dystopia, and so forth. The neo-slave narrative acquires liberation from the rigid forms of the nineteenth century through its meeting on common ground with SF. As Missey Dehn Kubitschek concludes in her analysis of the novel as an African-American woman’s quest, “Kindred provides a literal paradigm of coming to terms with a history of slavery and oppression, a process that is in other works frequently metaphorical” (51; my emphasis; see also Rushdy, Remembering Generations 107). In my assessment it also provides a “literal paradigm” for coming to terms with the submerged gendered and racial content of speculative fiction as well as of slave narratives. Butler is able to open a space within SF for history, and a place within the first-person histories of slavery for speculation.

Two critics have commented extensively on the pairing of generic forms I discuss here: Robert Crossley records Butler’s achievement of “her collapsing of the genres of the fantastic travelogue and the slave narrative” (xxi); however, his primary objective of introducing the novel precludes full exploration of the ramifications of métissage. And Sandra Govan also highlights the combination of SF, slave narrative and historical novel
in *Wild Seed* and *Kindred*, although her critique of *Kindred* relies on a limited list of slave narrative characteristics ("Homage to Tradition"). Yet Butler's novel conforms less to generic practice than Govan suggests, and has more invested in overturning the paradigms of slave narratives as much as speculative fiction. While sometimes the generic conventions overlap, occasionally it is precisely the terms of one genre that allow her to interrupt and interrogate the assumptions and expectations held by the other.

Time travel, the most prominent aspect of SF in the novel, permits Butler to construct moments of concrete contact – often conflict – between her protagonist, Dana Franklin, and slavery in nineteenth-century Maryland. Like Cambridge and Irina, Dana discovers "an experience of travel that is not about play but is an encounter with terrorism" (hooks, *Black Looks* 174). Thus the time travelogue observes the environment in a realistic manner similar to that of Emily's travelogue, but it is diametrically opposed to the travel narrative of privilege exposed and condensed in Emily's journal in *Cambridge*. Butler's book may be compared generally with the historical accounts Butler read in preparation for writing *Kindred* ("An Interview" 496-497) – in fact, Dana herself compares her own experiences to those described by history books – but unlike Caryl Phillips's *Cambridge* or *Higher Ground*, it may only rarely be compared specifically with hypotexts. This time travel combined with the tropes of slave narratives has numerous effects: it indicates the limits of documentary histories, particularly their representations of violence; challenges the assumptions of civil rights and feminist movements with ethical complexities; addresses definitions of humanity and the obstacles to interracial sexual relationships and marriage; links the violence of slavery to twentieth-century violence (in South Africa and in the Holocaust); makes suffering
under slavery relatively less representational and more realistic as Dana is initiated to the early 1800s; and brings the wounds of the past into the present. Like genealogist Dorothy Redford, Dana discovers that slavery is none too distant, and that the generations are “squeezed together.”

**Making readers “feel history” instead of judge history**

Butler’s strategy of genre *métissage* permits her readers to “feel” the history of slavery and understand the moral complexities and “adaptations” it entails. Dana, the first-person narrator typical of slave narrative autobiography, provides insight and authority to slavery; her latter-day environment makes her discourse more relevant and meaningful to a contemporary audience than the formal patterns of the nineteenth-century slave narrator. The result is a heightened appreciation of the painful physical and psychological sufferings of slaves. Butler has commented that

> The whole purpose of *Kindred*, when I wrote it, was to make people feel history as well as to know the facts of history. All too often, people don’t understand what it might have been like to live under the conditions they read about. Young people imagine themselves living under those conditions with their thinking unchanged from the way it is now. But different ways of life absolutely demand different ways of thought.

> For instance, people who read *Kindred* often feel they would have behaved with much more anger and aggression than my character did. But all that really means is that they would have been killed. (ABC Online Interview)

Knowledge is differentiated from sensation and experience. Dusty knowledge contained in slave narratives is rejuvenated by speculative fiction’s ability to push slavery beyond ontology to the authority of experience. Time travel gives the real an artificial priority over symbolic, representative discourse.

Butler has a largely pragmatic approach to the past’s real demands, demands its students often misunderstand. Many critics interpret Butler’s work as didactic, and the
interpretation of evidence can be selective, not to mention dismissive of Butler’s “black feminist aesthetic” (Crossley xvii). Lisa Long usefully outlines two positions: in the first, contemporary readers privilege “the countless loving and heroic acts of African Americans and whites who worked to overcome the dark imperatives of socialization and history” (Long 463), imagining that “[w]e would not be the ones maimed or killed – surely not the ones doing the maiming and killing” (Long 463-64). This preference takes the critical shape of willingness to reclaim wholesale the slaves’ portion of the historical record as defiant and unqualified self-affirmation. In the other position, interpretation of the more brutal aspects of slavery is freighted with warnings against perpetuating negative stereotypes, “recapitulations of victimization and resentment, and thus re-inscriptions of powerlessness” (Amy Gottfried qtd. in Long 468). In short, interpretations tend to depend on reading either political and moral power or powerlessness into the slave’s situation. Yet *Kindred* walks the line between the forceful, fallacious assertion of agency and the realism of the “grim reading” that counters it (Butler qtd. by Govan, “Homage to Tradition” 94). Butler’s own words may serve as a useful reminder here of the absence of a lesson: “What I hope to wind up with in my work are [ ] series of shadings that correspond to the way concepts like ‘good’ and ‘evil’ enter into the real world – never absolute, always by degrees. In my novels, generally, everybody wins and loses something …” (Interview with McCaffery 64). The novel is thus less a lesson in power relations than an interrogation of, first, the state of mainstream thought about gender and race as alien and distant concepts of otherness, and second, the ways in which received genres may embody – and revised genre refute – these concepts.
Butler inhabits a complex moral position that is linked to an overlapping space of genres; her particular contribution is maneuvering into a shared space and making changes that resonate in both generic categories, commenting on both in degrees, not absolutes. “Kindred was a kind of reaction to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster” (“An Interview” 496).

When I was in college, I began Kindred, and that was the first [novel] that I began, knowing what I wanted to do…. I really had had this experience in college that I talk about all the time, of this Black guy saying, “I wish I could kill all these old Black people that have been holding us back for so long, but I can’t because I have to start with my own parents.” That was a friend of mine. And I realized that, even though he knew a lot more than I did about Black history, it was all cerebral. He wasn’t feeling any of it. He was the kind that would have killed and died, as opposed to surviving and hanging on and hoping and working for change. And I thought about my mother, because she used to take me to work with her when she couldn’t get a baby sitter and I was too young to be left alone, and I saw her going in the back door, and I saw people saying things to her that she didn’t like but couldn’t respond to. I heard people say in her hearing, “Well, I don’t really like colored people.” And she kept working, and she put me through school, she bought her house – all the stuff she did. I realized that he didn’t understand what heroism was. That’s what I want to write about: when you are aware of what it means to be an adult and what choices you have to make, the fact that maybe you’re afraid, but you still have to act. (“Octavia E. Butler: Persistence,” original emphases)7

Like Rudi of Higher Ground, Butler’s college friend is incapable of recognizing the value of adaptation and survival. Central to Kindred, then is the inability of history to communicate the past’s private ambiguities and compromises to Butler’s militant university friend.8

Like him, Dana at first decries individuals able to survive under slavery. Butler uses the vehicle of time travel to channel a militantly revolutionary dismissal into the historical context that provides a pragmatic reminder of the bounded choice of slaves.
[Aunt Sarah] had done the safe thing — had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called “mammy” in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom — the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about the freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter.

I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. Or it did until Rufus and Nigel drove into town and came back with what was left of Alice. (145)

The too-high cost of open resistance is Alice’s mutilated body, wounded during her attempt to escape with a fugitive slave. Dana models her behavior on slaves around her; she realizes that the slaves do not get to negotiate the terms of their selfhood under slavery. Dana’s realization of the high risks of resistance is commensurate with her new appreciation of Sarah’s low-risk survival strategies, her realistic calculations: “Things ain’t bad here. I can get along” (145). Dana learns that historically blacks (both free and slave) simply do not occupy the bargaining position implied by present day evaluations. Butler is overtly critical of versions of history that omit oppression, and of corrective versions of history that see the potential for heroism only in physical acts of defiance.

One of the more exciting aspects of this novel is that it encourages the asking of questions that are discouraged within an academic milieu whose goal is objectivity. Questions such as: Would you, as a slave in the antebellum South, submit to or resist the status quo? Speculative fiction gives the author a chance to examine modern, liberated woman in an often hostile and certainly more circumscribed and primitive environment. How will she survive? Have twenty-first-century education and training made her better able to cope? Will she, via her “superior knowledge,” restructure the past (and potentially alter the future)? (Friend 50)
Dana, as a 1976 black woman trapped in slaveholding Maryland, utters these questions and enacts possible answers. Often these questions, suggestions, musings, wonderings, stack one on top of another in a single passage until the overwhelming impression is of Dana’s near-complete disorientation. To the overriding question – could you beat the system? – Butler’s answer is a resounding “no” – unless you consider limited adaptation a victory.

In response to an interviewer’s suggestion that “self-preservation” and “the cost of survival” are a theme in her books, Butler responded, “No, it’s more like the need to adapt to your circumstances….[I]n all my books there is some need for not only the character but generally the group that she lives with to make some changes. People don’t tend to like to do that” (Butler, “Adapt” 13). Where survival suggests stasis, or the reduction of a human to meeting basic human needs for the purposes of existence, Butler’s emphasis on adaptation suggests interaction, reception, and influence with the new environment and its inhabitants. Adaptation also connotes a slightly more speculative approach to the negotiations entailed by continuity than does survival. As Butler has remarked, “I usually put my characters into positions that show us how well they’ve learned” (qtd. in Foster, “Octavia Butler” 42; see also “Adapt” 14). Barr observes that feminist time travelers are frequently not heroines who change their worlds but “survivors who must learn to cope with a new environment” (xv). For Butler, the process of adaptation necessitated by time travel and Dana’s slave status captures this sense of learning, coping. Not only does she put her characters under test, but she also places genres under conditions of pressure to see how they will adapt to one another.
The (il)logic of time travel: the motherhood and progress fallacies

There are two main bodies of existing critical response to Butler’s novel: the first emphasizes its affiliations with other works of speculative fiction. These briefly include *Kindred* within surveys of feminist challenges to conventional SF (Friend, Barr, Weinkauf), or survey a number of Butler’s works (Johnson; Raffel; Foster’s “Octavia Butler’s Black Female Future Fiction”; Govan, “Connections”). The second body of criticism emphasizes slave narratives and African-American literary traditions to the exclusion of SF (Beaulieu, Mitchell, Kubitschek, McKible). For all their celebration of Butler’s work, their assessments often reductively reinscribe the nurturing role of motherhood onto Dana and sometimes Butler; one standout is Christine Levecq, whose article examines Butler’s relationships with slave narratives and history, but who also perceives the ways in which Butler’s novel resists a clichéd “network of solidarity” between black women (546). Like her, I also see Dana’s gestures toward mothering as repeatedly suggested but immediately aborted. For instance Alice when ill calls Dana “Mama” (153); soon she turns scornfully on Dana’s peacekeeping: “They be calling you mammy in a few years” (167). Beverly Friend notes that “Dana . . . [questions] her role as the guardian for Rufus” and briefly cites Dana’s own doubts. Here I quote more of the passage Friend refers to:

The boy [Rufus] was literally growing up as I watched – growing up because I watched and because I helped to keep him safe. I was the worst possible guardian for him – a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children. I would have all I could do to look after myself. But I would help him as best I could. And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even be making things easier for Alice. (68)
Dana struggles with issues of guardianship, parenthood, appropriate influence and so on; she asks, “What did I know about teaching children?” (88). Dana’s insecurities foreshadow her failure to fill this position. Nurturing Rufus and Alice is not destiny but self-delusion. Overturning Dana’s logic on this point is critical if we are to resist the critical impulse to “mother” and if we are to fully comprehend time travel in this novel.

Time travel disrupts the line of life and narrative in such a way as to reinstall uncertainty to the slave narrative. While slave narratives reassuringly root themselves in the formulaic opening of “I was born...,” and branch into the by-and-large chronological sequence of events, the sequence of Dana’s story is more complicated, as the result partly of time travel, partly of narrative framing provided by a prologue, epilogue, and regular analepses. The novel carefully notes the ages of characters, as well as the dates and durations of Dana’s six trips to the past.  

11 Duration is not synchronous between the 1800s and 1976, but is nonetheless consistently patterned: ten minutes in the nineteenth century takes a few seconds in 1976, several months take a few hours, and so forth, in a predictable discrepancy clarified by Dana’s comprehensive explanation to Rufus.  

13 Basically, history is compressed; the past takes up less time in the present. However, duration is constant in its effects on the human body’s aging process (Jakiel and Levinthal 134), which Kevin and Dana undergo, and to which Butler draws our attention: when Kevin returns to 1976, he has clearly aged 5 years (184); when Dana introduces her narrative, she laments the loss of a year of her life (9). Duration may be proportional, but Dana cannot predict when in 1976 she will be called to the 1800s; once there, she cannot predict when she will be called back to 1976. In this book, the slave’s escape has temporal as well as geographic contours: the successful attempts to escape occur through
the dimension of time, not space, thus bridging slave narrative and SF. Like many slave narratives, this novel includes accounts of failed escapes and bodily mutilations. Nigel tries to run away after his father has been sold; Alice and Isaac are recaptured after several days of flight; his ears are cut off and he is sold, and she has been so savagely attacked by dogs that her survival is uncertain, she suffers temporary amnesia, and she is sold into slavery to Rufus; Dana attempts to flee northward and is whipped. She can only escape through time travel. Yet as the fugitive slave faced punishment, death, fear, separation from loved ones left behind, recapture and ignominious return, and the possibility of scarring, so does Dana face all of these elements in her time travel. Escape to the future offers as many threats as escape to the North: according to the dynamic of time travel in the novel, Dana is obliged to fear for her own life in order to escape. She is constantly aware that she may be “recaptured,” called back to nineteenth-century Maryland and punished for her prior actions; she leaves behind her husband; and she loses a limb in her final escape. The arbitrary nature of time travel and Dana’s constant dread of it stimulates the reader’s appreciation of the arbitrary and quickly changing logic of slavery and the slaves’ complex psychological responses to situations of bounded choice.

Butler also joins the slave narrative to SF in her qualification of ideals of freedom. While fugitive slaves often celebrate the passage to freedom, they as frequently qualify descriptions of the “free” North and Canada with accounts of racism experienced there. Sometimes they also qualify the freedom they have achieved with a sense of responsibility to those left behind, in slavery. Though they have reached a place where they can articulate moral absolutes, they recognize that freedom is relative and not
absolute. (This sense was of course heightened after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and the increased lack of security felt by fugitive slaves in Northern states.) Escape through time proves to be as equivocal as escape to the North. Dana finally frees herself from slavery but her achievement is qualified by her knowledge of the breakup of the slave community and the loss of her arm, both caused by her escape. More significantly, there is a potential analogy between the place fugitive slaves found qualified freedom — the North — and the place Dana finds qualified freedom — the present day of 1976. “Butler’s use of the year 1976 as the contemporary setting — the year the United States celebrated two hundred years of freedom — reveals inherent contradictions in American history” (Mitchell 44).

*Kindred* draws attention several times to its setting in 1976, the year of the celebration of the bicentennial of American independence. As Mitchell notes with reference to the American political climate in the 70s, “many Black Americans may have felt it disingenuous to celebrate two hundred years of freedom given the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation” (60). Kevin uses a coin with both dates — 1776 and 1976 — issued in commemoration of the bicentennial to prove to Rufus that he and Dana come from the future (64). (It is important that money is the deciding factor; the reduction of human life to the value of money is, after all, one of the protests of antislavery sentiment and a theme of the novel.) Finally, Dana’s last trip to the past is prefaced by her remark, “With some kind of reverse symbolism, Rufus called me back on July 4” (243). The symbolism is noted by Dana but not fully explored or explicated by her, other than modified by the adjective “reverse.” As the slave narrator Thomas Smallwood observed, so might Dana:
[I was] compelled painfully to witness as I had done for many years their hypocritical demonstrations in honour of a day, which they say, brought to them freedom. But I sorrowfully knew that it was in honour of a day that brought to me, and my race among them, the most degrading, tyrannical, and soul-withering bondage that ever disgraced the world or a nation. (53)

Unpacking Dana’s brief reading of the situation, we can see that she takes the celebrations attached to Independence Day at face value, as symbolizing freedom from oppression; conversely, she sees being called back to Rufus as slavery. The irony recalls Charles Ball’s when he recalls that he, while waiting with other slaves to be auctioned off, overheard nearby celebrations on the Fourth of July. However, an attentive reader will further note Dana’s reluctance to celebrate the Fourth of July, consider the fact that Dana finally earns her freedom during this last trip, and perhaps even remember Frederick Douglass’s ironic rhetoric in one of his best-known speeches, “What to a slave is the Fourth of July?” Butler gives a wider field of interpretive possibilities than Dana suggests. In particular, if Douglass’s speech is indeed an hypotext for Kindred, then the former’s identification of the slavery of African-Americans with the oppression of American colonists prior to revolution, and of unpopular abolitionists with the adored advocates of American Independence, informs Kindred’s duplication of parallels between past and present. Moreover, Douglass’s sensibility in this speech toward the uses of history – “We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future” (123) – confirms Kindred’s attempts to make history less remote and more significant to the present and the future. Therefore, not only does the novel frequently compare the early nineteenth century (c. 1812 – 1831) and 1976, but it also compares 1776 with 1976 and, in so doing, tests the promises and omissions of 1776.
Time is linear and absolute. In the absence of the supernatural (a common absence in SF) and the more noticeable absence of technology (unusual in time travel narratives), Dana tries to locate a psychological and/or biological logic in her movements. After her first couple of trips into nineteenth-century Maryland, Dana rationalizes these trips with the explanation that she is brought back in time to save Rufus and perhaps to mitigate the effects of slavery on her slave ancestors. This explanation has been espoused by every critic of Kindred. I introduce a perspective resisting this explanation, not to disrupt the validity and the authority of Dana’s experience, but to sharpen the reader’s perspective on Dana’s interpretation of her experience.

For this perspective we need to examine closely the passage in which Dana discusses the paradox of her situation vis-à-vis her ancestry, in masculinist SF called a grandfather paradox. She considers the possible reasons for her time travel at moments when the life of Rufus Weylin appears to be in danger:

After all, what would have happened to me, to my mother’s family, if I hadn’t saved him?

Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family’s survival, my own birth.

Again, what would have happened if the boy had drowned? Would he have drowned without me? Or would his mother have saved him somehow?

Would his father have arrived in time to save him? It must be that one of them would have saved him somehow. His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense.

But somehow, it didn’t make enough sense to give me any comfort. It didn’t make enough sense for me to test it by ignoring him if I found him in trouble again – not that I could have ignored any child in trouble. But this child needed special care. If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn’t dare test the paradox. (29; original emphasis)

Butler’s introduction of the grandfather paradox to this slave’s narrative is no mere playful moment of superficial self-awareness. Kindred plays with and against this
paradox, turning it inside out. Dana’s progress is full of questions that don’t have
answers, and those that are answered are only ever answered provisionally, conditionally.
The style here indicates multiple possibilities; Dana chooses her own imperative. She
knows that she cannot in fact alter her own existence, and that the authority of her own
existence in fact guarantees the survival of Rufus without her help; in other words, the
“law of preservation of reality” prevails (Fritz Leiber qtd. in Hacker and Chamberlain
359). Dana’s quest is for the means to preserve her life (and occasionally therefore the
means to cause her death, since only this fear will allow her to escape slavery). It is
rather conservative than transformative; she does not seek to change, but to stay the same.
Dana’s paradox is that she changes history in order to preserve it; if she did not intervene
at moments in which the life of Rufus or Alice is threatened, she would not preserve her
own history, her own existence.17 In short, Dana chooses to feel needed to help Rufus,
and her thought process in making this choice is intricately revealed to the reader to
demonstrate its provisional quality. She plays the long game over the short one; as Kevin
puts it, she’s “gambling against history.” She retorts, “if trying means taking small risks
and putting up with small humiliations now so that I can survive later, I’ll do it” (83).
Dana’s terror of history – its linearity yet randomness – leads her to try to put the past
under her influence. This biological/genetic imperative is analogous to the situation
actually faced by many slaves: their fears of repercussions and punishments, even death,
may not have been accurate – but they were sufficiently true to keep many of them
subservient. In a novel which tries to legitimize our imaginings of the slave’s mentality,
it seems crucial that we appreciate that Dana’s actions and her complicity are an example
of bounded choice, not of necessity.
Dana’s choice is also ethically complex. Her hope to form a connection between herself and Alice, expressed in its fledgling form in their joint initiation to the violence of slavery, ends with herself complicit in Alice’s rape and concubinage.18 Dana’s expectations of black sisterhood or a racial consciousness are undermined; the suggestion of black sisterhood and cooperation is raised then repudiated, a violation of contemporary black feminist thinking that is akin in its effect on the reader to the effect of nineteenth-century slave narratives’ critique of Christian moral codes on their readers.19 As Levecq puts it, this novel “subverts this model of solidarity” between black women, “replacing it with a treatment of relationships between black women as more conflicted, ambiguous, even aggressive” (547).20 Rather than nurture, the best Dana can do is preserve the status quo so that her family lineage will continue. Simply in doing this, in persuading Alice to accept Rufus’s sexual advances so that she can give birth to Hagar, she violates her feminist tendencies. Instead of helping Alice and other black women and children for the better, Dana cannot alter the future in a positive way.

Much of Butler’s futurist fiction treats “genetic evolution and selective breeding,” which can be considered futurist versions of the eugenics program Dana feels conscripted into in Kindred (Foster, “Octavia Butler” 37). SF’s engagement with the means of human reproduction and its frequent trope of exercising control over reproduction – consider, for instance, Brave New World – provide an alternative to the nurture imperative. Such control over reproduction is a crucial issue in feminist SF, particularly as described in chapter 7 of Maureen Barr’s study Alien to Femininity. Butler reduces the technology of production and reproduction to the fundamentals of surviving conception and childbirth in the hostile environment of slavery. Dana’s task as she sees it is to
facilitate or ensure her own eventual existence through taking control over the conception and birth of Hagar, Alice and Rufus’s child and Dana’s ancestor.

As does the relationship between Dana and Alice, the possibility of a nurturing relationship between Dana and Rufus deteriorates. In this case, into mutual threat, fear and reluctant cooperation, into a much more calculating, less altruistic arrangement, and is finally consumed by a murderous and violent antipathy. My reading of Dana’s killing of Rufus relies on Maureen Barr, who points to feminist speculative fiction’s understanding of gender and reversals of narrative expectations. In challenging masculinist presentations which find narrative fulfillment in women’s death and pleasure in the misery of others (Shadenfreude), Barr cites Judith Fetterly’s analysis of submerged patriarchal structure in narrative: “the motive underlying the desire to perfect is the need to eliminate” (qtd. 27); eugenics and death are thus interlinked. The key reversal is that this patriarchal drive to perfect, to eliminate, is evident in a black woman’s interactions with a white man. Instead of finding its climax in the rape or death of a woman, this challenging SF novel finds its climax in the death of a man, Rufus. Rufus’ death occurs in a continuum with Dana’s desire to alter Rufus’s socialization and to control the reproduction of her ancestors. Dana does not find control in nurture, but in murder.

Dana’s bounded choice, as evinced by her killing of Rufus, shows that adaptation is not necessarily a more workable proposition than survival. Survival has only the goal of preserving life; adaptation respects pre-existing physiological and psychological walls, boundaries that may not be violated. This conversation between Kevin and Dana, taking place after her second trip into the past and a patroller’s attempt to rape her, foreshadows the end of the novel. Kevin attempts to reassure Dana:
“Look, your ancestors survived that era – survived it with fewer advantages than you have. You’re no less than they are.”
“In a way I am.”
“What way?”
“Strength. Endurance. To survive, my ancestors had to put up with more than I ever could. Much more. You know what I mean.” (51)

Dana realizes that the difference between her situation and that of the other slaves is that they know how to survive, and they have a different sense of bounded choice – what Crossley calls the “ethic of compromise” or “situational ethics” that records both agency and victimization of the recording subject (xxi and xxii). Dana can adapt, but her limits may not be pushed beyond certain preconditioned points. In other words, Butler’s novel requires that Dana adapt because it is in this struggle that Butler can expose the situationality of slavery as well as civil rights and feminist ideals. For Dana, Rufus’s attempt to rape her is the wall of the unacceptable, the limit to her adaptation. She may be complicit in persuading Alice to a sexual relationship with Rufus, but she will not allow herself to be raped. Yet her resistance to Rufus’s attempt, by Butler’s and Dana’s definitions, is no more heroic, and possibly less heroic, than Alice’s submission. Dana finally realizes that she cannot survive as a twentieth-century woman in the nineteenth. Even with the vehicle of time travel providing passage between times, revolt is not free of serious, dangerous consequences.

**Time travel and the limits of adaptation**

Dana has been forced to capitulate to biological destiny (blackness, femaleness, the logic of time travel and the grandfather paradox) for so long and to such an extent that Rufus’s death is a necessary relief of narrative and the moment of climax that unites slave narrative resistance with time travel and its grandfather paradox. Dana protects her existence by killing Rufus, when protecting him no longer serves that function. As Butler
herself comments wryly, “I’ve been told again and again that my characters aren’t ‘nice.’ I don’t doubt it. People who must violate their long-held beliefs are rarely pleasant. I don’t write about heroes; I write about people who survive and sometimes prevail” (qtd. in Paulin 165). Ultimately, despite any nurturing efforts, Dana draws the line and refuses to let Rufus cross it.

He lay with his head on my shoulder, his left arm around me, his right hand still holding my hand, and slowly, I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this. So easy, in spite of all my talk. But it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into the flesh I had saved so many times. So hard to kill... (259-60; original ellipsis)

Dana has tried everything: running away, cutting her own wrists, freezing when threatened, succumbing to beatings; by and large, she has been frightened of the possible repercussions of her actions and has avoided fighting back. “I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once” (260). Dana realizes that her own identity does not permit her to make the same choices and compromises that a nineteenth-century slave might make, that these will break her. And Dana does regain power and control as a killer (even in self-defense). She regains her place in time, her life and home and husband in California. She regains freedom, physical and emotional, though she has not escaped unharmed. Most relieving, in terms of the novel’s conflict, she is no longer locked into a vicious and violent cycle of dependence. She gains more by killing Rufus than she ever did by saving him. She puts forward her own inviolable definition of black womanhood by finally dismissing any effort to nurture. Salvaggio has commented that Butler’s other female heroines “are heroines not because they conquer the world, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny” (81).
Put another way, let us consider the possibility that Dana doesn’t come back to save Rufus: she comes back to finish him off. If Dana were correct, in that her primary goal were to ensure Hagar’s birth, then there would be no reason for her to return after Hagar’s birth. Her mission has never been to protect Rufus, it has always been to control his life, and this includes eliminating him when necessary. Lisa Long reads Rufus’ attempted rape of Dana as a metonym for the past’s intrusions, and states that when Dana kills Rufus, “she literally kills her past” (470). This murder may be read as abandonment or lessening of the past; though it demonstrates a lack, as indicated near the beginning of this chapter, it does not indicate a forgetting. The loss of arm manifests this lack, not only by testifying to the history of violent struggle, but also by showing that history can dis-arm the present.

**Speculative fiction’s critique of the slave narrative**

Time travel in the novel is the most visible location for the collision of speculative fiction with slave narratives. Dana’s time travel is deliberately and transparently unexplained. It simply is. Nevertheless, its duration can be interpreted: “her stay in the alternative time is stretched as she lives out an imposed remembrance of things past” in these historical sections of the book (Crossley x). The aging is also open to interpretations. Rufus and the other residents of the plantation believe that Dana’s appearances grow more supernaturally mysterious as she seems not to age. Alternatively, the cyclical repetitions and her experience of vertigo are characteristic of SF’s time travel (Jakiel and Levinthal 137). She undergoes a number of typical symptoms, such as nausea at terror of the void, of loss of will and chaos, of emptiness, isolation, infinitude, separation, and/or absence (13, 14, 19, 38, 43, 112-113). Sometimes the pain is caused
by the actual time travel, sometimes by the pain of the violence that pushes Dana to fear her death and therefore to return to 1976. Mitchell argues that in this novel the time travel is “an inexplicable vehicle to assist [Butler] in presenting the inexplicable institution of slavery” (62). Likewise, Crossley admits that “[a]n irresistible psychohistorical force, not a feat of engineering, motivates Butler’s plot” (x), and suggests that the hidden time machine may be “the vehicle that looms behind every American slave narrative, the grim death-ship of the Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors” (xi). In other words, the disorienting nausea and fears of her journeys owe as much to slave narratives as they do to SF, and serve as another important junction of the two.

The means of time travel may be uncertain, but Butler’s choice of Dana and Rufus as time traveler and trigger is not random. Dana has chosen a white male, Kevin, to be her “kindred,” and therefore faces the implications of that choice, as Kubitschek observes: “time traveling repeatedly interrupts the unpacking of boxes that represent Dana’s and Kevin’s personal pasts and integrity ....This sequence suggests that, before they can meld their possessions, much less their beings, into a coherent relationship, they must confront larger issues, the heritages of both races and both genders” (28). Whereas Dana and some readers seek out affiliations within gender and race communities, for instance looking for parallels between Dana and Alice Greenwood or her mother, the novel’s interest in crossing apparent racial boundaries is indicated by the selection of Rufus as Dana’s unlikely pied piper, calling her through time. Rufus reaches her partly because she has recently committed to an interracial relationship, much as he is destined
to one with Alice. The difference lies in how the relationships play out amid disorienting scenes and estranging conditions.

A strong sense of estrangement accompanying the logic of slave narrative and speculative fiction is highlighted in the structural bookends of prologue and epilogue that frame Dana’s narrative. The novel begins with Dana’s confused pain and her meeting with Kevin in the hospital. “I lost an arm on my last trip home” is the opening line of the prologue (9). She begins her narrative, not by drawing attention to her own development and freedom, but by drawing attention to her maiming, the problematic of “home,” and the distance at the time of narration from the events she describes. “[T]his rearrangement of scenes a posteriori, as well as the sense of immediacy in the reporting of events, foregrounds the protagonist’s storytelling qualities and the constructedness of her narrative” (Levecq 541). “Home” is ambiguous, and could mean either the house in present-day California or the plantation in antebellum Maryland. Later, readers realize in horror that the new and unfamiliar “home” in the present is as responsible as past violence for Dana’s injury, as her arm merges entirely with the wall designed to shelter her, in a bizarre example of transfiguration and mutation typical of SF. “Home” fails to protect, and may cause injury, and is thus a richly problematic concept in this novel, as it is in SF and slave narratives. This conundrum is expressed in Dana’s attitude toward the past South, too: “I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house [the Weylin plantation], feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home” (190). Words such as “monster” and “alien” have special resonance in the work of a science-fiction writer. Here, “alien” refers to a site that can be
mistaken for the familiar, but is precisely the unfamiliar, the uncanny. In *Kindred*, there is a partial restoration at the end of the story of the familiar world in California, but even that is marked and made strange by Dana’s experiences of the past. As with most slave narratives, the fact the narrative exists provides preliminary notification that the narrator, however wounded and vulnerable, escapes slavery. But by beginning in a disoriented post-traumatic state of disfigurement (a state that will be uncovered during the novel’s course), Butler dislodges her narrator and reader from the secure, familiar and protected space of “home.” In SF, this process by which the familiar becomes unfamiliar is called *estrangement*. Dana has not only lost an arm: “And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone” (9). From the outset, Dana is an archetype of the lack at the centre of slave narratives – the lack of family, the lack of security, the lack of certainty, the lack of love, the lack of mobility, the lack of choice, the lack of education. Note her feelings of loss, alienation, and guilt as “sole survivor,” in her two situations: she is alienated as a 1976 black women held in slavery in the nineteenth century; and as a nineteenth-century enslaved black woman in 1976. Her isolation is evident especially in the epilogue after she returns to Maryland in 1976 and discovers the break up of the community of slaves upon Rufus’s death. Dana’s narrative disrupts the limits of genre, bringing slavery to face the present, and taking the present to the slave.

The bald opening to slave narratives – “I was born” – is generally followed by geographical but not temporal location. The inability to fix one’s self in time becomes an object lesson in the denial of human individuality under slavery. Dana’s statement of
birth is embedded in her narrative, in the context of a suspicious slave owner’s
examination of her:

“How old are you?” he asked.
“Twenty-six, sir.”
“You say that like you’re sure.”
“Yes, sir. I am.”
“What year were you born?”
“Seventeen ninety-three.” I had figured that out days ago thinking that it wasn’t a part of my personal history I should hesitate over if someone asked. . . .

As I spoke, though, I realized that here, a person might hesitate over his birthdate simply because he didn’t know it. Sarah [another slave] didn’t know hers. (90)

Slaves can be taken out of precise time, as Dana is seized by time travel. Where
narratives supplied a precise location and approximate age, Dana provides a precise age
and inaccurate location, substituting New York for California. This reversal of slave
narrative conventions supports the disturbance and substitutions of the time/space
continuum in *Kindred*. The narrative of *Kindred* is a slave narrative, by its own inner
logic, and Dana is a fugitive slave, fugitive through time if not space.

Another of time travel’s effects is that the rapid unexpectedness of Dana’s
movements between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries throws the privations of
slavery into sharp relief against twentieth-century middle-class American comforts. For
example, this slave narrative, like many others, describes the food, housing, work, and
medical treatment of slaves. Rather than the slave narrative’s pseudo-objective
reportage, which is often separated from the action of the narrative proper, Dana’s
disclosures of conditions are integrated with her activities, and demonstrate tensions in
the book. Dana notes that the food of slaves is unappetizing corn meal mush; even
“better food” is simply “[s]omeone else’s leftovers” (73), which is “poorly preserved ill-
cooked food” (75). When Kevin shows his concern for Dana’s sleeping arrangements in
the Weylin house servant quarters, she compares her situation to that of other slaves:

“I’m not being treated any worse than any other house servant, Kevin, and I’m doing
better than the field hands. Their pallets are on the ground. Their cabins don’t even have
floors, and most of them are full of fleas” (83). Later, when Kevin thoughtfully
comments on the absence of visible abuses, saying “this place isn’t what I would have
imagined. No overseer. No more work than the people can manage,” Dana interrupts:

“...no decent housing,” I cut in. “Dirt floors to sleep on, food so inadequate
they’d all be sick if they didn’t keep gardens in what’s supposed to be their leisure
time and steal from the cookhouse when Sarah lets them. And no rights and the
possibility of being mistreated or sold away from their families for any reason –
or no reason. Kevin, you don’t have to beat people to treat them brutally.” (100;
original ellipsis)

Dana continues to compare and contrast her situation with that of the other slaves, and, in
so doing, to expose the day-to-day conditions of slavery. Dana, an unseasoned initiate,
gives a nightmarish firsthand account of how she is repeatedly abused and beaten by a
white overseer while trying to perform the physically demanding work. The account is
particularly disorienting as it comes so soon on the heels of details about Dana’s career as
a writer. Even less physically stressful events, such as the corn-husking party, reveal
details about slave life in such a way as to further develop Dana’s character, carve new
dimensions of her relationship with Rufus, and connect Dana’s experiences with those of
historically-situated slaves. In this way, Dana’s discomforts are made historically
realistic, typical or representative of the experiences of other slaves. Moreover, through
SF’s juxtapositions, these discomforts are made immediate and denaturalized, so that the
privations of this existence are clearly shown, “felt” by the reader. Butler’s emphasis on
the material world that surrounds her protagonist is echoed below in the privileging of
experience over representation.
The slave narrative’s critique of speculative fiction

Butler’s novel not only uses speculative fiction to critique the conventions of slave narratives, but also deploys the slave narrative to turn the conventions of speculative fiction back on its own assumptions and rhetorical tropes. She reinvigorates its master-slave dialectic by giving it a historical referent, and in so doing subverts the white masculinist assumptions and paradigms of hard-agenda science fiction. Much SF is explicitly or implicitly engaged with issues of slavery and freedom, possession and liberation, but these issues have been divorced from the material scale and meaning of historical slavery. In his useful anatomy of science fiction, *Alien Encounters*, Mark Rose elaborates on a number of instances of the master-slave narrative. For example, texts can “turn upon a transposition of the ‘natural’ relationship between man and machine: man becomes the slave, the machine the master” (153). Rose goes on to assert that “[l]ogically, the master-slave relationship reaches its most extreme form in the relationship between god and man, and [science fiction] abounds in stories that portray machines as divinities” (153; see also 165, 167). Moreover, stories about artificial life (i.e. robots, cyborgs, androids, artificial intelligence) also “tend to revolve around some form of master-slave antimony” (157). Likewise, in an echo of proto-feminists who wholeheartedly adopted the rhetoric of slavery without adopting the slave’s cause, Maureen Barr employs the term “slavery” loosely in describing a sexual relationship between humans where race is not implicated (109). Rose and Barr use the terms of the master-slave dialectic to heighten the tensions in SF, but drain it of the historical context from which it derives its power. Slavery is divested of much of its human, racialized content; and SF projects the human tendency to enslave and/or to be enslaved onto
nonhumans. Another way in which SF’s racial and gendered dimensions can be diluted is through imposing a “universal” interpretation of a story of contact as a metaphor for any human contact (see Rose 81). Thus critics otherwise sensitive to power, class, and gender imbalances can work to evacuate the terms of slavery of specific racial and historical content.

In other words, speculative fiction (like so much of popular culture) has found a way to write and perpetuate assumptions about slavery without reference to its specific racial aspect. SF borrows the terms of the debate and exploits the widespread interest in slavery as an extreme condition, but denies the particular conditions of slavery. “Science fiction as genre has seldom evoked an authentic African setting or employed non-stereotypical blacks as characters” (Govan, “Connections” 83). As Butler has said, writers of SF “are lying to themselves when they portray the world as all white or the universe as all white” (“Sci-Fi Visions” 33).\footnote{Butler, “Sci-Fi Visions” 33} Butler tackles the “insidious problem” with speculative fiction, that it “has always been nearly all white, just as until recently, it’s been nearly all male” (qtd. in Salvaggio 78). To Butler, “science fiction [is] a way of disseminating the fact that we don’t have only one kind of people, namely white males, in this world” (Butler, “Sci-Fi Visions” 33); or, as Frances Smith Foster notes, “Octavia Butler consciously chose to introduce the isms of race and sex into the genre” (“Octavia Butler” 38).

While much speculative fiction – and criticism of the genre – is heavily invested in this master-slave dynamic, and uses the specific terms associated with that dynamic, very little SF is written with reference to the most obvious historical example of slavery in Western civilization: the slavery of Africans and their descendants in the New World.
Butler’s novel suggests that if SF is defined by its formulation of free will vs. 
determinism (articulated as freedom vs. slavery), then it ought to consider the 
phenomenon of American slavery. Authors do not actually have to reach too far into the 
possibilities of human experience and consciousness to find incidents of mastery and 
slavery; they are, in fact, available in the history surrounding them. Butler reanimates the 
discussion of mastery and slavery in her chosen genre by setting parts of *Kindred* (and 
*Wild Seed*) within the experiences of slaves in Africa and the New World. She 
reconnects abstracted notions of human freedom and subjection to a tangible and concrete 
past of racial (and gendered) exploitation. For example, Butler’s capacity to interrogate 
and critique the master/slave trope as a universal becomes immediately visible in her 
response to Larry McCaffery’s comment, “In one way or another, all your books seem to 
explore different forms of slavery or domination” (56). She answers, “I know some 
people think that, but I don’t agree, although this may depend on what we mean by 
’slavery,’” and she defines “slavery” precisely as “humans being treated as if they were 
possessions” (57), claiming that only *Wild Seed* and *Kindred* treat slavery explicitly. Her 
correction of the interviewer signals a prickly sensitivity to the too-ready move from the 
particular and historical to the universal. As Mitchell has already observed with respect 
to this interview, Butler “realizes how naïve definitions as well as explanations of slavery 
can be” (44). *Kindred*’s subject matter exposes what is generally obscured and/or clichéd 
in the genre. Butler turns SF inside out, using the pattern of its inner dialectic to revise 
human past and to predict present and future. In short, she makes the latent content of SF 
manifest.
Butler tacitly suggests that readers might learn more about humanity where the visible conflicts are between humans, and that the past might be a valuable resource for SF. There is no need for artificial intelligence and life forms to explore and illuminate the dynamics of power struggle within the master/slave binary. There is no need to talk in remote terms about aliens, and the alienation process, when at our fingertips we have the experience of millions of African people who were forcibly alienated from family, economy, society, religion, language.

For Rose, SF texts “are composed within the semantic space created by the opposition of human versus nonhuman. Indeed, this opposition defines the semantic space, the field of interest, within which science fiction as a genre characteristically operates” (31-32). The nonhuman can emerge from space, machine, time, or monster. Butler has written that “Science fiction has long treated people who might or might not exist – extraterrestrials” but “did nothing to make us think about here-at-home human variation – women, blacks, Indians, Asians, Hispanics, etc.” (qtd. in Govan, “Connections” 87). In Butler’s novel, the debate inherent to the slave narrative over the humanity of the slave dictates that the role of alien shifts in the novel. Dana is threatened by the attempts of others to fix her status as a nonhuman. Slaveholders routinely pressed slaves (literally and figuratively) into the nonhuman realm, denying their human status, insisting in some cases that people of African descent belonged to a separate species, in others that they were comparable to cattle or horses. Slave narratives bitterly incorporate a certain amount of this confusion; witness Douglass’s catalogue at a valuation of property: “There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow
examination” (Narrative 35; for similar phrasings in Kindred see 26-27, 202, 211-212, 236, 246). As a black woman in 1976, Dana is alien to her own world, because women generally may be aliens within a patriarchal society, as Barr argues (31), and blacks are also aliens in racist hegemonic American culture. Crossley observes that SF can challenge the utter otherness of aliens: “The alien … has been not a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien, sometimes more specifically, the black woman” (xvi). If the concept of “alienation” originally derives from Marx’s description of the capitalist industry’s hostility to the inherent relationship between a worker and his labor, then the obvious example is the distance between slaves and their frequently unpaid, unchosen labor.26 The slavery of the black female protagonist pits her humanity against the perception and rhetoric of alien inhumanity. Thus the slave narrative of a black woman is an appropriate vehicle for speculative fiction, as well as a rebuke to patriarchal American culture, which has created its own monstrous threat through practices of exclusion.

Though time and time travel itself seem to threaten Dana, and though in some respects she is alien or “other” as an antagonist to slavery, her most threatening antagonists appear to be the Weylin family, who are human but inhumane, closer to ordinary human life than Dana and the reader would like to think. In the subtlest way possible, simply through the substitution of slaveholders for the conventional alien or monster antagonists of SF, Butler strips the slave owners of their full humanity. Slavery is a conundrum: it is wholly human, ordinary, and wholly inhuman, inhumane, extraordinary. Dana observes that Tom Weylin “wasn’t the monster he could have been with the power he held over his slaves. He wasn’t a monster at all. Just an ordinary man
who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper” (134).

Tom Weylin’s ordinary qualities make him representative of the attitudes of the average Southerner. Though Dana refuses to put him in the role of monster, he sets the stage for her more damning indictment of the larger slaveholding society as “monstrous.” Though all of the Weylins and their overseers audition for the role of prime antagonist through acts of calculated cruelty, the role of antagonist is carefully reserved for slavery itself. Dana’s treatment incorporates a reversal of proslavery rhetoric, as gradually Rufus comes to fully inhabit this role of inhumane and nonhuman antagonist, representing all that Dana cannot control, including the plantation overseer, Tom and Margaret Weylin, and time travel itself. In the climactic scene, Rufus is reduced to the status of animal, as Dana describes his scream: “I had never heard anyone scream that way – an animal sound” (260).

In this inversion, whites – who by and large control definitions of humanity in the novel – are by the end of it structurally and figuratively situated in the role of the Other.

Because Butler’s novel describes a woman who, despite twentieth-century education and personal strength of will, cannot ensure her own safety nor obtain her own freedom, let alone achieve a public position to influence others, Dana’s story is also a corrective to conservative SF, which typically invests in public figures and gives priority to catastrophic and apocalyptic large-scale, universal events. For instance, Hacker and Chamberlain’s bibliography of alternate histories shows a predilection in speculative fiction for exploring different outcomes to wars. From this perspective, which does not articulate the ways in which private individuals participate in culture and history, nor explore their potential to alter history or their subjection to the flood of larger historical
forces, Dana would be a footnote in a history book. Her actions affect only herself and those in the immediate circle around her, testifying to the insignificance of the black woman slave within the nineteenth-century US. Yet Dana’s identity as black female slave/black female writer replicates the position of the slave narrator, and demands that SF and the slave narrative include her individual experiences. To borrow from Virginia Woolf, Dana is “Nat Turner’s sister,” more frequently vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse and subject to emotional blackmail than are black male slaves.29

Not only is there a false flaw in hegemonic history, but also there is a weakness in the middle-class, highly-literate brand of feminism Dana espouses, which seems to have sacrificed ability for knowledge. For all of Dana’s familiarity with the history of her family, the history of slavery, and slave narratives, and for all her use of twentieth-century resources (such as an atlas), she learns that she is less capable of survival than her fellow slaves are, and less capable than the usual protagonists of SF, who are often given opportunities to display resourcefulness, sometimes using objects from other time periods (Jakiel and Levinthal 134). Dana eases pain with aspirin tablets but, unlike Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee, who gains influence and prestige at King Arthur’s court through his understanding of natural history and mechanics, Dana is ill-equipped to impress. “Instead of performing technological marvels before a crowd, Dana quietly helps individuals. She realizes that despite her superior knowledge, her ability to cope with slavery is not superior to that of her ancestors” (Barr 49). Butler appears to be writing against a narrative imperative perpetuating the myth of male knowledge and inventiveness. Moreover, Butler projects Dana’s present impotence, her struggles as a writer and her limited knowledge and education, into a situation wherein her impotence is
undisguised by the rhetoric of feminism or civil rights. Her desires for change are
untenable in this environment. The passage in which Dana acknowledges that she is
“less” than her ancestors (51) is key to undermining the sense of progress over time as
meaning more, stronger, better. The fallacies of progress endemic to hegemonic history
and mainstream feminism are exposed.

Hypertextual allusions to Robinson Crusoe clarify Dana’s position in relation to
the resourcefulness valued by slave narratives as well as SF. Readers may recall that
Defoe’s narrative lists, celebrates, and worries over the quality and quantity of salvaged
materials from the wrecked vessel. In Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl, Linda Brent, a
fugitive slave hiding in her grandmother’s small attic space, finds a gimlet: “I was as
rejoiced as Robinson Crusoe could have been at finding such a treasure. It put a lucky
thought into my head. I said to myself, ‘Now I will have some light. Now I will see my
children’” (438). Jacobs refers to Defoe’s character to put her narrative in a lineage of
realistic adventure stories, and to put Linda Brent’s acts in a tradition of practical
resourcefulness and spiritual strength, firmly establishing her literary antecedents and
credentials. Both the slave narrative and the adventure story take old techniques and
tools to adapt to new circumstances. Suggestively, the first book Dana reads to Rufus is
Robinson Crusoe. She has reservations: “I had read it when I was little, and I could
remember not really liking it, but not quite being able to put it down. Crusoe had, after
all, been on a slave-trading voyage when he was shipwrecked” (87). On reading it again,
she is more engaged, but only imaginatively, not practically: “As a kind of castaway
myself, I was happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else’s trouble” (87).
Slowly, Dana learns Brent’s and Crusoe’s more immediate suspicion and their
resourcefulness; she learns not to trust Rufus, not to turn over her belongings to him, and she kills Rufus with the knife she brought with her. Thus allusion to a hypertext highlights a common resourcefulness of SF and slave narrative and allows readers to measure Dana’s distance from that quality.

Dana’s isolated ineffectuality reframes the dystopian element of speculative fiction within the slave narrative. Within her historically accurate and well-researched history of slavery, Butler produces a dystopia – a tale of dislocation and reprogramming within an environment inimical to one’s existence – that is different from the urban nightmares of most SF. This dystopia is atypical in that it is not set in a city; many of the most dystopian elements of Butler’s novel – the isolation and lack of resources among other drawbacks – originate in its rural setting in Maryland. The rural in Butler is opposed to the natural order, not equivalent to it. Butler shows that future urban sites full of technological marvels are not the only sources of disorienting horror in SF, and they may even set up a set of false dichotomies in which the rural and the past are mistaken for nature, the urban and future for artifice. By invoking SF through time travel, but inserting the rural past on which the slave economy is based, Butler structurally opposes this simplification and its attendant nostalgic view of early American life.

**Time travel and the fallacy of education**

To go further, dystopian fictions also often involve the exorcism or deprogramming of the protagonist’s mind; the analogue from slave narratives is the emphasis on self-education and literacy. As in Harriet Jacobs’ narrative, which describes her attempts to teach literacy to a devout black man named Uncle Fred and to secure education for her children, Dana’s is not a struggle to achieve literacy for herself but a struggle to educate
others. Dana thinks that she can de- or re-program Rufus, alter the messages he receives from the slaveholding South. Initially, Dana wants to “take out some insurance” against her return to the past by conditioning Rufus to accept blacks and treat them well. She plans with Kevin to “keep him from growing up into a red-haired version of his father” (81). But the system of slaveholding is too strong. “Despite Dana’s education, maturity, logic, and assertive approach, she cannot change Rufus’s socially engineered position as her superior” (Paulin 182). Dana’s self-appointed task shifts from socializing Rufus appropriately to teaching other slaves. In the process of attempting to program others to reject the oppression of slavery, Dana is the one who gets reprogrammed so that she begins to think differently and make different choices. This reprogramming mimics the alteration in character of slave owners such as Sophia Auld (as recorded by Frederick Douglass in the Narrative 31): in the nineteenth century, slavery was routinely condemned for its brutalizing effects on both slaveholders and slaves. Anyone who might seem to be outside of the totalizing system becomes absorbed and altered by it, as in dystopian narrative. This society may not be urban, mechanical or technologically advanced, but it is certainly alienating, totalitarian, and nightmarish, in its inhumane treatment of human beings, and in its treatment of slaves as nonhuman. Dana’s recognition of this implicitly widens the focus of dystopia while her inability to act reinforces its impact.

Dana’s cognitive map is in fact more restricted and less informed than that of nineteenth-century black women like Alice or Harriet Tubman. Tom Weylin points it out bluntly during the recapture of Dana after her attempted escape: “Educated nigger don’t
mean smart nigger, do it?” (175). At the time, Dana refuses to reply, but later she comprehends his meaning:

What had Weylin said? That educated didn’t mean smart. He had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. Yet in a few years an illiterate runaway named Harriet Tubman would make nineteen trips into this country and lead three hundred fugitives to freedom. What had I done wrong? (177)

Similarly, when Alice and Nigel run away, they manage to avoid capture for many more days than Dana. The study of history has not prepared Dana adequately to survive, still less to adapt. Butler implies that feminism and civil rights movements, with their supposedly improved education and career choices for women and blacks, are not equivalent to better chances of survival.

Moreover, her education actually disables Dana, since it puts distance between herself and the black community that might otherwise find it easier to support her. Nigel voices the opinion of the slaves who do not accept her, when he asks her “Why you try to talk like white folks?… More like white folks than some white folks” (74). When Nigel and Carrie ask her to teach them to read and write, she obliges, but has to hide the fact from their slave parents, who are afraid of the risks to their children, and from the slave owners. As Dana muses with bitter humor, “If anything went wrong, there would be blacks to take their revenge on me when the whites finished” (106). Finally, Alice does take out some of her anger at her enslavement on Dana, voicing the suspicions of the larger community when she tries to wound Dana with insults bound up in her education: “Doctor-nigger…. Think you know so much. Reading nigger. White nigger! Why didn’t you know enough to let me die?” (160). In this respect, the ambivalence toward literacy is the return of the folk that the focus on slave narratives’ literacy may
have suppressed, according to Hazel Carby; the folk challenges the primacy of slave narratives (137-38). Rather than cementing bonds with other members of the slave community, Dana’s education is a vulnerability as it falsely encourages her to rely on the written word.

As a college-educated twentieth-century writer, Dana is bound to literacy, which is more often a liability than aid in her day-to-day existence in antebellum Maryland. Thus the immediate juxtapositions of time travel enable a critique of the slave narrative’s emphasis on literacy. Sometimes her reading informs her, as when it helps her to identify the patrollers who raid the Greenwood home, or when it prescribes a mien appropriate to slaves, but it cannot assist or protect her. For all Dana’s books about slavery have told her about the conditions of slavery, they fail to provide a pattern for free papers (48) or maps to follow to freedom. Dana’s experiences expose the woeful inadequacy of history to communicate experience in a meaningful way. Butler repeatedly underscores the space between Dana’s reading and the experience; instead of preparing Dana, the reading of slavery has exaggerated and perpetuated myths of plantation life where slave children always eat out of troughs (72) and the slave owners always inhabit white mansions, as in Gone With the Wind (see 67, 116). This is not to say that Kindred suggests that we should not publish or read slave narratives, or we should not try to understand the histories of slavery; nevertheless, the limits of history are sharply delineated by the metahistorical dimensions of the novel. Dana’s study of the past has not prepared her for the experience of slavery, and her time travel highlights the separation. Crossley agrees that literacy has limits: “Books had not taught her why so many slaves accepted their condition, nor had books defined the kind of bravery possible in the powerless and
humiliating situation of being owned and in the face of the ruthless means by which owners protected their investments” (xx). At worst, literacy misleads her and drives a wedge between Dana and her potential allies. At best, literacy provides information, allowing her to articulate her problem, but giving no solutions or practical knowledge, and therefore heightening her discomfort under slavery: “I almost wish I hadn’t read about it” (48), she asserts, wishing that she could be unaware of the potential repercussions and able to make choices independently.\(^34\) Her wish echoes Douglass’s lament: after learning to read while yet a slave, he comments, “I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy” (Narrative 33). Though this is a passing thought of Douglass’s, it is an enduring vulnerability in Dana’s life as a slave.

Where Douglass’s literacy leads him to dissatisfaction with slavery and eventually to freedom, it leads Dana to complacency and acceptance of slavery. Dana’s ability to read aloud gives her the opportunity to “program” Rufus when he breaks his leg. Later, though, it is a liability in her negotiations with Rufus. When he demands that she burn a map of Maryland she’s brought with her, in exchange for his sending a letter from her to Kevin, she thinks, “I wanted to do things the easy way if I could. I wanted to stay here and let a letter go to Boston and bring Kevin back to me” (143). The letter, and the literacy and education it symbolizes, is to do the work in Dana’s place. But it is “the easy way,” a weakness, not a strength, as she discovers Alice exposes Rufus’s deliberate deception and his failure to forward the letter. Rather like Harriet Jacobs’s literacy, discovered by a master who then proceeded to torment her with sexually suggestive notes, Dana’s literacy contributes to exploitation.
Similarly, Dana’s ability to write depends on her frustrated attempts to communicate her struggles and sufferings as a slave: “Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away” (116). Much later, after Alice’s funeral, Dana admits “Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn’t say them, couldn’t sort out my feelings about them, couldn’t keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for no one else” (252). At times, Dana’s struggle with the past is connected with her struggle to write, and as long as she is bound to the past she will not be able to write, nor share what she writes. *Kindred* is a novel about a writer coming up against material she cannot write – an anti-work-in-progress novel. In this respect of the cessation of communication across boundaries, the novel echoes the withering of creative and communicative urges in Rudi, Irina, and the narrator of Phillips’ *Higher Ground*.

Nevertheless, the fact that her narrative exists under these terms implicitly reassures readers that she is able to survive, escape slavery, and narrate her story. Ultimately, Dana succeeds as an observer and a recorder. Dana’s narrative is implicitly her statement that she is qualified to make an authoritative analysis of slavery. Her narrative performs her activism. While *Kindred* indicates the limits of individual and social progress, and the brutal impact of history, it contains this victory that is her story itself, a story that has preserved an imaginative space for the power of representation of the real while demonstrating the relative constructiveness of history and narrative. This story, however, is a rare, small victory. Like the story in Morrison’s *Beloved*, this too is not a story to be passed on: “If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn’t think we were so sane,” Dana and Kevin remind one another (264).
Representing the body in pain: the erosion of representation

Butler’s particular version of generic métissage affects the status of the representation of the real. This is only to be expected when realism and verisimilitude are the priority of slave narratives, and fantasy the stock in trade of speculative fiction. Butler’s first person narrative replicates and signifies on the self-authenticating structures of slave narratives. The first-person narrative style, ostensibly transparent and functional, describes physical pain and suffering through the apprehension of all the senses, and contributes to the realistic quality of the SF novel. The imaginative time travel of speculative fiction allows Butler to juxtapose events that conventional historical approaches would usually consider separate. The combination of speculative fiction and slave narrative results in the partial dismantling of representation’s distance. “[I]n order to bring her readers closer to the immediacy of the horror we have just seen, Butler moves Dana rapidly from witnessing slavery to experiencing it, from watching, to feeling, to testifying what life was like for a Black woman, even if she were nominally free” (Govan, “Homage to Tradition” 90).

Dana keeps proposing, accepting, rejecting parallels between the two lives she leads. I will first describe her ambivalence with reference to specific comparisons, and then to more complex linguistic ones. One early attempt to capture the magnitude of her situation occurs as she tries to make her way at night from the Weylin house to the Greenwood home: “The possibility of meeting a white adult here frightened me, more than the possibility of street violence ever had at home” (33). As her own, and the reader’s, guide to this strangely familiar land, Dana begins with the working vocabulary of the experiences of the twentieth-century woman. Because she is not a historical
persona but a contemporary creation, Dana is able to invite the reader to insert their own experiences of fear and paranoia and to multiply them in order to understand her own. Another parallel she draws also helps the reader to extrapolate her experiences from what they know of current news events. As Barr comments, Dana “realizes that the brutality she encounters in the past is clearly a part of her own world” (50):

The news switched to a story about South Africa – blacks rioting there and dying wholesale in battles with police over the policies of the white supremacist government.

I turned off the radio and tried to cook the meal in peace. South African whites had always struck me as people who would have been happier living in the nineteenth century, or the eighteenth. In fact, they were living in the past as far as their race relations went. They lived in ease and comfort supported by huge numbers of blacks whom they kept in poverty and held in contempt. Tom Weylin would have felt right at home. (196)

Though Dana’s language expresses a progressive view of history and human rights and shows that in part she subscribes to the fallacious notion that race relations get better over time, it is also deeply indicative of her growing inability to “escape” from the past into 1976. When she is in the present day, she cannot stop making connections with the past.

Early in the novel, she is struck more by differences; later, she notes startling similarities, to the point where she feels that if Tom Weylin could travel through time and space to present day South Africa he (unlike Dana in her time travel) would feel “right at home.”

Dana, like Rudi in Higher Ground, also compares slavery to the more recent atrocities of the Holocaust, though her recognition of symmetrical racism is more reluctant than his. While trying to prepare for her next trip to the past by reading books about slavery, she writes,

I got caught up in one of Kevin’s World War II books – a book of excerpts from the recollections of concentration camp survivors. Stories of beatings, starvation, filth, disease, torture, every possible degradation. As though the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly
two hundred...Like the Nazis, ante bellum whites had known quite a bit about
torture – quite a bit more than I ever wanted to learn. (117)

The myth of progress in 1976 is debunked as racism becomes more lethal in the twentieth
century. Dana’s use of simile – “as though”, “like” – is more tentative than Rudi’s rough
metaphoric substitution of “Nazi” for “prison guard.” Still, as Rudi would perhaps tell
her, there is less distance between slavery and Dana’s world than she has previously
thought.

Parallels between times are also symbolic and linguistic. Dana has used the
experience of slavery rather casually and callously as a comparison to her own work,
referring to a temp agency for which she works as a “slave market.” As identified by
Olney, a slave auction or slave market often appears in slave narratives; this particular
slave market is however wholly figurative or analogical. This figurative language is
highly colored by the context of Dana’s contacts with slavery and with the sales of
human beings wrenched away from family members:

I was working out of a casual labor agency – we regulars called it a slave market.
Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn’t have
cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered. They
always had more job hunters than jobs anyway. If you wanted them to think
about using you, you went to their office around six in the morning, signed in, and
sat down to wait....

You sat and sat until the dispatcher either sent you out on a job or sent you
home. Home meant no money. Put another potato in the oven. Or in
desperation, sell some blood at one of the store fronts down the street from the
agency. I had only done that once.

Getting sent out meant the minimum wage – minus Uncle Sam’s share –
for as many hours as you were needed....It was nearly always mindless work, and
as far as most employers were concerned, it was done by mindless people.
Nonpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks. (52)

Several connections between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries are made here. First,

Dana’s support of her life and career by the extreme measure of selling her own blood
foreshadows her sacrifice of her own blood—her wrist-cutting, her loss of arm, as well as the killing of her kindred, Rufus—in the 1800s. Second, this early comparison connects Dana’s work in a “slave market” with her work as a slave; it connects the nineteenth- and twentieth-century worlds of capitalist ownership and unpaid or underpaid exploited labor. Dana’s references to the corporate attitude toward “nonpeople” are parallel to her documentation of attempts to strip slaves of their humanity. However, Dana’s experiences as a slave quickly underscore the weakness of such comparisons, just as specificity of the unnamed slave’s and Irina’s stories deflates Rudi’s comparisons in *Higher Ground*. Dana’s experiences allow her to better assess the situation in the casual labor agency as different from slavery. The effects and attitudes may be similar, but the structures of oppression through labor control have changed. Reading about slavery, knowing about slavery from a distance, enables one to make analogies; experiencing slavery, knowing about slavery intimately, makes one wary of analogies. For Rushdy, the questions the novel raises by juxtaposing past with present attest to a “curious dialectic in which the past is prologue to the present and yet also a foreign entity, in which the slave experience is both formative of and yet indisputably distant from contemporary society” (*Remembering Generations* 125). *Kindred*’s cautious approach to comparison recalls the troubled dynamic of representation through analogy of Phillips’s *Higher Ground*, although where that novel uses different individuals’ polyphonic discourses in different times to point to the potentialities and limits of analogies, Butler’s uses a single individual’s dialogic voice to do so.

Dana’s time travel may exhaust and damage her, but it rejuvenates language, reinfuses it with the menacing meanings of literal truth. In this novel, Hortense Spillers’
desire for both a discursive and a literal slavery reaches its most sustained and fraught position. More self-aware realization of the failure of rhetorical exaggeration occurs when Tom Weylin threatens Dana, shouting at her, “I’ll flay you alive!”

My aunt used to say things like that to me when I was little and did something to annoy her – “Girl, I’m going to skin you alive!” And she’d get my uncle’s belt and use it on me. But it had never occurred to me that anyone could make such a threat and mean it literally as Weylin meant it now. I turned and left him before he could see that my courage had vanished… He could do anything he wanted to to me, and I had no enforceable rights. None at all. (202)

The original words of the aunt – “I’m going to skin you alive!” – contain no idle threat, as she follows up the action with corporal punishment. Still, the words and action pale in comparison with Weylin’s words and the action he threatens; Dana realizes that slavery and its apparatus of cruelty have the deadly power to keep language literal. Literal language use has a reinvested value and violence in this novel. Figurative language use is only possible in safety, and then it may be inappropriate to those who have been subject to the literal force on which its power relies.

Butler includes representational claims to expertise and authority and provides commentary on them through Dana’s interactions with the discourse of history. Like fugitive slave narrators before her, Dana testifies to the brutality, violence, and other abuses endemic to slavery. She records a series of brutal initiations into slavery with painstaking verisimilitude, “deliberate violence,” to paraphrase Weinkauf (234). Dana’s blunt language realistically expresses the viewpoint of one who has recently suffered unsettling trauma, as, after she’s been threatened by a man holding a rifle, she tells Kevin she no longer feels “secure” in their new home: “Maybe I’m just like a victim of robbery or rape or something – a victim who survives, but who doesn’t feel safe any more…. I don’t have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don’t feel safe any more” (17).
Time travel and violence are conflated in “the thing that happened.” Dana continues, “as real as the whole episode was, it’s beginning to recede from me somehow. It’s becoming like something I saw on television or read about – like something I got second hand” (17). As Levecq writes, “the novel stages a hovering between event and memory, raw encounter and retelling, reality and textuality” (527). Butler suggests that reliving and accessing the past, whether through time travel or writing autobiography, can be as painful as the original experience, but that the act of telling means that the experience is translated into representation, which does become less harmful.

The distance between violence and its representations grows increasingly vast in the novel as Dana’s initiation to the violence of slavery is graphically extended in the mutual confrontation of speculative fiction and slave narrative. Time travel dramatizes the collision between the literal and representation in slave narratives. During her second trip, Dana searches for assistance from her black ancestors, but in so doing exposes herself to the threats of violence offered to free blacks. She happens upon a terrible scene in which the father of her ancestor Alice Greenwood is whipped by patrollers:

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn’t they stop!

“Please, Master,” the man begged. “For Godsake, Master, please…”

I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit.

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. (36, original ellipsis)
The gestures to strip away this scene’s status as another constructed representation of violence are artificial. Dana’s use of the attribute “literally” rather heavy-handedly emphasizes the reality of the scene she describes. The fact that violence as represented in film and television (and not violence in books) is discounted is a strong distraction from the fact that what we are reading is indeed another representation of violence. However, the realism is nonetheless compelling, partly because of its indebtedness to slave narrative models and partly because of its evocation of many senses. Time travel results in a scene that closely echoes similar initiatory scenes of violence as seen by children and later reported by them in slave narratives (as in Douglass’ *Narrative* 13-16); the deliberate comparison between Dana and the watching child, Alice, underlines Dana’s role as such a disregarded child observer. In scenes such as these, Levecq observes, “the concurrent shock to Dana (and to the reader) comes precisely from the sudden materialization of what until now had been known exclusively through texts” (530). Simultaneously, asyndeton in parallel constructions such as “hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip” and “jerking, convulsing, straining” breathlessly and mercilessly piles on details of the action observed. Moreover, the addition of the senses of smell and feeling to the more limited senses of sight and sound gives the impression of a range of senses and distinguishes this scene from filmic representations of violence. In fact, the event overloads Dana’s senses so intensely that she limits one of her senses (shutting her eyes) to reduce the amount of sensory information she’s receiving. Her physical response is important, as the painful feelings of nausea evoke the undeniable reality of the body – both Dana’s body and the body of the man she’s sympathizing with. Nausea teaches the reader (lest they be inured to it) to see violence as part of an unnatural
order against which the body rebels. As established in my introduction, feeling of the
body is the most intimate reality, and it is in touch and feeling that contact between the
body and the outside world is established. Because Dana feels, we connect to the
sufferer’s feelings and are viscerally convinced of their existence.

Actual events are represented as more convincing and powerful than
representations, and the tension between reality and representation goes unresolved. Lisa
A. Long’s article emphasizes the ways in which this novel insists on the reality of
history’s presence, beyond the act of remembering, through the pain experienced by its
protagonist, and it articulates a paradox by which the body’s pain cannot be sufficiently
translated for others “and to assert that it is, is to do a violence to the past,” while one can
only learn history through the violation of one’s body (478). To paraphrase Long, Butler
admits that history cannot be communicated at the same time she works to “make it a
palpable reality” for Dana and her positivist readers (480). The novel’s premise of time
travel into slavery highlights Dana’s unpreparedness for the precise conditions that
shaped the very texts that have shaped Dana’s perceptions of slavery. Butler further
tangles this thread of representations of violence when Dana shows Kevin in 1976 how
she would protect herself with the knife. She claims, “I’ve been watching the violence of
this time go by on the screen long enough to have picked up a few things” (48). Though
introduced to slavery’s brutality and rehearsing her self-defense, Dana still sees herself in
terms of being a twentieth-century spectator. Yet she also reveals her anxiety: “most of
the people around Rufus know more about real violence than the screenwriters of today
will ever know” (48). Again, representations of violence are limited to the screen. The
written word is a privileged representation, as Rufus compliments Dana on her reading to
him, “It’s almost like being there watching everything happen” (87). Levecq’s argument is helpful in reconciling two different values on representation, as she argues that, “[f]ar from locking her novel into an unresolved contradiction, Butler provides a convincing historical account which is not made to seem arbitrary by the novel’s self-reflexive dimension. *Kindred* stands out precisely because of this reinstatement of the cognitive value of fiction about history alongside its criticism of representation” (528). In Levecq’s view, the novel “installs markers that profoundly question the process of discovering or recovery history” while it also “depicts that process at great lengths and in a realistic fashion, elaborately redeeming it from relativism, and consequently creating the space for the development of a speculative philosophy of history” (526).

Dana’s belief in the safety of representation continues to erode as her time travel continues to bring her into rough juxtaposition with the early 1800s. As she is forced to give up the illusion of representation, her twentieth-century responses to trauma become vivid. Tom Weylin summons all the slaves “to watch Weylin punish a field hand for the crime of answering back” (91). Forced to watch Weylin “making an example of the man,” Dana wants to leave but cannot. “The whipping served its purpose as far as I was concerned. It scared me, made me wonder how long it would be before I made a mistake that would give someone reason to whip me. Or had I already made that mistake?” (92). The emphasis shifts away from the first incident’s violation of the safety of representation and the connection between sufferer and sympathizer, and moves toward Dana’s growing realization that she is not uninvolved but caught up in the action. She is more numbed to violence directed toward others, more aware of the potential of violence directed toward herself. Clearly, by the time of the whipping she receives at the end of
“The Fall,” Dana is no longer exempt from violence. Instead of the first scene’s violence, communicated in parallel inevitable constructions impressed with the rapidity of sensations, this violence and its effects seem to occur in slow motion. The imagery she initially uses to describe her whipping – hot irons, searing, burning – is taken verbatim from the details of actual slave narratives.35 However, the breakdown of her language into short, staccato, fragmented, repetitive sentences, her ignorance of anything other than the traumatic pain, and her stomach’s involuntary revulsion to it – “I vomited. And I vomited again” (107) – subscribe more to twentieth century versions of traumatic realism than to slave narratives. Despite these changes, Dana still filters her experience through pictorial representation, contemplating her injuries in a bathtub in 1976: “My back was cut up pretty badly too from what I could feel. I had seen old photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves. I could remember the scars, thick and ugly” (113).36 Even here, in the connection between photograph and the literal, suffering body, Butler recharges slave narratives with immediacy and feeling.

Uncomfortable doublings: interracial relations and exploitation

Time travel brings Dana and Kevin into contact with other selves – adaptations they make, roles they must play, and foil characters such as Alice and Rufus. On several occasions, Kevin’s equivocal position demonstrates twentieth-century and nineteenth-century doublings. Paulin argues that time travel permits Butler to generate multiple identities, particularly for Dana and Kevin (180). When Dana returns to California after fighting off the patroller, she is still fighting:

Pain dragged me back to consciousness. At first, it was all I was aware of; every part of my body hurt. Then I saw a blurred face above me – the face of a man – and I panicked.
I scrambled away, kicking him, clawing the hands that reached out for me, trying to bite, lunging up toward his eyes....

“Dana!”
I froze. My name? No patroller would know that.

“Dana, look at me for Godsake!”
Kevin! It was Kevin’s voice! I stared upward, managed to focus on him clearly at last. I was at home. I was lying on my own bed, bloody and dirty, but safe. (43)

Dana’s confusion over the identity of the man she thinks is attacking her shows how her consciousness – and therefore the reader’s – has trouble distinguishing between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries. She may assure Kevin otherwise (51), but the confusion over Kevin’s identity continues in other shapes. One of the first things Dana has told him is that she will not be “a nurse, a secretary, or a teacher like my mother” (55). Yet he has asked her to type for him, and she has had to refuse (109). He persists; she notes that “[a]t home he tried to catch me in a good mood and get me to take care of his correspondence for him” (136). The anecdote makes clear that, unchecked, Kevin has a tendency to treat her as a secretary, and that this tendency to view his romantic partner as a default servant has always been unacceptable to her. Therefore, when they arrive together in antebellum Maryland and remain together by playing the roles of master and slave, she is naturally suspicious of Kevin’s ability to act the role of slave owner. By exploiting the trope of sexually coercive relationship between white master and black slave woman, they gain the freedom to spend the night together. Dana recognizes the implications: “I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner” (97). The novel’s use of SF and time travel brings women’s servitude in juxtaposition with women’s sexual slavery, and thus “makes the patriarchal structures which constrain women obvious and perceptible” (Barr xx). When Dana expresses concern over the threat to her safety, Kevin paternalistically
assures her that he can protect her, but is in fact unable to prevent Tom Weylin whipping
her. Dana seems to suspect that Kevin may pick up attitudes antagonistic to their
relationship: “A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn’t want to talk to him
about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him…. 
The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow” (77). He
expresses a desire that jars with her sense of history when he wants to “go West and
watch the building of the country” and she reminds him, “[t]hat’s where they’re doing it
to the Indians instead of the blacks!” (97). Dana feels that Kevin’s attitudes toward
people of oppressed races and/or the female gender requires vigilance; when she is not
present in a position of equality, he becomes alien as he looks at her “strangely” (97).
Dana’s initial confusion of Kevin with an antagonistic white man refracts her doubts
about his commitment to her and his understanding of the predicament of herself and
other victims of American expansionism.

Kevin is also the focus for mistaken perceptions of Dana’s interpersonal
relationships that expose the continuity between institutional enslavement and domestic
treatment of black women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To nineteenth-
century observers such as Sarah and the Weylins, Kevin and Dana’s relationship can only
be one of sexual exploitation between white male master and black female slave, since
marriage and equal partnership between white and black are nearly inconceivable. Rufus
and Sarah both ask Dana if Kevin has hit her (64, 151). In continuity with this
misunderstanding, Dana’s cousin in the twentieth century believes that Dana’s physical
injuries are the result of Kevin’s abuse (116). The sheriff’s deputies also consider Kevin
to be responsible for the mangling of Dana’s arm (9). Neither cousin nor deputy is
convincing that Kevin is not responsible. So long as Kevin is free from imprisonment, Dana and Kevin choose to let others think him an abuser rather than explain the time travel. To Dana and Kevin, hers is a fugitive slave narrative. However, to many other characters, her life bears an uncanny resemblance to that of a battered spouse. These continual misperceptions serve as chilling reminders of domestic violence and of women’s estrangement from the conventional associations with home. Slavery may not always be an appropriate analogy for the conditions of modern life; however, Butler’s insistence on the possibility of domestic violence seems to suggest that slavery and the compromises and terrors of domestic violence are comparable states, and that one may be read next to the other. As Long writes, “[w]hile the reader knows that Kevin has not beaten Dana, Butler makes clear the kinship between slavery and domestic abuse” (466). Long also points out though Kevin may not have abused Dana, Tom Weylin has, and as he is another male relation of Dana’s the abuse lies within kinship and intimacy, as does spousal abuse. The blind spot of twentieth-century American society is slightly different from the blind spot of the nineteenth century, yet there are continuities.

Dana and Kevin cannot openly acknowledge their relationship in the nineteenth century, except to Rufus; in the twentieth, the couple’s interracial relationship is marked from the onset with puerile commentary from one fellow worker, Buzz, who suggests that they write “[c]hocolate and vanilla porn” (56), and another, who says they are “the weirdest-looking couple” she has ever seen (57). More seriously, Dana’s aunt and uncle, who have cared for her since the death of both her parents, cannot accept the news of her marriage. In the rather closed domestic space of the novel, the family members’ attitudes are conveyed through reportage, in conversation between Dana and Kevin, rather than
through exposition. Dana explains that her aunt can understand, because if Dana and Kevin have children they will be “light-skinned blacks,” but her uncle feels “rejected”: “He wants me to marry someone like him – someone who looks like him. A black man” (111). Kevin’s sister, though at one time a close friend of a young black woman, “quotes clichéd bigotry,” telling Kevin that she doesn’t want to meet Dana and won’t have either of them in her house if they marry (110). A marriage that is a secret in the nineteenth century meets with considerable opposition from fellow workers and family members in the twentieth. The emphases change but the antagonistic assumptions about interracial relationships remain constant. Just as the novel brings together two genres under with an umbrella métissage that may reconcile the two but more urgently is the occasion for a bifold critique, the novel brings together two supposedly separate races in a way that may celebrate the creative potential but more urgently records the difficulties and obstacles of such interracial relationships.

Those obstacles can come from outside the relationship and from within the doubts and uncertainties held by the individuals involved, as when Dana doubts Kevin’s commitment to anti-slavery. Nearing the close of the novel, Kevin and Rufus double for each other in a way that demonstrates the distinction and overlap between centuries. In a recognition that is the converse of Dana’s mistaking Kevin for an antagonist earlier, she mistakes Rufus, now her antagonist, for Kevin, and says Kevin’s name “eagerly” (213), for Kevin signals home and comfort. The connection between Rufus and Kevin continues when Rufus asks Dana to write letters to his creditors. In response to her comment that she tries to “avoid doing jobs like this,” he tells her that Kevin has already told him she hates secretarial work (226). Both Rufus and Kevin try to put Dana’s
intellect and abilities at their own service, and try to make the relationship hinge on her acquiescence. However, as Rushdy comments with respect to the difference between Kevin and Rufus, “the social order, with its racially based access to power, is hegemonic, but not inexorable” (*Remembering* 123). Kevin is capable of learning to respect her own work, and will accept her as a writer, not a mere secretary to a writer. Unlike Kevin, Rufus cannot accept her on her own terms.

Time travel puts individuals into line: Kevin and Rufus, Dana and Alice. The relationship between Dana and Kevin is juxtaposed with the relationship between Rufus and Alice. Rufus has told Alice about the other marriage to try to convince her there is a precedent for interracial love. But the 1976 model of interracial love, difficult as it is to realize in 1976, is impossible in the 1820s. When Alice chooses Isaac as her lover, Rufus rapes her. Dana says, “I was beginning to realize that he loved the woman – to her misfortune. There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one” (124). Kevin’s love for Dana is misunderstood by others as exploitative and abusive; Rufus’s love for Alice transforms into exploitation and abuse. As Rufus’s affection turns into ugly brutality, Alice’s sympathy with and compassionate advice for Dana’s relatively untroubled love for Kevin run up against her own bleak situation of missing a husband who will never return. On occasion Alice, like Dana’s uncle, accuses Dana of rejecting her black identity, saying “You ought to be ashamed of yourself, whining and crying after some poor white trash of a man, black as you are. You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people!” (165). These instances remind us that a relationship cannot exist free from context, that context can determine the shape and destiny of a relationship. The sets of relationships are stacked
against one another and are dependent on each other to establish grounds for patterns and contrasts.

What Dana fears comes to pass: the place and time mark Kevin with a permanent scar. When Dana and Kevin finally meet again after what has been for him five years apart, she notices that “there was a jagged scar across his forehead – the remnant of what must have been a bad wound. This place, this time, hadn’t been any kinder to him than it had been to me” (184).37 Kevin is permitted to return with a healed wound, whereas Dana returns with an open one. Paulin writes that “[t]he different levels of pain, suffering, recognition, and denial that Dana and Kevin experience reinforce the inequality of damage that each of them incurs” (188); “Kevin’s wound on the head indicates that he has undergone a painful and intellectual experience whereas Dana’s wounds, her scarred head and her amputated arm, suggest that her experience was intellectual, emotional, and physical” (189). Nevertheless, there is a continuum of bodily injury, and the scar marks Kevin as a sympathetic character, one who suffers alongside Dana. Both are physically transformed as the result of moving through time. The scar and wound are authenticating reminders of the materiality of history. Pain’s legitimacy assures one of trauma’s reality.

**Speculative fiction’s probing of the wound of slavery**

To explore the use of pain in representation, it is worth revisiting the work of Elizabeth Spelman, who draws the reader’s attention to the economy of suffering, noting that pain and healing are unfairly distributed, so that oppressed minorities may do the symbolic work for their communities. In other words, Spelman demands awareness of a possible exploitation of the labor of suffering, which she expresses in an agricultural metaphor of unfair profit: “You sow the seeds, I pluck the fruits of sorrow” (172). SF’s trope of time
travel facilitates Butler’s finessing of this point. Her protagonist is not someone who
refers to the suffering of slaves in order to draw attention to her own sufferings as a black
woman in twentieth-century America. Rather, time travel permits Dana to talk about her
own sufferings as a slave and as a twentieth-century black woman. The two experiences
overlap within the suspension of disbelief occasioned by SF. Dana learns the painful
difference and distance between slavery as metaphor and slavery as experience, but she
can only learn the distance by traveling it, in time.

Time travel results in the wounds of slavery being open as late as 1976, which is a
rather different approach to the marks of suffering than that of most neo-slave narratives,
which present scars that testify to pain yet are healed over, symbolically signifying the
healing process within; for instance, witness Harker’s revaluation of Dessa’s scarred
genitals in Sherley Anne Williams’ Dessa Rose, or Paul D.’s caressing of Sethe’s
scarred back in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. To refer figuratively to the scars of slavery is a
common trope referring to the violence of slavery and its impact on the cultural,
psychological, and social climate of the present day of the writer. Tacitly, the metaphor
admits that the wounds are healed, that scars are reminders of wounds and not the
wounds themselves. There is thus something capitulatory about scars; they can be a
compromise. Alice’s scars conform to a pattern in the novel whereby scars are not
permitted to form: after she has been viciously attacked by dogs, and nearly dies, Dana
writes that “She was healing emotionally as well as physically. I had helped her to heal.
Now I had to help Rufus tear her wounds open again” (165). The physical wounds and
the emotional ones are rhetorically made indistinguishable, yet it is understood that Dana
will open up the emotional ones, not the physical ones, which will remain closed and
scarred. Dana also has experienced pain and on repeated occasions, she brings not healed wounds nor memories of wounds but open wounds into the present. In conjunction with the time travel, the primacy of bodily pain and its traces (in the shape of unhealed wounds and sometimes scars) are “strategies to obscure the distance of a traumatic history” (Long 462). A wound that is healing is no mere reminder of an injury but an injury that is remembered while it heals, that hurts while it heals. Butler’s periodic use of time travel means that the wounds of slavery literally haven’t healed over by 1976.

Dana is not merely scarred or wounded, but disfigured, made un-whole. This loss is a symbolic irony, considering that one might expect contact with and knowledge about one’s ancestors to make one whole and to enable one to write about it. As shall be further developed in the next chapter, the assumption behind the Roots phenomenon is that a person achieves genealogical and psychic completion or wholeness in working to recover the past and to comprehend the totality of life and experience at a particular time and place in human history. Dana’s loss of an arm implies that trying to uncover the family secrets of the past and getting too close to the past is dangerous, that total and complete wholeness of self is unavailable. Butler comments, “I couldn’t let her come back whole” (“An Interview” 498). To Dana as writer, her arm’s loss symbolizes a more permanent loss of control than those losses that have occurred throughout the novel. As Rushdy comments, “the discovery and acceptance of impurity does not produce certainty, liberate the memory, and give a sense of fullness to family narratives” (Remembering 106):

By showing the pain involved in recovering the past, Butler attests to a deep contradiction between seeking to recall and understand the past as a means of “possible political self-recovery,” a way to become “whole,” and the destructive
potential historical excavation harbors for the contemporary African American subject. (108)

Her story is about reconnection with the racial life, with the experiences of her ancestors and others like them, which may make her a writer, though it does not make her whole. Though scars suggest healed violence, Dana’s (and to some degree Alice’s) open wounds suggest the unresolvable traumatic rawness of contact with the past. Just as the representation of violence through visual media is debunked in the novel, the representation of pain through healed scars is exposed as a rhetorical trope.

Spelman writes that “[t]he more assuredly we present ourselves as enduring what others have experienced, the more expertise we implicitly assume as interpreters of their suffering and of their sense of appropriate responses to it” (165-66). Dana endures what the slave experienced, and therefore assumes an authoritative role as interpreter of that experience. What better way for a black woman of the twentieth century to present the experiences of slaves than for her to become one herself? What better way for a writer to bypass the slippery trope of slavery as analogy than to use time travel? The conventions of science-fiction allow Butler to appear to leap representation and valorize real experience, “stark, powerful reality” (Kindred 191). Whereas Emily, of Phillips’s novel Cambridge, attempts to embody the discourse and authority of the traveling eye to distance herself from slavery, Dana attempts to impose between herself and slavery a chronological distance that time travel makes negligible. Although Emily’s and Dana’s travels within different forms of métissage – the hypertext pastiche among other polyphonic texts and the imbricated merging of genres, respectively – bring them into pointed contact with slavery, both are ineffective against the grinding monologic
ideology of slavery. The impact of Butler’s novel can be more fully described with reference to both traditions of slave narrative and SF, which are fully integrated and inextricable, both giving context and meaning to the events of Dana’s fantastic narrative. What in fact Butler is asking us to recognize is the process by which questions and speculations and uncertainty, especially about one’s survival, are translated into a need for tacit acceptance, and the process by which the chains of acceptance for the sake of survival can be broken. If we do not appreciate that Dana’s chains are to a certain degree self-forged, then we cannot perceive the reciprocal actions needed to perpetuate slavery and to survive it. We cannot appreciate how each person under slavery occupied a position of agency in which they agreed on the terms and conditions of enslavement. It might seem extreme and counterintuitive to use contractual language to describe the situation of enslaved peoples, but Butler’s version of perceived necessity and adaptation helps us conceptualize the tremendous number of minute and magnified opportunities for oppression and subjection, repression and revolution, subversion and rebellion present in each slave and slave owner’s life at every moment. By demonstrating how a set of responses to slavery can be established, modified, and normalized in a modern individual’s perceptive experience, and by having Dana run through a variety of responses – from horror and fear to complicity to violent resistance – Butler makes all of the available responses to slavery more comprehensible. From being a somewhat tepid historical phenomenon in which slaves are critically interpreted to demonstrate exclusively their submission or their rebelliousness, slavery becomes a charged and immediate presence in modern day life, whose shape changes daily and whose contours
readers must renegotiate continually if we are to make any sense of it and its place in our present existence.
Endnotes

1 I use the term speculative fiction partly because it is more common, and it absorbs both science fiction and fantasy. The book was not originally published as science fiction and Butler herself seems to prefer “fantasy” or “historical novel” (see Interview with McCaffery 65-66, “Sci-Fi Visions” 31, and Beaulieu 119), since there is “no science” in Kindred (“An Interview” 495). Time travel is merely “quasi-scientific,” according to Mark Rose (47). And yet Dana states that “[t]ime travel was science fiction in nineteen seventy-six” (63). Admittedly, “[b]y the most conservative of definitions – those which emphasize the natural sciences, rigorously applied to fictional invention – Kindred is not science fiction” (Crossley xii). However, where conservative old-agenda sci-fi privileged the “plausibility” of sci-fi novum (technology and so forth), soft-agenda sci-fi privileges the “ethical implications and resonances” of these changes, emphasizing “problems and conditions already clearly recognized in contemporary society” (Landon 177, 176). The differing agenda of soft-agenda science fiction has gradually come to be seen as more important, leaving its own mark on style and theme: “Even more significant than the material changes are the concurrent shifts that technology produces in our systems of evaluation and judgment, our sense of inner space, and our relationship to subjective memory, desire, and sensory stimulation” (McCaffery 4). Butler then is part of an overall shift of many writers of SF, as is indicated by this novel’s inclusion as a “recent innovation” under “science fiction” in a guide to literary terms (Quinn). Moreover, Kindred is contiguous with Butler’s other, more conventionally science fictional novels (Govan, “Connections, Links, and Extended Networks” 82). For the purposes of this critique I consider this novel to be speculative fiction, and when I cite critics’ comments on “science fiction,” those comments apply equally to speculative fiction.

2 Butler’s Wild Seed also uses the historical materials of slavery, in this case to embellish and complicate its SF presentation of reproductive control and the emergence of a new race.

3 Butler has spoken about the research for this novel:
   With Kindred, I did go to Maryland and spend some time. Well, I mostly spent my time at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore and at the Maryland Historical Society. I also went to the Eastern Shore to Talbot County, to Easton actually, and just walked around, wandered the streets and probably looked fairly disreputable. I didn’t have any money at the time, so I did all my traveling by Greyhound and Trailways and I stayed at a horrible dirty little hotel….Anyway, I went down to Washington, D.C. and took a Grayline bus tour of Mount Vernon and that was as close as I could get to a plantation. Back then they had not rebuilt the slave cabins and the tour guide did not refer to slaves but to “servants” and there was all this very carefully orchestrated dancing around the fact that it had been a slave plantation. But still I could get the layout, I could actually see things, you know, the tools used, the cabins that had been used for working. (“An Interview” 496)

4 Govan uses the portmanteau term “faction”, which is “that blend of authentic verifiable historical fact and well-rendered fiction” (91), to describe Butler’s junction or link
between genres. “Faction,” indicating an interest in the junction of fact and fiction, and identifying moments when fact crosses over into fiction, shows the particulars of how Butler conveys the demands of realism into the satisfaction of direct, typical historical experience.

5 See pages 542-46 of Christine Levecq’s article, “Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (Literary) History in Octavia E. Butler’s Kindred,” for a detailed analysis of a few explicit parallels between Kindred and Douglass’s Narrative and Jacobs’s Incidents.

6 Though Kubitschek prepares a careful and frequently insightful survey of the novel, I would include her chapter on Butler in the list of didactic criticism. Often she employs the implied imperative of “must” to move from the descriptive to the prescriptive function of criticism. Furthermore, I am unconvinced that Dana is able to join the black community of slaves on the Weylin plantation, one of two stages Kubitschek describes as essential to Dana’s sense of “process” (30) in her “quest for a historically grounded understanding of self” (24).

7 Butler has given another version of this anecdote in an interview with Larry McCaffery:

In fact, Kindred grew out of something I heard when I was in college, during the mid-1960s. I was a member of a black student union, along with this guy who had been interested in black history before it became fashionable. He was considered quite knowledgeable, but his attitude about slavery was very much like the attitude I had held when I was thirteen— that is, he felt that the older generation should have rebelled. He once commented, “I wish I could kill off all these old people who have been holding us back for so long, but I can’t because I would have to start with my own parents.” This man knew a great deal more than I did about black history, but he didn’t feel it in his gut. In Kindred, I wanted to take somebody with this guy’s upbringing—he was pretty much a middle-class black—and put him in the antebellum South to see how well he stood up. But I couldn’t sustain the character. Everything about him was wrong: his body language, the way he looked at white people, even the fact that he looked at white people at all. I realized that, unless I wanted to turn Kindred into a wish-fulfillment fantasy, I simply couldn’t make the main character a male. So I developed an abused female character who was dangerous but who wasn’t perceived as being so dangerous that she would have to be killed. (65)

8 It is also a response to the attempts to purify ideology, as Ashraf Rushdy shows: So strongly marked was the desire of some in the leadership of SNCC for purity, which was understood as seamless ideological unity, that Stokely Carmichael would be applauded for saying that “we gonna off” those black people who “don’t come home,” at the same time as the Chicago Office of SNCC claimed that the way to deal with Uncle Toms was to “ostracize them and if necessary exterminate them” because those black people “do not represent us or even belong to the same black race.” (Rushdy, Remembering Generations 101)

9 She begins by describing the cookhouse as a node for social contact and information sharing among blacks: “I liked to listen to [the slaves] talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive” (94).
I took some cookhouse advice that I’d once heard Luke give to Nigel. “Don’t argue with white folks,” he had said. “Don’t tell them ‘no.’ Don’t let them see you mad. Just say ‘yes, sir.’” Then go ‘head and do what you want to do. Might have to take a whippin’ for it later on, but if you want it bad enough, the whippin’ won’t matter much.”

There were a few whip marks on Luke’s back, and I’d twice heard Tom Weylin swear to give them company. But he hadn’t. And Luke went about his business, doing pretty much as he pleased. His business was keeping the field hands in line. Called the driver, he was a kind of black overseer. And he kept this relatively high position in spite of his attitude. I decided to develop a similar attitude—though with less risk to myself, I thought. (96)

Though the plan seems to work initially, it only works when she and Kevin are mimicking the sexually exploitative relationship of white master and black female slave—for which there is space created already in the system of slavery and on the Weylin plantation. But when Dana is caught in the cookhouse reading—a violation of state law, plantation code, and his express instructions—Tom Weylin whips her. The cookhouse, supposedly free from the interference of whites, is no more sanctuary than the advice is a refuge for her independence. Luke’s approach does not work for him either: he is sold South, because, as Rufus says, “he would just go ahead and do what he wanted to no matter what Daddy said... Daddy got tired of it. New Orleans trader came through and Daddy said it would be better to sell Luke than to whip him until he ran away” (138). In this novel, even when slaves believe that they understand the rules, and think they have limited control, their owners watch over them with the goal of total submission and the power to change the rules to achieve this goal. Like Luke, Dana finds that she cannot attempt to impose her own limits on life as a slave without negative impact.

10 See Adam McKible’s and Burton Raffel’s articles and Angelyn Mitchell and Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu’s full-length studies of African-American fiction by women. One critic who praises Butler’s self-effacing and ‘caring’ writing then dismisses Kindred precisely for its use of “overly conscious” plot, language and historical documents and the attention it draws to its own means of fabrication (Raffel, n. pag.); however, the novel’s critical emergence in the 1980s and its endurance through the 1990s was in fact assured in part by these very qualities. Mitchell asserts that black women’s texts embrace and accentuate slave history, though citing few nineteenth century texts as sources. She names Dana “her own ancestral mother” and argues that she learns to “place the collective good of her family over her individual needs” (52). Similarly, Beaulieu surveys neo-slave narratives from a point of view specifically identified as female and mothering (15), and to make Kindred fit the bill labels Dana “a surrogate mother” (120) and “the mother-figure in the novel” (121). In spite of Long’s doubts about such readings of “family ties” as “troubling” (469), she also asserts that “Dana becomes the symbolic mother,” “nurturing and protecting [her] older kin and ancestors” (473). Kubitschek’s claims are more moderate: “Dana has experienced a relationship analogous to that of the slave mother/child and felt the terrible burden of socializing kin into slavery” (36). Neither Butler nor her protagonist should be projected into the role of nurturer and each should be independently appreciated for their self-conscious interrogative independence. 11

The following summarizes the novel’s emplotment:
1. The River: On June 9, 1976 (Dana’s birthday; also the day of unpacking boxes in her new house), Dana is transported into c.1812 Maryland (though she learns neither time nor place). She experiences time as a few minutes – long enough to save Rufus (aged about 5) from drowning, to give him artificial respiration, and to be threatened by his father with a gun. Kevin tells her that she has been gone only a few seconds.

2. The Fire: After a few hours on the same day of June 9, 1976, Dana is transported into 1815 Maryland when Rufus (aged 8) sets fire to his bedroom curtains. She experiences time as several hours – long enough to find her way to the Greenwood house, to meet Alice and her mother, and to be attacked by a patroller. Kevin tells her that she has been gone about three minutes.

3. The Fall: After a night of rest, at about 9 a.m. on June 10, 1976, Dana and Kevin both are transported to 1819 Maryland when Rufus, aged 12, breaks his leg in the woods. Kevin’s first verbal response to arriving in Maryland with Dana is an amusingly naïve reassurance of the reality of the world the novel attempts to establish: “It’s real!” (58). He repeats this statement when the truth of his and Dana’s California life is challenged by Rufus (62). Dana spends 8 weeks — long enough to begin teaching other slaves how to read, to get caught reading, and to be whipped by Tom Weylin. She returns without Kevin on the same day she left California, less than an hour after she’s left.

4. The Fight: After 8 days without Kevin, Dana returns to Maryland when Rufus (aged 18) is in a fight with Isaac, the husband of the girl he has raped. The year is c.1825. Dana remains in Maryland for two months, waiting for Kevin, who has been in the nineteenth century for five years, to come back from the North. When he does, Rufus threatens to shoot them both and they return to California on June 18, 1976, the same day Dana left.

5. The Storm: On June 18, 1976, Dana again travels to Maryland, where the year is now c.1831. Rufus, aged 24, is drunk and drowning in a storm. Dana spends eight months in Maryland before she causes her own return by cutting her wrists. Kevin tells her she’s been gone for three hours.

6. The Rope: Dana and Kevin readjust to 1976 for a period of 15 days. On July 4, 1976, Dana travels back to 1831, three months after her last trip; Alice has committed suicide and Rufus contemplates his own. On this trip, though it isn’t clear how long Dana remains, she is there at least a couple of weeks. When Rufus attempts to rape her and she stabs him, she returns; Kevin tells her she was gone a few minutes.

Note that each of the six numbered sections begins with a discussion of Dana and Kevin’s life in and prior to 1976. In the first section, this is contained within a few paragraphs. The first chapter of each of sections 2 through 5 is devoted to this background information. In section 6, two background chapters prolong the suspense before the climax of the book and Dana’s final return to Maryland. Every section ends with Dana’s return to 1976.

12 While a regular formula can be worked out for Dana’s time in the past, no similar formula exists for the time that passes between trips while she is in 1976. Sometimes a 1976 interim of a few hours is equivalent to several nineteenth-century years; sometimes a 1976 interim of 15 days is equivalent to only a few nineteenth-century months. The only thing that is constant is that historical time takes up less present time.
Rufus’ question about Dana’s apparent lack of aging in the nineteenth century stimulates Dana to summarize her relations with time to that point:

When I came to you at the river, it was June ninth, nineteen seventy-six for me. When I got home, it was still the same day. Kevin told me I had only been gone a few seconds.... Later, on that same day, I came to you again. You were three or four years older and busy trying to set the house afire. When I went home, Kevin told me only a few minutes had passed. The next morning, June tenth, I came to you because you’d fallen out of a tree.... Kevin and I came to you. I was here nearly two months. But when I went home, I found that I had lost only a few minutes or hours of June tenth. (135)

Dana and Kevin’s last name of Franklin is significant in this respect. First, inclusion of the word “frank” subtly asserts their claim to believability; second, and more important, the name “Franklin” evokes the defining American figure of Benjamin Franklin, whose autobiography records the impoverished runaway apprentice’s achievement of wealth and international political and scientific importance through ingenuity and diplomacy. The allusion is ironic, even antithetical: while Franklin’s make-good story helped to construct the mythology of American success in spite of adversity, the Franklin’s story, with its emphasis on individual ability limited by American society and law, deconstructs the myth; likewise, while Franklin’s life-narrative shaped the ideal “life of reason” (Spengemann 53), Dana’s defies reason and belief. Furthermore, Franklin’s name is associated with the Declaration of Independence and the ideals it expresses, since he helped to draft it. In keeping with Kindred’s anti-celebration of two hundred years of American Independence, the Franklin’s are subject to slavery that the Declaration failed to address.

When Dana’s behavior is not being overwritten as nurturing, it is normalized with the biological imperative. Elizabeth Beaulieu’s reading of Dana’s time travel as having the ultimate objective of nurturing herself is only a projection of the altruistic misreading produced by Dana’s own misguided assessment of her situation. Maureen Barr states that radical feminists in SF kill men, and womanists marry them. Barr places Dana, despite her willingness to kill men, in the camp of womanists, because she has a husband. She claims that Dana “is a woman who rescues a male, a white male’s black fairy god mother” (48) and “is a ‘mother’ to her ancestor” (50). Paulin writes that, “[i]n order for history to unfold, Dana must help Rufus survive long enough to father the child who will become Dana’s great-great-grandmother” (167). Adam McKible writes of four African-American women’s adaptations of slave narratives and their approaches to history. He summarizes this portion of Butler’s novel:

Although Dana resists her complicity with Rufus as much as possible, she must aid him in order to insure the birth of Hagar Weylin, the first inscriber of Dana’s family history. In other words, Alice’s rape and continued brutalization constitute a precondition of Dana’s existence. (n.pag.)

Such words as “must” and “precondition” establish a biological genetic imperative for Dana’s heinous actions that does not necessarily exist. That is to say, it exists only for Dana. Sandra Govan modifies Dana’s fuzzy explanation:

The reason she moves is simple — Rufus Weylin “calls” her to him whenever he gets into trouble he cannot resolve alone.... The agency which moves Dana
is never clear. She never understands how it happens. The “why” is easier. Whenever Rufus fears for his life, his subconscious mind somehow reaches out to Dana and transfers her to his setting and his time to meet his need.

(“Homage to Tradition” 88)

Govan understands that Butler wants SF, especially in this novel, to avoid the trap of technological information and speculation and to focus instead on ethical, psychological, sociological situations. She correctly identifies the gap in Butler’s novel – the gap of agency. Though Govan is skeptical of Dana’s role as “mentor” and “teacher” with few opportunities for either activity (“Homage to Tradition” 89) and though she does not attempt to fit her into a mothering or nurturing role, she does accept Dana’s logic, writing that “Dana must assist Rufus in his conquest of Alice or her personal history, her present, will be irrevocably altered” (94) – but staying more attuned than some critics to the politics of power inherent in the movement through time.

16 “Grandfather paradox” is a gendered term describing the paradox of family relations complicated by time travel. In SF that incorporates time travel, speculations about one’s ability to influence one’s own birth through tampering with the past are common. If you go back in time and kill your grandfather, when you return to the present time, you cease to exist. But if you do not exist, you are therefore unable to visit the past and kill your grandfather. “This is the kind of argument that frequently leads nonreaders of science fiction to shake their heads and decide to stick to conventional literature – whatever that is” (Jakiel and Levinthal 133). Mark Rose describes the paradox differently: finally we must acknowledge that we are constituted by time. Exactly this is implicit in the paradox in which the time traveler murders his grandfather and thereby ceases to exist. Much of the fascination of the time loop is related to the fact that it represents the point at which the spatialization of time breaks down. In such circumstances time itself as we normally conceive it disappears.... There is a further reason for the prominence of the time-travel paradox. As I suggested earlier, science fiction can be understood as mediating between spiritualistic and materialistic world views, between free will and determinism. We can note now that the paradox at the heart of the time loop is that both free will and determinism are asserted simultaneously, for here genuinely free agents are nevertheless caught in cycles of determined repetition. Through the time loop, then, science fiction can construct its characteristic activity in a particularly concise and provocative form. (108-109)

17 In this way, Butler’s version of the ethics of time travel reverses the rules generally observed, in which changes to the past are less acceptable than changes to the future: “[i]f a time traveller attempts to change history, even in the smallest way ..., he could possibly terminate his own existence, change the destiny of a nation, or even the entire world” (Jakiel 134), while it is generally more acceptable in the genre for travelers through time to “alter the future” (135).

18 There is some disagreement over Dana’s culpability in this respect: Long asserts that Dana is “complicit in Alice’s sexual slavery” (469) whereas Mitchell suggests, “Although she could be labeled an enabler, it would be more accurate to indict the real culprit – slavery” (50).

19 Thanks to student Lawanda Patterson for this suggestion.
Levecq concludes as follows: “The novel’s title then becomes an ironic commentary, not just on the actual family relationships depicted in the novel, but also on the family metaphors that infuse many discussions of the African American literary tradition” (550).

At the end of his essay, Crossley uses another vehicular metaphor for time travel: “In Kindred Octavia Butler has designed her own underground railroad between past and present whose terminus is the reawakened imagination of the reader” (xxiii).

Curiously, authenticating documents like those provided in slave narratives (testimonials from abolitionists and respected members of her community containing verification of the narrator’s reliability and respectability and instructions on how to read and interpret the narrative) are mentioned but not included in Dana’s narrative and the epilogue.

Another way of putting this is to say that the novel begins by “[exposing] the way that those who attempt to bear witness to that history [of slavery] are ostracized, pathologized, and even institutionalized” (Long 480).

British examples are cited by Moira Ferguson in Subject to Slavery, American ones by Jean Fagan Yellin in Women and Sisters.

The following observation reinforces Butler’s open challenge to conventional SF:

In a recent essay Butler exposes what has been the rule of thumb for science-fiction writers: They were (are?) told not to use “any black characters…unless those characters’ blackness was somehow essential to the plot.” The argument alleged that “the presence of blacks…changed the focus of the story – drew attention away from the intended subject.” (Govan, “Connections” 84)

See Leonard Cassuto’s book for a lengthy discussion of Marxism and slavery.

Like Dana, other slave narrators sometimes rhetorically turn the terms of the oppressive dehumanizing rhetoric against proslavery advocates, as when Harriet Jacobs repeatedly classifies slaveholders as snakes.

Their bibliography reveals a number of science-fiction pieces written after Reconstruction in which the South’s peaceful uncontested secession results in the healthy gradual abolition of slavery. Some shorter examples have titles such as “If the South had been allowed to go” or “If the South had won the war”, and there are more developed, more recent examples. Others imagine the results of certain civil war battles or the assassination attempt of Lincoln, as different – and the ensuing ripple-effects. An African-American alternative history imagines the assassination of Booker T. Washington as the start of a race war.

Remember that Butler, like many African-American writers of her generation, is also in part responding creatively to William Styron’s The Confessions of Nat Turner, published a few years previously. This novel was met with an uproar in African-American literary communities, accused of paternalism, historical inaccuracies, and cultural appropriation. Styron’s historical novel, too, though, reinvigorates slaves and slavery as proper historical subjects in a time when they were often seen as a negligible and passive historical presence; the novel takes as its subject a revolutionary black male with a significant public presence and influence over political and military policy. The Confessions of Nat Turner is still a great-man-of-history document, however revolutionary it may be in bringing great black men of history to public attention in the decade of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Turner’s influence is primarily
negative, in that he is stripped of much when he is stripped of his religious certitude and becomes an existential hero. Here we might remember some of the more stringent criticism directed toward William Styron’s Nat Turner, and how he was accused of merely restaging the racial unrest of the late 1960s on the platform of the past, and then using the accurate details of the past to defend the novel’s overall credibility.  

Thanks to student Gloria Slaney for bringing the passages in Jacobs and Butler’s novel to my attention.

At least one other fugitive slave narrator, Josiah Henson, alludes to Crusoe when noting that his masters called him “Man Friday,” as he was a handy slave boy (192). Isaac Williams’ biography of his slave mother claims that slave narratives are better reading than Crusoe’s tale. It is interesting that slave owners compared their slaves with Friday, whereas slaves and their sympathetic biographers pictured themselves in comparison with Crusoe.

Bell hooks writes that,

> From slavery to the present, education has been revered in black communities, yet it has also been suspect. Education represented a means of radical resistance but it also led to caste/class divisions between the educated and the uneducated, as it meant the learned black person could more easily adopt the values and attitudes of the oppressor” *(Talking Back* 98).

The value of literacy and education is overtly asserted by the narratives of John Quincy Adams, Juan Francisco Manzano, Chloe Spear, Josiah Henson, Solomon Northup, Leonard Black, Peter and Vina Still (Pickard), John Thompson, and Frederick Douglass, among others.

Not only is Dana’s reading a liability but also, more literally, the history book she brings with her. See 140-41, where Dana thinks about how the history book she has brought with her could be used to suppress Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman: “I had said I couldn’t do anything to change history. Yet, if history could be changed, this book in the hands of a white man – even a sympathetic white man – might be the thing to change it” (141). The implication is that this suppression would be negative, though in the case of Turner’s rebellion, which resulted in mass reprisals and newly extreme oppression throughout the South, the conclusion is debatable.

The sensation of burning under whipping was commonly known to both slaves and masters. Leonard Black described one scene of violence this way:

> My work, in the winter time, was to fetch wood from the swamp up to the house. Being without shoes or hat, and thinly clad, I used to go into the house to warm myself. When in the house for this purpose, at one time, old Mr. Bradford followed me in, and said: "If you want to be warmed, I'll warm you." He took the tongs, heated them in the fire, and branded my legs; and the scars are there to this day. I could not sit down in consequence of the wound. (9)

Similarly, Solomon Northup’s master Epps “declared that when he came out again he would warm us well” (223). Northup also says that, under the lash, “[m]y sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!” (25). Charles Ball recorded his sensations on being whipped: “The first strokes of the hickory produced a sensation that I can only liken to streams of scalding water, running along my back” (383).
Ex-slaves referred to excessive punishment often in their narratives and displayed scars on lecture circuits. Photographs of fugitive slaves were circulated in antislavery circles, evidence not so much of slaves’ fortitude and strength as of slavery’s brutality and the suffering of its victims. Like a fugitive slave lecturer who must bare his back to prove his identity as an ex-slave and do antislavery work effectively, Dana even feels compelled to display her wounds as evidence of her claims of usefulness: Rufus will not let her treat Alice’s wounds until he sees how well hers are healing. His demand makes her “[swallow] a few indignant words” (147), but she accedes to the degrading exposure. Frederick Douglass works the memory of marks on his body into a startling moment of creative self-awareness in the midst of a description of living conditions on a certain slave plantation:

This vivid juxtaposition of the relatively safe act of a fugitive slave’s writing as figured in the pen, and the jeopardy slaves face daily and nightly, as figured in the cracked feet, is significant. Though the cracks no longer exist, Douglass’s side-by-side comparison brings them into view. We can see both the cracks in Douglass’ feet, and the feet as whole, healed. Symbolically, as the pen may be laid in the cracks, the act of writing autobiography may heal the wounds of a slave’s past. But Douglass’s wounds are healed; Dana’s are not, and this difference points to a crucial difference between Butler’s version of a slave narrative and the nineteenth-century version.

Like Dana, Kevin is ill-equipped for time travel. It may be significant that he has deliberately chosen the career of writer over that of engineer (55). Twain’s Connecticut Yankee uses engineering feats and knowledge of the physical world to win over Arthur’s Court. Kevin is unable to have a significant impact on the public life of the past time in which he lives, although he does join more radical abolitionist forces.

Lisa A. Long writes that “not even the scarred bodies of the enslaved (either those who lived during antebellum times or those who time travel there) truly verify slavery. Such are merely traces, evacuated shells representing a wordless, imageless physical experience that is the core of history” according to Butler’s novel (461-62). To modify Long’s radical denial, I would argue that scars and wounds are incontrovertible evidence of the body’s pain, but not incontrovertible evidence of slavery. My own research indicates that it is possible that writers about slavery have turned to scarring because it provides corporeal symbols that are in fact, if not incontrovertible, at least less contested, than the act of rape.
Chapter 5

Including the Slave Narrative in the Family Memoir Novel:

Lawrence Hill’s *Any Known Blood*

Genre means differently according to different contexts and evolves as different practitioners adopt and challenge it. Just as a singular sense of genericity may restrict the analysis of slave narratives by ignoring their religious and fictional aspects of self-creation, this thesis illustrates that viewing the slave narrative as a single generic precursor to neo-slave narratives is insufficient to hold together historical and contemporary realities of members of the black diaspora. Other genres are needed to support plural views of plural experiences. An acute awareness of genre boundaries and the ways in which they overlap, compete, and complement one another in a single work is particularly useful in examining a text like Lawrence Hill’s genre-conscious novel, *Any Known Blood*, which structurally enfolds a slave narrative within what I define below as a family memoir novel, a subgenre of the family novel, refined and influenced by genealogical memoirs.

Brief yet entire, the fictional slave narrative comprising chapter 22 is embedded in an intergenerational novel that contains documents and other findings relating to five generations of men named Langston Cane and their families, all framed by Langston Cane V’s search for patrimony. Although Hill’s novel has attracted some critical attention, I am the first to consider *Any Known Blood* in the context of the popular family memoir: my findings suggest that such an approach can supplement topics in the novel already discussed, especially interracial relations and border-crossings. The slave narrative and the family memoir novel converse with one another. The junction of genres
in *Any Known Blood* – allows for the family memoir novel to change in an African
diasporic context, and to embody the “mixed-race” or “Zebra” family it describes (400).¹
The slave narrative proves to be the heart of the novel in several ways: its emotional tone
of reconciliation with one’s shame and one’s family is a model for Langston Cane V’s
personal quest; though occurring late in the novel, it nonetheless retroactively provides a
model for not only Langston’s becoming but also his writing practices as central to that
effort; finally, the archival romance leading up to the climax of document’s discovery
makes it the literary nexus of the search for origins, a search that may be nostalgic (as is
true of postslavery novels according to Handley [4]) but is unsentimental, and is not
exclusive but multiple.² Moreover, the story in chapter 22 is largely based on the story of
one Osborne Anderson, a historical black Canadian-American man who joined John
Brown’s rebellion, so Hill’s reliance on and alterations of hypotexts can be compared
with those of the other authors in this study. The jump in sympathy from Langston Cane
V to Cane I occurring in chapter 22 is one in which Cane V invites the reader to partake,
and is one which Hill, in giving over the narrative to Cane I, also propels us toward. This
moment spins together the lengthy threads of distant historical events and the oft-tangled
intrigenerational and intergenerational conflicts into one skein. The relationships that
Hill’s versions of family memoir novel and slave narrative have with hypotexts and
generic conventions, the family memoir novel as it provides a nest for the slave narrative,
and the latter as separate yet dependent offspring of the former, are the foci of my
discussion.
Black Canadian routes

Hill’s reliance on Canadian settings and hypotexts allows for the family memoir to be shaped in a specifically black Canadian context that differs significantly from the African-American realms of meaning. A distinctly Canadian angle on slavery, migration, civil rights and other important historical periods defamiliarizes the African-American family saga and the slave narrative, making them new and vitally important to contemporary ideas about race, postslavery literature, and Canada. This reader finds connections between the novel’s establishment and transgression of genre boundaries and its anxiety over racial and national boundaries within and between individuals. The national boundaries to which the novel draws attention are thematic as well as critical. That is to say, just as the characters’ blackness adjusts with movements across the US/Canada border, so too do critical studies of blackness alter with movements across this border from African-American to African-Canadian literature and culture. One recurring task of the current interpretation is to draw attention to its Canadian qualities, and thereby suggest ways in which the novel’s genre boundaries might be affected by its thematic transgressions of racial and national boundaries. Thus, as this project continues in a journey toward my own home, I have tried to include examples with a Canadian valence and highlight peculiarly Canadian issues at various points throughout this chapter.3

The slave narrative of chapter 22 was written by Hill, and can be termed an autographic ad hoc hypotext (Genette 52) for the novel entire. In other words, Langston Cane I’s letter was written by the same author as the rest of the text, and is a contrived original text “in order to make the second version” – that is to say, the rest of the story of
*Any Known Blood* – “possible” (Genette 52). I argue that chapter 22 is in effect an “analeptic or backward continuation” of the novel, to a “more satisfactory starting point” (Genette 177) than Langston Cane V’s racial confusion outlined in the first few pages of the novel. This hypotext is one that the novel itself creates and contains. This demonstrative pseudo-hypertextuality performs the generic mingling of slave narrative and family memoir novel at a manifest level. In other words, the novel gravitates toward a particular slave narrative, just as African-American family memoir novels spiral around the slave narrative genre.

While Cane I’s slave narrative has a silent relationship with genre, Cane V’s text (the novel proper) is genre-conscious, aware of the interplay of genres as it includes documents of varying nonfiction genres. Hill’s genre-conscious pastiche differs greatly from Phillips’ approach in *Cambridge or Higher Ground*, which put contrasting genres side by side without specific reference to hypotexts, but is closer to Butler’s novel which comments on its integration of science fiction with slave narrative by self-consciously referring to hypotexts the author has relied upon for information about slavery. Furthermore, like Butler, Hill puts a serious transformative distance between the hypotexts and his novel, and he is less precisely imitative of his models’ discourses than is Phillips. Hill creates a slave narrative that is an exceptional one, as I will outline below.

This family memoir novel takes shape around the slave narrative, like all hypertexts, “born ... in the manner of pearls that can take shape only around a foreign body” (Genette 382). The family memoir novel provides context for the slave narrative and extends the significance of the slave narrative outward, making it relevant to the
present day. Again, like Butler, Hill is more interested than Phillips in understanding the contemporary importance of the slave narrative and in juxtaposing its historical lessons to contemporary situations and attitudes. As the African-American family memoir novel emerges under the influence of slave autobiographies, so does this particular black Canadian family memoir novel accrue around an invented slave narrative, though many changes occur to the slave narrative and the family memoir novel in their move north of the border. The moment of the discovery and reading of the narrative is a disclosure not only of the family's shame and silences, of the power of literature to communicate and meditate on the self, or of a model for Langston Cane V, but it is also, crucially, a disclosure of the strong influence of genre influencing African-Canadian literature.

At first, Any Known Blood might appear to participate in a broader tendency of black Canada to construct black America as the origin of true politicized, racial identity, or as what George Elliott Clarke calls a “Mecca of true ‘blackness’” (Odysseys 4; original emphasis), because the novel’s contemporary protagonist begins his journey of self-awareness with a journey south to Baltimore, Maryland, and this journey climaxes in the discovery in Harpers Ferry of a fugitive slave narrative written by Langston Cane I. According to this logic of model (American) blackness, Langston Cane V would access a core African-North American identity, and refresh his own soul, simply through his encounters with American inhabitants and history. Seductive notions obscuring the realities of American blackness mean that “for African Canadians, African America signifies resistance, vitality, joy, ‘nation,’ community, grace, art, pride, clout, spirituality, and soul” (Clarke 39; original emphases). Similarly pointing toward a myth of origins is genealogy. What is written of Roots can be said of Any Known Blood: “the whole plot
structure is traced along a genealogical line” (Moore, “Routes” 14). This model of
“single root-sources or origins that are held to be at ‘core’ of the later development”
(Moore, “Routes” 11) elides many other ancestors that contribute to one’s genetic
makeup. In other words, “the farther back one can trace a single ancestor, the less and
less that ancestor represents you, except – and this is a significant point – by a process of
retroactive and selective affiliation” (Moore, “Routes” 15). In the case of Langston Cane
V, Langston Cane I is merely one of sixteen great-great-grandparents. Thus the novel
gestures toward selectively nostalgic national and genealogical construction of origins.

Any Known Blood may certainly record the influence of African-American history
and genealogy on the Cane family, but Hill underscores the diversity and plurality of
Canadian blackness by pointing out the perils of African-Canadian identity and by
providing constant reminders of Canadian “home.” Comic interaction between Langston
Cane V and a young Baltimorean named Derek satirically illustrates an African-
American attempt to interpret and elide the specificities of black Canadian identity:
Derek tells Langston that “I’ve got to assume that [you’re black], since you’ve been at
Bethel [an African-American church] and up on Pennsylvania. I’ll assume you’ve
accepted the burden of blackness,” and he cuts off Langston when the latter tries to
explain the differences between Canada and Baltimore (243). Hill deftly illustrates that
“[t]o be ‘Black’ and Canadian in that [American] setting [is] to suffer the erasure of
Canadian as a legitimate expression of black identity” (Clarke, Odysseys 5). Black
Canadian conditions of life do differ from those among African-Americans: “the specific
constraints of black Canadian life – its heterogeneity, the scant population, its perpetual
marginalization within white majority discourses – in a word, its African-Canadianité –
means [sic] that the powerful African-American influence upon it must itself be
adjusted,” according to George Elliott Clarke (49). Siemerling also claims that the novel
“turns in quite different directions” than discovery of a single black mythical ancestor in
the US; while he cites evidence of the novel’s being “packed with both actual and
imagined aspects of Black Canadian history” (38)⁴, I note that the narrator’s research in
Baltimore is interrupted by a trip home to Oakville made necessary by the disappearance
of his father; similarly, the process of tracing black Canadian identity to African-America
is interrupted by the narrator’s and Mill’s (among other characters’) allegiances to a
Canadian family and home.

The protagonist Langston Cane V may discover the source of his family’s
ambivalence in a single document written by a single ancestor, but the lateness of this
discovery, and its paratextual structural independence remind readers that Cane V’s
process of identity reformulation depends on many interactions in several nations with
strangers, family, lovers, and friends, and on the stories of several ancestors. Because of
the complex temporal construction of the novel, the slave narrative only functions in
retrospect as a beginning, as a hypotext to the family memoir novel. The slave narrative
is thus no single origin; the family novel it nests in supplies plurality. Moreover, the
main precursor for the fugitive slave narrative is a black Canadian’s – Osborne
Anderson’s – memoir. Instead of a version of black America as origin, the journey to
America appears to provide a distant and improved perspective on Canadian blackness,
thus making African-Canadiannité the emphasis.

With its rejection of the script of American or African model blackness, therefore,
the novel in its individual, racial, geographical, and national variety can be said to proffer
a version of Clarke’s formulation of African-Canadianité. This notion depends on multiple dimensions of individual identity or “polyconsciousness,” as extrapolated by Clarke from Du Bois’s famous concept of “double consciousness”: “We are divided severally; we are not just ‘black’ and Canadian, but also adherents to a region, speakers of an ‘official’ language (either English or French), disciples of heterogeneous faiths, and related to a particular ethnicity (or ‘national’ group), all of which shape our identities” (Odysseys 40). The confusion and partly resolved racial anxiety at the heart of Hill’s “Zebra” essay that Clarke cites as evidence of the ambivalence inherent to African-Canadianité (Odysseys 42), is a confusion which is also evident at the outset of Any Known Blood, as can be seen from the narrator’s multiple cross-identifications as a member of various criticized ethnicities and races. In terms of national and geographical locations in Hill’s novel, neither Africa (Cameroon or Mali), nor America (Baltimore or Harpers Ferry), nor Canada (Toronto or Oakville) is any one of them a precise and singular origin site; these are all geographic locations that are part of the African diaspora, but they coexist in contemporary networks. Though Africa is certainly less immediately present than the US and Canada, no part of the diaspora is left behind in a tribal or idealized past, but instead all parts map the present with their overlapping burdens of history. The US and Canada are present simultaneously in Hill’s structure of fluent movement. Neither is past nor lost; both exist in the changing, challenging imagination.

Canadianité is a continuing search rooted in Canadian existence, or more precisely the sustained interrogation of this existence, “a condition that involves a constant self-questioning of the grounds of identity” (Clarke 48). Such self-questioning
is a motivating impetus behind the novel’s journeys, and clearly a continuing part of
Cane V’s identity. The novel’s emphasis on Cane’s career self-sabotage and
reconstruction also inclines, as is the tendency of African-Canadianité, to illustrate
internal rather than external violence, highlighting individual isolation (Clarke 56). The
novel contains scenes of racial violence – notably an Oakville branch of the Ku Klux
Klan attacks the Cane family house – but these are toned down⁵, and the overall structure
of the individual’s search for self is not motivated by or patterned on a desire to escape
racial violence (as it is, for instance, in Richard Wright’s Black Boy). To adopt David
Chioni Moore’s terms, this Canadian family memoir novel traces routes, not roots; in
other words, the novel circulates at the roundabout of boundary crossings, without
worrying overmuch about fixing a site of origin or arrival at a destination. The routes of
some family members may be found in slavery, but the slave narrative is only one of
various routes to self-expression and understanding. The novel describes meetings at the
crossroads of one man’s journey of self-knowledge that re-enact and pre-enact moments
of his family members’ journeys.

The novel and thus this study identify and participate in several provocative areas
of African-Canadian studies, such as: the critique of multicultural fictions (fictions that
enable some pictures of blacks to thrive and fictions that suppress others); the study of
cultural relations between the US and Canada; and the consideration of how cultural
information alters in the process of this and other border crossings. By demonstrating
important differences between American and Canadian contexts, I can also address the
energetic and unexpected connections between slave narrative and family memoir in the
form of the neo-slave narrative of Hill’s novel. The novel’s complex reworkings of many
border crossings between the US and Canada interrupt hegemonic notions of these countries. In this novel, the crossings-over of genre are imbricated also with the crossroads of racial identification. In short, generic expectations may fuel and foil broader cultural expectations.

**Family novel and slave narrative**

A definition of the developed subgenre of the family memoir novel is first necessary to conceptualize the larger framework within which the slave narrative occurs. *Any Known Blood* is a novel containing traces of *Bildungsroman* (Cuder-Domínguez 57), *poeoumenon* or work-in-progress novel⁶, family memoir, autobiography and other genres but can most accurately be thought of as “a family novel or family saga,” which is how Hill himself conceives of the “big, sprawling, touching, loving family story” (Telephone interview). Hill’s notion of the sprawling “family saga” (a term also used by one reviewer, Bethune S5) is most inclusive of the multiple dimensions of the novel as a story of origins. Yet “family saga,” though inclusive, is not precise enough a term, and does not alert the reader to the growing importance of the memoir impulse in African-American and black Canadian contexts. Leaning as it does on nonfictional family memoirs, Hill’s family novel contains distinctively autobiographical elements and the historiographic story of research and the figure of researcher as protagonist. I will first outline the dimensions of the novel corresponding to family novel, and then explain how the African-American memoir interacts with this genre.

In African-American and African-Canadian historical and contemporary contexts, family stories such as novels and memoirs mean differently than in Euro-American texts. For instance, African-American autobiographies demonstrated that the patterns, values,
and structures of Euro-American genres, such as captivity narrative (in the 1600s and 1700s) and autobiography and Bildungsroman (in the 1800s), could not hold under the pressures of slavery and racism. There are several suggestive points of symmetry and correspondence between family novels and slave narratives that inflect our perceptions of both genres. The “great age of the modern family,” as one critic observing family novels points out (Boyers 3), is the nineteenth century, when both slave narratives and family novels came into prominence, though the former changed under historical pressures (as discussed in my introduction) and the latter under early twentieth-century interest in family relations “as a function of individual psychology” (Boyers 8). One can see these forms united in a contemporary novel like Dionne Brand’s At the Full and Change of the Moon, which records (in both narrative and genealogical table) the dispersal and decline of family connections from the time of the suicide of a rebellious West Indian slave onward. Slavery had crucial repercussions for families; the family novel for members of the African diaspora therefore often includes reference to slavery.

Yi-ling Ru argues that family novels share several marked features, many of which intersect with slave narrative characteristics in Any Known Blood: the first is the realistic treatment of “a family’s evolution through several generations” (2). Thus historical verisimilitude, inclusion of family documents, and “meticulous” psychological characterization (Ru 10) are typical of Hill’s realistic novel. Realism in African-American and African-Canadian writing also corresponds to the stringent requirements for verifiability and credibility in slave narratives. The second feature of family novels is the re-creation of family rites within “familial and communal contexts” (Ru 2). Most slave narratives demonstrate reliance on a black community and (sometimes secretive)
shared rituals, such as churchgoing, singing, learning, and so forth. Border-crossing and active membership in church communities – the “elaborate recreation of traditional community life” (Ru 12) – are repeated motifs for this novel’s family and inclusive community; furthermore, storytelling through oral or written forms is a significant ritual, significant as much for the tales it withholds (which threaten family cohesion) as for the ones it tells: “Forgetfulness of the past would lead the family to chaos and confusion” (Ru 17-18), as it does in Ann-Marie MacDonald’s family novel, Fall On Your Knees. Shame threatens the Cane family through willed forgetfulness.

Third, the “peculiar narrative form [that] is woven vertically along the chronological order through time and horizontally among the family relationships” is characteristic of the family novel (Ru 2). Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children provides a strong instance of vertical and horizontal relations. Slave narratives also tend to structure events according to a simple chronological order, but horizontal structure between family members threatened with division, and/or between slaves and masters, gives such narratives syncretic cohesion. In Any Known Blood, horizontal and vertical narrative structures coexist. Multiple fraught “horizontal” family conflicts (such as that between Millicent and her brother Langston Cane IV) define each generation of the family; strained intergenerational relations (such as the conflict between Rose’s mother and Langston Cane III, or that between the two living Langston Canes) are also structural elements. “Vertical” chronology highlights dates and events of national importance: characters participate in the raid on Harpers Ferry, the American Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the Civil Rights movement. “The Cane dynasty is thus placed squarely in the centre of momentous events for black North Americans and especially in
the midst of key episodes of the histories of the United States and Canada” (Cudер-Dominguez 60). The family is given synchronous breadth as well as diachronic endurance.

Finally, family novels focus ambivalently “on the decline of the family” (Ru 2). The paradoxical, “underlying assumption in the family novel is that families must somehow find a way to preserve themselves” (Boyers 5). This ambivalence has repercussions for the protagonist’s character: “[T]he protagonist’s personality exemplifies family traits, while his or her evolution (a process of self-discovery) brings about the key changes in the family” (Ru 173). Families “[provide] at once a testing ground” of individual independence and “a refuge” for them (Boyers 6), hence the strong connections between the family novel and the Bildungsroman (novel of individual development and self-discovery), as in Charles Dickens’ Bleak House. Such ambivalent decline and revolution are also vividly enacted by Rushdie’s The Moor’s Last Sigh, which tracks the family descent (as inheritance and as decline in fortunes) with the assistance of a genealogical table. This tangle of ambivalence, in which individual ability is charted against family decline and family preservation, applies equally to slave narratives, because in frequently recording painful division of family members, they testify to the enforced decline of the family in slave owners’ denial of primary social and emotive functions of the family. Yet the underlying assumption of slave narratives is that the slave must find a way to preserve him- or herself and to gain independence. The decline of the African-American family is less a reflection of contemporary urban realities than it is indicative of external oppression. Slave narratives and African-American memoir practice record family decline as unacceptable. Readers can see this in
the extraordinary efforts to join other family members, or in contemporary instances of people tracing and contacting family members lost through slavery, migration, passing, or other external causes. For instance, in the early 1800s, Solomon Bayley bought himself, and—with the advice of “some friends, white and coloured, rich and poor” (29), the influence of his wife’s mistress and her daughter, and the assistance of wealthy white men—managed to forestall the sale of his wife and son and buy them himself (25-32). Thomas Cooper, denounced as a fugitive slave in Philadelphia, was “torn from the bosom of his wife and children” in a scene “well calculated to awaken feelings of sympathy and tenderness” according to his biographer Isaac Hopper (10), and, when he escaped from custody, chose to remain nearby and then leave together with his family. Young Moses Roper repeatedly ran away in order to find his mother and siblings. As historian James Walvin records, “the slaves managed to maintain their families in the teeth of the periodic convulsions which shook the fabric of their lives” (205). In African-American tradition, protagonists find themselves as they attempt to preserve their families against external threats of dissolution.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the novel studied here—and the fugitive slave narrative it contains—both reflect ambivalence toward family. Hill’s “larger than life” (Ru 47) father figures—especially Cane IV—paradoxically escalate the decline of the family through their authoritarian strength and through their voicing “all of the traditional family values” (Ru 32). The novel uncovers the motivations and maneuvers for protective family members’ editing of “royal screw-ups”—what we might call with tongue in cheek, black sheep—in the family tree until they more closely resemble “royal blood” (428), in the process providing a falsely elevated standard of achievement and
principle that later generations find impossible to meet. As Siemerling notes, Langston Cane V’s “interest in expanding his freedom of self-definition and self-identification seems particularly motivated...by the constraining expectations of his domineering father” (34). Eventually, the protagonist, who is following not an overtly political path of trying to change things but rather a personal path to do “the right thing” (56), either discovers or imagines moral lapses in each generation of the Langston Canes, uncovering what his father calls “the politics of shame. Shame in one’s family and in one’s community” (361). Gradually, as the weakness and strength of each Langston Cane emerges, and the forceful steamrolling imperative power of each father figure diminishes, Cane V finds room to define and pursue his own goals. When he finds out the worst about each family member, he learns in each case how shame can drive a person away from his or her family, responsibilities, community and future, and he must therefore face his own shame for not measuring up to the family ideal, and for his marital infidelity and the loss of an infant. The novel is a study in the power of family narratives’ omissions of shameful sins to alter lives and negatively affect familial relationships. Cane V’s penetration of the boundary between public respectability and private shameful selves, tantamount to an unmasking of the law of the black father, gives him the flexibility to claim membership in the family and responsibility for his life on his own terms. The slave narrative he discovers is also ambivalent about family, its author Langston Cane I torn between freedom from all ties and his responsibilities to his family. The slave narrative is thus a highly charged source of shame and strength that will inform the family saga for generations to come. As we can see, the family novel takes on slightly different overtones in the context of the diaspora created by slavery in the New World,
that colour Hill’s writing of *Any Known Blood*. Our understandings of slave narrative and family novel thus interpenetrate each other.

**Contemporary family memoirs**

The subterranean strata of genre in Hill’s novel include layers of family memoirs in addition to family novels. Hill’s novel thus participates in a “memoir boom” of the 1990s (Gilmore 2). In particular there is a growing body of African-American and black Canadian autobiographical family reflections whose concerns, summarized as a triumvirate of “reflection, research, and reunification” by Hill’s own father, Daniel Hill III (x), illuminate Hill’s book. Several family memoirs exemplify the currents affecting *Any Known Blood*. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice* is largely devoted to the life of its author’s mother, tracing her siblings who “passed” into the white world. *Divided to the Vein* locates the white Southern members of Scott Minerbrook’s extended family who rejected a woman’s interracial marriage in the North and the children of that marriage. *Come By Here* explores the situation of the single black mother of the author, Clarence Major. Catherine Slaney’s *Family Secrets* ties biographies of members of a prominent black Canadian family to African-Canadian history and to the author’s growing sense of racial complexity. *Somerset Homecoming*, written by Dorothy Redford and Michael D’Orso, tells of the researching and gathering together of slaves’ descendants on a Southern plantation. Like family novels, these memoirs document the ambivalent decline of the family while demonstrating that “forgetfulness of the past leads to chaos and confusion” (Ru 17-18). The author/protagonist tends to be document decline while shoring up the family against it, frequently journeying across geographical and racial boundaries in the interests of psychological wholeness. Often a memoir
performs an actual "journey to close all the loops" (Minerbrook 222): Scott Minerbrook goes south, Haizlip goes west, Redford goes rural. One only has to briefly recall travel narratives and time travel as delineated in other chapters of this study to realize the symbolic openness to other experiences and the difficulties of fitting in signified by journeys. Memoirs depend on credibility and authenticity (relying on documentation), on family rituals and codes, and relationships within and between generations, especially conflict over and resistance to changing family relations. This type of text is probably not a direct influence on Any Known Blood, but a synchronous or sympathetic development in African-American literature.\(^7\) Hence Hill's novel is symptomatic of contemporary concerns over tracing family genealogies.

Some recent African-American memoirs incorporate the painstaking tedium of research and thrilling discoveries of primary sources, in oral testimony from family members and in institutions like libraries, museums, and archives, as part of the narrative's building tension. Memoirists attempt to marry oral and written information, finding authority in balance between the two as they search archives to authenticate and substantiate oral histories, "using literary documents to undergird the oral tradition," writes Margaret Walker (How I Wrote Jubilee 18).\(^8\) This is apparent in the way Slaney uses both conversations with family members and archival research to flesh out her understanding of the choices made by her forbears. Often memoirists' versions of events illustrate omissions in official histories. The memoirs discussed here all rely on paratextual photographs and/or family trees to provide documentation and guide readers through relationships. The inclusion of a family chart and documentary photographs establishes the authoritative vantage point of one who (to adapt Hill's titular phrase)
knows blood, one who has done all the research and understands all the links so
documented. For example, Clarence Major’s study of his mother’s life includes only two
photographs: the first of his mother, the second tellingly depicting the mother sitting and
the (authoring and authoritative) son standing above.

Like some of the memoirists I cite, Hill includes a family tree to guide the reader
through the family relationships. Hill family letters and photographs are not included
within the body of the text, but occupy a liminal space on the book’s cover, just as his
family members’ characteristics and stories loosely inform those of the Cane family,
implying but not asserting the autobiographical connections between Hill and Cane (see
the credits for letters and photographs given on the novel’s copyright page). There are
opposing critical views on the role of genealogy in family memoirs and novels. One
view highlights the conservative function of family work; the other its liberatory
function. Russell Adams deconstructs the public success of the novel Roots, arguing that
it perpetuates an avoidance of intellectually rigorous questioning of slavery through the
overindulgence of emotion and a form of bourgeois nostalgia in genealogy, deflecting
challenges to history and historical practices.

The incipient movement towards multi-ethnic pluralism was converted to the
inward pursuit of intra-group biographical provenance....The genealogical
approach to the study of the past and of the structure of group relations does not
lead to a wider understanding of the social system. In the case of white
Americans, the current vogue of genealogical research is but another form of the
nostalgia diverting the energies and emotions from the unfinished work of
understanding and doing something about the recurrent surge for black liberation.
(137)

Certainly in some cases Adams is correct: the reader of Alex Haley’s Queen, for instance,
is compelled to agree. Based on events in the family of Haley’s father, Queen’s accounts
of Irish roots, idyllic antebellum life in the South, the fierce disruptions of war, race and
class, and sexual titillation read bizarrely like those in *Gone with the Wind* and feed conservatism. In “a social climate of nostalgia and social conservatism” (Adams 136), the public can remain “oblivious to the extent to which the Americas have compounded identity questions” (138).

On the other hand, certain kinds of genealogies can defy expectations, “tactically” using knowledge conjoined with memory and history of struggle (Moynagh 16). The “trope of genealogy” (Moynagh 15) is in this case “an insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault qtd. by Moynagh 16). Rinaldo Walcott’s appraisal of the work the genealogical chart does is as follows: “[it] bear[s] a trace to something beyond the nation, disturbing its boundaries and requiring that … we think beyond the notion of singularity. If community is at stake… it is a community which requires the active working out of the very category” (*Black Like Who?* 71). In short, genealogy can provide roots, or it can provide routes. Hill’s novel, transparently locating suppressed microknowledges in each generation’s shame and in its efforts to join hegemonic discourse, moves beyond singularity and renegotiates the category of community and family. The genealogical chart he provides is an index to subjugated knowledges whose long-term effects force eruptions to the surface of the protagonist’s life.

In the family memoir, the practice of research and interpretation of the past of slavery inextricably links the researcher’s sense of self to his or her family’s identity. The researcher achieves a sense of historical place and purpose, and builds a new appreciation of “home” that is contingent upon the movements of generations. Family memoirists often meet resistance to their endeavors, particularly from other family members whose comfort with the past and ability to understand is challenged. Scott
Minerbrook’s white grandmother, aunt, and step-grandmother discourage him and/or refuse to meet him; Slaney’s uncle refuses to recognize the family’s black antecedents until his death, and her mother’s cousin is likewise reluctant; Redford’s friends and family get bored with her historical obsession. Similarly, Langston Cane V’s lover, Annette, is unsympathetic to his quest, his aunt Mill tells him he’s “chasing [his] tail” (395), and his father tries to stop him from uncovering the past. The discoveries of his father’s cheating and stealing in university and his aunt’s prostitution have the most immediate impact, because they affect his relations with the closest members of the Cane family. Like the grandfather’s adultery and venereal disease, the father’s unethical acts and the aunt’s prostitution “clearly [dispute] the discourse of genealogical purity” (Handley 170), where purity is understood to be moral and/or sexual. They also uncover multiple, not single, routes to becoming individuals and belonging to family.

Memoirs may heal the individual self; by exploring distant sources of conflict, they also often attempt to resolve and if possible heal current family estrangements. For instance, noted African-American author Clarence Major’s version of his mother’s life is an attempt to reconcile with parts of her past that excluded him. Several memoirists reach out to their families’ black and white constituents. Haizlip gives insight to the ways in which passing damages those left behind, and how it can rob the descendants of those who pass. The research and writing equally have the specific objective of reunion between two elderly sisters and a larger goal of family reconciliation. Slaney comments, “I realized that the process of self-exploration in a racial and cultural context, through an historical lens, was an important step in my personal evolution” (xiv); *Family Secrets* ends with a reunion organized around a theatrical performance based on the life of the
central progenitor (186). Minerbrook begins his memoir thus: “I knew that if I was to be free I would have to embrace the others I’d come to hate; I couldn’t love myself if I hated my own flesh and blood” (9). And he concludes it thus: “[w]e had become lost to each other, and in some measure we had become lost to ourselves … This trip was about feeling whole inside myself, despite the time it had taken for me to do so” (233). Again reiterating the connection between family separation and travel, Minerbrook comments on his achievement: “I felt I had fulfilled some small part of my parents’ dream to mend the terrible wound of race, a journey they had started but could not complete” (241).

Family memoirs such as these provide compelling testimony in support of genealogical research:

For the first time in my life, I love me in a way I’ve never loved me before. For the first time in my life, I love my parents and grandparents and those before them in a way I never knew them, nor loved them before…. I have always been proud of who I am. And I have always appreciated the little part of me that I know. But now I have a new found appreciation of “from whence I have come.” And a new vision where I, and we as a people, must go. And now I know why we must go. (Blount qtd. by Redford and D’Orso 263; original emphasis)

For Cane V, this sense of connection approaches most closely when he discovers and reads the narrative of Cane I. He tells his aunt “that I felt strangely connected to Langston the First. ‘I love the fact that he didn’t fit in. I love him for his mixture of weakness and dignity’” (497). Brian Bethune has reviewed Cane I’s narrative as “an eerily familiar self-portrait that finally reconciles Cane to his family and to himself” (S5). So the slave narrative closes the search and enables Cane to work toward reuniting his nuclear and extended family (including Aberdeen, Annette, Hélène and Yoyo) and even envisioning his future children at the end of the novel. Anticipated unions and reunions are a manifestation of psychological healing and wholeness.
When these aspects of family memoir—their self-conscious identity search in the milieu of researching family genealogies and stories, their common obstacles to and opportunities for reconciliation—complement what we already know about family novels’ vertical and horizontal structures, documented family decline, the importance of ritual, and the role of the individual, and when they are fictionalized as they are in *Any Known Blood*, then the family memoir novel results.

**Houses in slave narrative and family memoir novel**

The intersection between family novel, family memoir, and slave narrative has thus far been discussed at a fairly abstract level. It may be helpful to see a more precise application of the intersection of genres in Hill’s novel; this is available in the patterning of homes and houses. The epigraph to the novel, Langston Hughes’ poem “Cross,” refers to material conditions reflecting geographical, racial and gender divisions: the wealthy white male father has died in a “fine big house” and the poor black mother has died in a “shack.” As hooks notes, the periphery is a concrete place for blacks who live “across the tracks” or “in the ghetto” (*Yearning* 145). Houses and homes are particularly important in slave narratives, where more often than not slaves’ families are denied the comfort, privacy and protection supplied by nineteenth-century bourgeois ideals of home, and where a stock piece of the narrative is the comparison of slave quarters with the homes of the white slave owners. Frederick Douglass compares the two in Chapters II and V of the *Narrative*; later he compares the “voluptuary who reclined upon his downy pillow” to the “poor slave, on his hard pine plank, scantily covered with his thin blanket” (*Life and Times* 68). The autobiographies of Booker T. Washington (13, 15) and Thomas William Burton (16, 20) include a pair of pictures to emphasize the contrast between the
slave cabin and the “big house.” Moreover, homes can be of tremendous significance in family novels – think of the Dedlock country estate Chesney Wold in *Bleak House*, the old Compson place in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, or Orlando’s estate in Virginia Woolf’s novel – and occasionally in family memoirs as well, where the home is a site of generations, and its location, state of repair, and so forth symbolize the family’s rise and fall. Inez Major’s stories, as reported by her son Clarence Major in *Come By Here*, revolve around the difficulties of a single mother’s creating a home; in *Divided to the Vein* the parents’ ambitions are reflected by their home in Norwalk, Connecticut; and the parents’ homemaking in *Family Secrets* coincides with the discovery of the family’s partly black racial background. Race, class, and gender therefore determine in part one’s relationship with one’s home; and one’s success or failure to create a home speaks volumes about character.

Langston Cane I leaves his home in the South as a fugitive slave. He manages to work and talk himself into a period of refuge at the impressive lakeside home of Captain Wilson. Years later, he leaves behind the responsibilities of his home and his wife and children in Oakville, first intermittently to commit adultery, and eventually to never settle down again. When his wife and children leave their home in Oakville and move to Baltimore, their slum home is vulnerable to illness, poverty, hunger, and predators looking for child slave labor in the aftermath of the Civil War. Two generations later, Rose, the wife of Langston Cane III, buys the home once owned by Robert Wilson, the ship captain who helped ferry the first Langston Cane to freedom. For her family, this home in part means freedom from the interference of local church groups, and it also signals the rising fortunes of the Cane clan. They are able to literally occupy the space
once inhabited by wealthy whites, although not all is unchanged: the house has been
moved away from the lakeshore. Aberdeen’s presence in this Cane home from his teen
years suggests his role as a surrogate uncle to the next generation, Langston Cane IV and
Milicent. Langston Cane IV and his wife challenge the geographical separation of blacks
and whites so vividly imaged in Hughes’ poem, in part simply by living together as
husband and wife, but also by legally challenging Dr. Norville Watson’s refusal to rent
part of his home in Toronto to blacks. They also support the long-lived connection
between family and home by re-purchasing the house once inhabited by the Cane family
in Oakville. Langston Cane V has, in the past, left his home for research in Mali. This
work away from home, like that of Langston Cane I, gave him opportunities to commit
adultery and contributed to the unraveling of his home and family. He moves out of
temporary accommodation (a rented apartment in Toronto), to search for his family roots.
His homelessness in the context of this novel’s structure of family geography is parallel
to his rootlessness. The fact that his search begins with a visit to his parents’ home,
Langston Cane I’s refuge – now 180 years old – is telling.

Like Langston Cane I and other fugitive slaves, but in the contemporary world,
Yoyo finds that leaving home is a jeopardous undertaking with far-reaching effects.
Having left Cameroon as a journalist, he is unable to return due to political upheaval in
his absence, and is unable to establish a satisfactory new home due to his illegal
immigrant status. He searches for a home and love, a kind of sanctuary or refuge. Yoyo,
curiously, has much to do with actively assisting others to find and make homes: he helps
Langston Cane V find an apartment in Baltimore, and cleans houses for a living. It is he
who finally cleans Mill’s filthy house and clears her home of decades of junk. At the end
of the novel, Mill, who refuses to be left behind, barking at Langston V that “I was there, I keep telling you, and I won’t be left out of this story” (179),\(^9\) is headed to her childhood home in Oakville, anticipating reconciliation with her brother, long-deferred acceptance of her white sister-in-law, and reunion with Aberdeen. Paradoxically, both Mill and Langston Cane V need to leave their temporary homes to find their true homes. She tells Langston, “this is a homecoming that I have wanted for a long, long time” (501).

There are other distinctions between homes in operation, and characters need to learn how to spot them: Aberdeen’s and Langston Cane IV’s ability to see through a false home, a home that is not being used as one, is key to the discovery of the kidnappers and the rescue of Dr. Watson and Dr. Cane. Family history and domestic geography powerfully combine to influence present day desires and decisions. *Any Known Blood* realistically depicts a number of habitations and attitudes toward homes; routed through the starkly polemic contrasts of slave narratives (contrasts echoed in Langston Cane I’s autobiographical letter), the many associations with houses recall both the symbolic threatened decay of the home in the family novel, and the bourgeois aspirations and achievements of the family memoir. The plotting of homes across the terrain of *Any Known Blood* is key for the critical reader to map out genres in the novel.

**Model family memoir novels: the influence of *Roots***

*Roots* is the best-known (if least critically-respected) example of the larger framework Hill is working with, and the one specifically identified as part of his own development as a writer. *Roots*, subtitled “saga,” is in fact the middle ground, the transitional form between family novel and family memoir. A comparison of *Roots* and *Any Known Blood* helps to isolate questions of truth and authenticity, symbolic heroism, origins, and style.
The critical debates surrounding *Roots* are particularly helpful in elucidating expectations of family memoirs and family memoir novels, and the role of the slave narrative as a core genre.

As the result of *Roots* being “subjected – from virtually the moment of its publication – to challenges to both its historical veracity and its underlying authorship,” including attacks on its sources and research in Africa, the U.K., and US, legal cases of plagiarism brought by Leonard S. Brown, Jr. (dismissed), Margaret Walker (dismissed), and Harold Courlander (settled out of court), and critiques of its conservative and clichéd style, the book “has been utterly banished by the literary academy” (Moore, “Revisiting” 197). Despite the development in the academy in which “the distinction between originality and plagiarism, like that between fact and fiction, has been attacked as recent, historically variable, and theoretically untenable” (Moore, “Revisiting” 197-98), despite the fascinatingly slippery status of the book’s truth claims, and despite the recent emphasis of cultural studies on popular texts, this family memoir novel and its impact and influence on other authors remain largely unstudied.

*Roots*’ narrative power shapes Hill’s creative development and the project of *Any Known Blood*, just as its blockbuster status altered readers’ expectations of family novels and adjusted them to incorporate African-American experiences. The influence of *Roots* on family memoir writing is strong: for instance, Haizlip has called her book “a *Roots* for the nineties” in a radio interview (qtd. in Moore, “Revisiting” 234). Dorothy Spruill Redford and Michael D’Orso’s *Somerset Homecoming* is another book directly inspired by *Roots*; Redford first searched for her “pure” family (33), eventually substituting the goal of a reunion of slaves’ descendants on the Somerset Plantation grounds. The arrival
of Alex Haley at the reunion and his introduction to *Somerset Homecoming* are given prominent billing on the book’s cover. The centrality of *Roots* to Hill’s own development as a person and writer is evident in his writings and comments: “I read *Roots* at a time when I was just stepping into the world of literature….I’ve often believed that the things you read in your late teens or early twenties are often the things that really get you ticking and stay with you, just because you come at them in such a formative time”; *Roots* is therefore a “major point of reference” for *Any Known Blood*, especially “for its celebration of an intergenerational approach to black history in America going back to Africa” (Telephone interview).

For many more readers and viewers, Haley’s *Roots* contains a symbolic fulfillment as the protagonist Haley “was for the first time among his people apparently able to bridge the great historical abyss of the Middle Passage and to identify, quite precisely, his ancestral place in Africa” (Moore, “Routes” 6). Certainly, “a great portion of the initial power of Haley’s great work rested on the belief of its readers that it was fact” (Moore, “Routes” 9), a kind of “sacred text” to be interpreted literally (10). For some readers, “*Roots* does not function as fiction at all; representing not one more myth of race and sex in America, but the replacement of all such myths by the unchangeable, irrefutable truth” (Fielder 83). Critic of sagas M. I. Steblin-Kamenskij calls this “syncretic truth,” a type of truth that “is thought of as simply truth, something given, not created…. [or as] the lack of distinction between historical and artistic truth” (qtd. in Moore, “Routes” 19-20). Clearly, *Roots* is a widely influential text, perhaps as much for its blurring of fiction and fact as for its successful genealogical search.
Roots is not a model for Hill’s authorial ethics. Hill warily avoids Haley’s pitfalls by employing and policing conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, commenting that “I wanted to tell a fictionalized story – truly a novel – that in some way or another spoke to me about the love of family and the love of my own family and how I imagined things might have unfolded in my own family history” (Telephone interview). In his “Acknowledgments” Hill gives scrupulous details of historical sources used and “hastens to emphasize that this novel is a novel. Family stories have been altered or exaggerated, and almost all of this book is invented” (507), thus creating a contract with his readers of a much more cautious variety than Haley’s. He nevertheless evokes syncretic truth when he places the act of fiction-making within the family memoir, when he speaks passionately of the inspiration provided by family history, and when he places documents and photos and the kernels of family stories and characteristics on the margins of his novel. 10 This translation of truth allows readers “to talk not about roots but about routes: trajectories, paths, interactions, links” (Moore 21), as I assay to do through discussions of border crossings and intertextualities.

Reading Roots in part inspired Hill to travel to Africa in the late 1970s (Black Berry 64). Roots put forward what bell hooks in another context has called “a counter-hegemonic sense of history, wherein the African past, which white supremacy had taught blacks to despise, was now revered” and where one could recover the values of one’s ancestors (Black Looks 142). Initially Hill tried to separate himself from his Quebecois peers and to be accepted by Africans as black (as Haley’s villagers supposedly accepted him); however, during a severe illness, his peers’ thoughtful care of Hill drained away his need to be recognized as different from them. His experiences greatly altered his belief
in African origins and brotherhood. This crucial episode suggests a turn away from an idea of Africa as the edenic, original source of selfhood, the view that is promoted in *Roots*. For instance, Haley’s ancestor Kunta Kinte, as he approaches adulthood, thinks about “how so many things ... all tied together. The past seemed with the present, the present with the future; the dead with the living and those yet to be born; he himself with his family, his mates, his village, his tribe, his Africa” (Haley, *Roots* 105; my ellipsis). The novel’s family is built on “a new myth of Africa,” a revised version of “the Romantic myth of the Noble Savage,” in which family origins are invented through a kind of false nostalgia for Africa, argues Fielder (77). Another way of putting this is to point out that, as Paul Gilroy does, “this supposedly lost African authenticity is inseparable from the politics of the construction of Africa and African identity that was on the way from the first colonial contact” (qtd. in Sealy 103). *Any Known Blood*, like Haley’s book, is a search for the roots of an African-American family in freedom. Unlike Haley’s, this novel does not approach pre-slavery African roots. In other terms, Haley locates freedom beyond slavery and the graphically depicted horrors of the Middle Passage in an unreachable tribal African Eden and an inviolable sense of identity and family; in multiple border crossings, Hill finds freedom and opportunity in slavery and other oppressive circumstances. Additionally, the novel mocks Derek, the character most closely identified with a romantic undifferentiated vision of Africa (244-45); furthermore, Africa First, the supposed kidnappers of Dr. Norville Watson and Dr. Cane, turns out to be a front of white supremacists attempting to provoke race war by capitalizing on stereotypes of black African nationalism, militancy, and terrorism. Thus Africa is a false identification in this novel. Instead of American otherness serving as a mark of African
origin, as a means of pinning down the elsewhere singularity of roots, as Cuder-Domínguez argues (61), references to America and Africa in *Any Known Blood* are marks of diasporic identification, or *routes*.

Another important difference is that the play of chronology and plot in Hill’s novel is the obverse of Haley’s. Though the narrator of Haley’s novel speaks early on of the synchronic sense of Mandinka community and family composed of distant ancestors, living representatives, and unborn generations (as in the example cited above; see also 18), the narrative structure itself does not find a way to hold these together, instead relying on a highly linear plot: Haley begins *Roots* with the birth of his remote ancestor Kunta Kinte, chronologically leads up through generations to his own birth, and finishes the novel with his own development as a writer and researcher in the last two chapters. The novel’s chronicle of race crimes ends in about 1921, implying the end of racism and “defusing or downplaying current political tensions” as Moore points out (“Revisiting” 215). *Roots’* “narrative is simplistically linear, literally going from one thing to the next in a non-reflecting manner” with the result that “[w]e are not moved to think about changing hostile social structures, but to care about the vicissitudes of respectable victims caught in their interstices” (Adams 132). In contrast, Hill depicts many personal and institutional manifestations of racism through the civil rights period right up to the present moment, including the Ontario Provincial Government’s attempt to “kill antidiscrimination legislation and junk the provincial human rights commission” (13).

Furthermore, Hill’s novel resists the “chronological conceptualization of related events and experiences” (Elliott Oring qtd. in Wilson 140) that can do a disservice to family stories and to the patterns of storytelling, which may have “no interest in
chronological sequence” and instead “focus primarily on recurrent values and themes” (141), according to folklorist William Wilson. Wilson acknowledges the need to give stories a framework, suggesting unity of construction “not in a linear plot leading from event to event…but rather, as in some modern novels, in the clustering of motifs around given themes, with [the storyteller] always at the center” (141-42). *Any Known Blood* corresponds more closely than *Roots* to Wilson’s model because it embeds found documents and stories in the narrative proper and moves in two directions at once: first, Cane V’s own travels and development as a writer follow a chronological pattern; second, the embedded stories run in a reverse chronology, from close ancestors to more remote ones. Hill shapes a less uni-directional, more complex architecture of family webs and historical situations. The generic oyster-and-pearl framework Hill establishes, in which the family memoir novel frames independent characters’ highly individual voices (such as the slave narrative in chapter 22), provides a central storyteller (who is in fact becoming a professional storyteller in the process) and a cluster of motifs picked up by other voices. Generic juxtaposition permits Hill to avoid *Roots*’ abrupt shifts in narrative focus (as when the narrative turns from Kunta’s to Kizzy’s story, and when Haley’s own narrative persona enters). Hill’s structure permits the first-person researcher persona to direct and contain the stories of his forebears.

William Van Deburg, who has traced slavery through several centuries of American popular culture, suggests the metonymic function of the *Roots* family saga (what I call the family memoir novel): “the book became a chronicle of inspiration and vicarious wish fulfillment for black Americans less able [than Haley] to spare the time, effort, and money needed for extensive genealogical research”; Van Deburg quotes Haley
as saying that “although slavery had stolen from blacks ‘all insight into what they had been,’ now, because of *Roots*, ‘many could adopt his family patriarch as their family patriarch” (145). At the end of *Roots*, after Haley describes the personal significance of disentangling individual histories from the knot of general historical facts, he then proposes that African-Americans read the story of his family as a “symbolic saga” (681). In effect, through “adoption” or “symbolism” the tale is intended to become representative.

The anti-heroic protagonists of Hill’s novel carry a much less heavy burden of representation and the narrators make no claims to represent others. While the novel encompasses documents (such as letters) written by other Langston Canes, only Langston Canes I and V control their autobiographical narratives of self-discovery in the first-person voice. Chronologically and stylistically they are bookends of their family. The family novel “is likely to focus attention on one family member more or less at the expense of others, whether because the one character is superior by virtue of intelligence, capacity for self-conscious reflection, or flair for self-dramatization” (Boyers 3). Though all the Canes are highly intelligent, and all make mistakes, Langston Canes I and V are the two who chew over their past mistakes and shape their own stories, the two who demonstrate “self-conscious reflection” and “flair for self-dramatization” in their autobiographical narratives. Hill’s own remarks communicate the balance between the first and fifth Langston Canes:

I cared so much to get Langston Cane I’s story out alive and breathing that it just struck me as I was writing that what better way to deliver it than to do it in the first person, particularly I suppose because Langston V feels that he’s so adrift in relation to the other productive, forward-moving hardworking non-reflective male types that have been his ancestors, people who did things and saved themselves rather than worrying about their relation to the world. Doers rather than
thinkers.... Langston Cane V somehow connects with his Langston Cane I ancestor perhaps more profoundly for the very reason that he discovers the humanity in the errors and mistakes and human failings of his ancestor. I felt that changing the point of view in delivering the story from his point of view would maximize his effect on Langston Cane V and on the reader. (Telephone interview)

Thematically Canes I and V are also bookends. The first Cane is, according to family lore, a hero who achieved freedom. When Cane V discovers his flaws, Cane I loses his hero status. This erosion of heroic status contributes to the sense that the book is challenging simplistic archetypes of slavery and freedom. Both Langston Canes I and V are modern heroes, in that “the self is seen... as a fragmentation or a configuration of personalities” (Othow 316). They take up complementary, dominant positions in this novel. There is a narrative tension sustained here between Canes I and V: at the time of his writing the slave narrative, Cane I approaches the end of his life; at the time of reading the document, Cane V’s writing and love life is reinvigorated while the novel approaches its conclusion. Hill creates a complex character and, in so doing, a complex definition of the conditions of slavery and freedom. Langston Cane I is not a symbolic, tribal, heroic figure but a flawed one. Cane V and the novel thus locate a single, but multifaceted and morally complex source.

If it is a family saga, it is a saga in reverse. If sagas establish lineage through a master narrative of identity as inheritance and the foundational origins of family strength/wealth, then the basis of this saga in the failures of a fugitive slave disrupts absolute patriarchal family authority. Where Haley hoped to show “that black Americans were the products of the heroic legacy of their forebears as much as any other group and that, at the level of family, the black struggle has centered around identity, dignity and devotion” (Adams 137), Hill empties heroism out of the equation by making the family’s
first and latest representatives notable “failures,” and by showing the ways in which weakness might be erased and heroism constructed through selective family myth-making. In short, the polar fields of heroism and failure are drawn together. The narrator, unlike Haley and his siblings, does not adhere to the “conviction” of his ancestors nor belong to their “high-minded professions” (3), and is an uneasy fit with the conventional route of upward mobility. Though the promise of such a symbolic beacon is kept alive through Hill’s novel, at last the hope of ancestral hero is revealed to be a dubious one.

In other ways, the debt to *Roots* remains, such as the mutually reinforcing oral and written traditions. Kunta as a boy learns two languages: drum talk between villages and writing at school; Cane V listens to stories told by his father, mother, aunt, and Aberdeen in addition to reading family documents and other primary materials. In *Roots*, the oral legends passed down among family members lead Haley to discovery, and they always dovetail neatly with written evidence; in *Any Known Blood*, the father’s oral legends or “mythology” (33) stimulates the imagination and obscures reality, and is occasionally contradicted by other sources. The most important things for Cane V to know – the failures of his forefathers alongside their successes – are omitted from family lore. There is therefore a richly complex and contradictory pluralism to historical accounts in Hill’s novel. The interplay of competing oral and written authorities here recalls that of the family memoir, although in this novel the written word tends to correct and fill out the elisions from oral accounts.

The inspiration and modifications that take place between *Roots* and *Any Known Blood* illustrate George Elliott Clarke’s position “that one cannot access African-
Canadian literature without taking into account the remarkable tendency of many of its creators to deliberately, deliriously, parrot/parody Black U.S. intertexts” (*Odysseys* 61) in instances of “not elementary iteration, but calculated repetition insisting upon a signifying difference” (*Odysseys* 62). Despite differences with Clarke¹², Walcott agrees in his discussion of *Any Known Blood* that “This intertextual dialogue between contemporary black Canadian literature and history and African-American literature and history is crucial to black literatures of the North” and he suggests that the intertextuality – what I call hypertextuality – assists in an immediate “cross-border identification” (*Black Like Who?* 67). *Any Known Blood* is, therefore, a kind of contemporary Canadian *Routes*, not *Roots*. As a family memoir novel that is careful to identify itself as such, it has much in common with another example of this genre: David Bradley’s novel, *The Chaneysville Incident*. This thrilling novel’s narrator is a young African-American historian in the 1970s who turns his hunting and research skills to tracking down his father’s family; in so doing he is able to heal himself of loss and alcoholism and accept his white girlfriend as part of his family. Though not influential, according to Hill (Telephone interview), the novel holds affinity with Hill’s project. If *Roots* is a direct ancestor to Hill’s novel in terms of narrative power, then *The Chaneysville Incident* is another member of the extended family, one whose dramatizations of interracial intimacy, the law of the black father, and the act of research itself echo Hill’s.

**Hill’s slave narrative and Osborne Anderson**

Through assessing the family memoir novel, we have been able to map the broad generic topography of *Any Known Blood* and now inhabit a space to appreciate the contextual contributions of the narrative of Osborne Anderson to the slave narrative embedded in the
family novel. As Clarke eloquently predicts, “[r]emarkably, an African-Canadian sensibility may be articulated at the very point where it seems to vanish: at the moment when African-American texts seem to possess African-Canadian ones. If this is so, the model blackness that is African America, that is to say, the fount of racial discourse, engenders a new blackness, one that may prefer to be encased in quotation marks” (Clarke, *Odysseys* 49), one that is “shaped just as much by the broad cultural and socio-political currents of the nation” as by African-American modulations of genre (60). Once we have traced the generic affiliations of the book, we must work to understand the significance of black Canadian cultural issues. Crossing the border into Canada is as important a gesture for the critic as it is for the characters in this novel.

Hill’s particularly Canadian stance is indicated by his finding inspiration and authentic detail in a writer who, like many of Hill’s protagonists, had strong ties to both Canada and the US. Osborne Anderson, born a free black in the Northern US, accompanied Mary Ann Shadd to Ontario and lived and worked there for many years as a printer before being recruited in Chatham in 1858 to join John Brown’s army at Harpers Ferry. Anderson was the only member of the band to escape capture and punishment, and wrote about his experiences in a memoir while he gave lectures on the run. Hill’s discovery of Anderson’s document in Harpers Ferry Museum captured his imagination: “a black man as an assistant to the white man’s crusade against slavery seemed to me a fascinating dynamic and I was very curious about exploring that a little in my own novel” (Telephone interview). Hill has been aware of the importance of Anderson’s work in a Canadian context for some time: in *Some Great Thing* (1992), the reporter Mahatma Grafton finds mention of him in his father’s scrapbooks of black Canadian history (59).
While Osborne Anderson’s involvement in the raid on Harpers Ferry is a hypotext for Langston Cane I’s involvement, there are many differences between the two men. Where Anderson was free-born, single, Christian, and well-connected to the activist black community in Chatham, Langston Cane is a fugitive slave, a married but philandering father, and an atheist, who is by and large isolated from his community in Oakville. Where Anderson respected John Brown as a Moses-like liberator and respected his belief in armed resistance to slavery, Langston Cane shows a finely developed skepticism of totalizing religious American radicalism, criticizes John Brown as a lunatic, and joins him only to avoid family and social pressure. Anderson retreated from Harpers Ferry with another man in hopes of regrouping, but Cane gladly escapes from Harpers Ferry on his own at the first opportunity. Where Anderson continued to lecture and write about Brown’s uprising, testifying publicly to his role in historical events, Cane becomes an indigent nonentity who breaks his silence only in private communication of his life story to his estranged son. Anderson is most useful to Hill in that Anderson provides a model for a black Canadian man caught up in the preparations for the raid and the realistic details he provides about those preparations and the raid itself.

In assessing the hypotexts of *Any Known Blood*’s embedded slave narrative, the first thing to note is that Hill is much less dependent on the details of his hypotexts than is Caryl Phillips. In other words, Hill is much less interested in producing a pastiche through reproducing Anderson’s experiences, motivations, attitudes, and syntax through imitation. Hill has stated that he is “not riffing on Osborne Anderson’s work,” not “[creating] some sort of variation of Osborne Anderson’s character” (Telephone interview).
I was looking not for a hero in Langston Cane I; I was looking to create a flawed man whose flaws were major ... [but] that I felt I could care for and be compassionate about his flaws even as I created them.... I wanted to create a character who was scarred by his experience as a slave and whose inability to connect with his community was, at least in my own heart, completely understandable and explicable by dint of his past experience. Again, Langston Cane V has messed up his life pretty badly, and I was looking for an echo, not of Osborne Anderson’s life, but an early pre-echo, an origin, of Langston Cane V’s struggle in those of Langston Cane I. So I was looking for a ... literary family connection between the first and the fifth. (Telephone interview)

Hill explains that he did not so much need to change Anderson to fit his character’s profile as need to write a flawed character who would be exposed as a contrast to Langston Canes II, III, and IV and who would suggest an atavistic balance to the character of Langston Cane V: for instance, both Canes I and V have committed adultery, with tragic consequences (whether real or imagined) for their respective families.

Precisely because Osborne Anderson was of heroic stature – according to contemporaries, a “noble and devoted lover of freedom for all mankind” or “the greatest hero among the emancipated slaves in the struggle for liberty” in Harpers Ferry (qtd. in Libby 206, 207) – he was not a fitting model for Langston Cane I.

Nevertheless, the rupture between Anderson and Cane I is not total, and a reading of Anderson does highlight Langston Cane’s different experiences and flawed choices. Some analysis of the hypertextual relationship between the two is possible and facilitates comparison between this novel’s strategies and those of the other novels in this study. In one brief example, Osborne Anderson noted money in the Harpers Ferry Armory prior to his escape, commenting that in comparison with the desire for freedom “wealth had no charms for us” (47); however, Langston Cane I takes several hundred dollars from the Armory when he escapes, money that he says “could make the difference between life and death” (490). Clearly, Hill’s transformation of this detail in Cane V’s account
emphasizes the practical means of survival over the idealized morality of ownership, and
suggests the usefulness of a closer comparison between Anderson and Cane I.

Langston Cane’s experiences at Harpers Ferry differ radically from those of
Osborne Anderson. In one crucial substitution, Hill suppresses Anderson’s details about
the raid and deploys Cane I in another episode. According to Anderson’s account and
corroborating sources, John Brown ordered Anderson to accompany Captain Stevens to a
local farm in order to take prisoner a prominent local slave owner, Colonel Lewis
Washington (Anderson 34-35). Anderson there received the sword of Lafayette from the
hand of the slave owner, presumably with the intention of symbolically humiliating the
slave owner by putting him on inferior footing to a black man and affirming that power,
by changing hands, had changed its racial composition. Rather than pursue the creative
potential of this incident, Hill chooses to place Langston Cane at another moment at
which Osborne Anderson was not present: the death of the black porter, Shepherd.
Shepherd apparently did resist John Brown’s attack in some way, and posthumously
received an award for loyalty from the Daughters of the Confederacy (Libby 142).
Anderson’s account justifies the shooting of Shepherd (35). The novelist’s view of the
dynamics augments these views, depending as it does on a modern sense of irony. Hill
comments that

I put [Langston Cane I] there because it’s an absolutely horrible thing to happen
and it’s an incredibly disturbing irony that the first victim of this raid would be a
black man, and a free black man at that…. In [Langston Cane’s] eyes it’s not an
irony…in his eyes it’s horrible….I believe that one of the dictates of interesting
fiction is to place your characters in situations that matter, and that matter to them,
that disturb them and shake them up. I think that Langston Cane I’s flight out of
there is more emotionally understandable if he’s seen something horrific happen
that in some way violates his own moral code, just seems to be beyond the pale, absolutely unacceptable…. I put him there because he needed to see something
that would really rock him and thereby [give] an emotional, psychological justification for doing what he did next. (Telephone interview)

As well as justifying Cane’s next moves, the shooting of Shepherd exposes the fatal ironies of John Brown’s raid. The novelist has unintentionally answered the historian’s question: “What the impact of the knowledge that John Brown’s men had shot a black man in the town may have been on slaves and free black people in the area can only be imagined” (Libby 145).

Anderson included almost no background information about himself, discussing only his involvement with Brown in his memoir. As opposed to Anderson’s set-the-record-straight account of a single historical event, Cane’s autobiographical epistle in chapter 22 is the story of a life. Hill’s decision to extend Langston Cane I’s autobiography to include his past as a fugitive slave and his life after the raid up to the time of writing aligns Cane’s story with the fugitive slave narratives of people such as Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Henry “Box” Brown, Harriet Jacobs, and dozens of others, including many of those interviewed for Benjamin Drew’s autobiographical sketches of fugitive slaves collected in Canada. This affiliation between Langston Cane I’s and other slave narratives can be seen in several specific instances: its roughly chronological structure, the separation of family members, the early exposure to slavery through the observation of harsh punishment, the illicit struggle to gain literacy, the challenge to Christian hypocrisy, the successful escape characterized by nighttime travel and great privation – all of these have been outlined by James Olney in his classificatory essay as typical to slave narratives. Additionally, the suggestive conflation of whipping with sexual violence, the discovery of racism in the “free” North or Canada, and the suspension of liberation in Reconstruction – “it was like slavery all over again”
(416) – are typical of many slave narratives, as I have had the opportunity to observe in other research and teaching. All these aspects align Langston Cane’s story with other slave narratives. The powerfully influential slave narrative genre becomes an essential defining tool for the strategies of this chapter of the novel. However, the family memoir element remains strong even in this largely separate chapter: I call this chapter a slave narrative, but unlike conventional antebellum slave narratives, the central focus is not slavery, but “a particular and individual life as it is known internally and subjectively” (Olney 52). Slavery is structurally critical yet substantially incidental (much more like slavery in the early conversion narratives written by blacks, such as John Marrant’s).

Writing slavery into the past of Langston Cane I has a more general effect than of balancing out Langston Cane V’s character. In making the first Cane’s narrative a slave narrative, Hill alludes to the literary history of African-American and African-Canadian literature, to its roots in autobiographical writings of fugitive slaves. He thus places the writings and stories told by all the Canes into a classic formulation: one could, with irony, call it a master narrative of movement between slavery and the elusive goal of freedom. Hill draws the reader’s attention to the positive literary legacy of slavery. Moreover, he invites the reader to observe the negative impact of slavery on the identity crises and racism faced by slaves’ descendants, and to trace the ways in which “[t]he roots of slavery...have spread wide and deep within the social dynamic of everyday life” (Jennings 148). To appreciate the resonance of the slave narrative, it is necessary to create a blueprint of Hill’s larger generic project.

Langston Cane’s narrative can be distinguished from published nineteenth-century slave narratives by its unusual frankness with respect to moral topics, particularly
the moral culpability of its narrator. It tends to differ stylistically, having far more
colloquial diction and grammatical patterns (including frank treatment of sexual
matters\textsuperscript{13}), and more dialogue than indirectly reported speech. The shift from narrative to
dramatic mode, or \textit{dramatization} of the genre (Genette 277), brings the slave narrative
closer to Hill’s regular novelistic practices, and permits Mattie, Langston Cane I’s wife,
an assertive presence and voice. This narrator’s honest exposure of his own
psychological fractures, crimes, and moral weaknesses, tends to echo Langston Cane V’s
self-appraisal: both like to look about them rather than charging ahead (132). Just as
Cane I defies the heroic expectations raised by a \textit{Roots}-like scenario, he defies the ideal
archetype of the independent and stoic heroic slave narrator.\textsuperscript{14} (We might think here of
the way Frederick Douglass’s first autobiography creates an independent strong hero:
Douglass stands up to the brutal slave driver Covey and his wife’s contributions to his
escape are unmentioned.) Moynagh also comments that “Langston Cane I’s narrative
departs from … the heroic tenor of many slave narratives,” depending more on the
picaresque, the perpetual outlaw’s tale (21).\textsuperscript{15} Slave narratives usually work at a moral
distance from the picaresque, structuring the fugitive slave’s life around the outlaw’s
identity (because fugitive slaves by definition are illegal) while exculpating slaves for
immoral or amoral acts. For instance, William Wells Brown transforms an instance in
which he craftily avoided punishment by taking advantage of another slave’s illiteracy
into a condemnation of slavery:

This incident shows how it is that slavery makes its victims lying and mean; for
which vices it afterwards reproaches them, and uses them as arguments to prove
that they deserve no better fate. Had I entertained the same views of right and
wrong which I now do, I am sure I should never have practiced the deception
upon that poor fellow which I did. I know of no act committed by me while in
slavery which I have regretted more than that. (William Wells Brown 57)
In this instance of transmotivation, "the substitution of a motive" (Genette 324), Langston Cane, unlike Wells Brown and many other narrators\textsuperscript{16}, does not excuse his choices, nor does he provide support for his story in the shape of recommendations, references, or other documents.

Indeed, instead of including documents supporting his character and version of events, the family memoir novel incorporates several different pseudo-intertexts or ad hoc hypotexts (Genette 52) accusing Cane V of bigamy (339-341, 384) and of being a "fool and imposter" (424). The written versions of events discovered by Cane V correct the official patriarchal family version of Cane I's heroism; authority is contested in this interplay between oral and written sources of information. Where the conventional slave narrator persona (as distinguished from the historical writer of the slave narrative) is interested primarily in condemning slavery (often through the offices of abolitionist involvement in editorial processes or publication) (Sekora 494-500), and secondarily in justifying his or her own actions to the public, the persona of Langston Cane I writes privately to describe his actions to his long-estranged son. Slave narratives tend to be "all trained on one and the same objective reality, they have a coherent and defined audience, they have behind them and guiding them an organized group of 'sponsors,' and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike" (Olney 52) with the objective to "dispel that indifference" of Northern whites (Sekora 495); Sekora explains the limits of the slave narrative as follows: "[w]hitie sponsors of slave lives strive to see such lives wholly within the history of white institutions, for such a history is safe and comprehensible to editors and readers alike....White power over black lives was so great, so disproportionately great that the
slave was recipient/victim – at most re-actor” (Sekora 503-504). Cane I’s departure from
this pattern is a key difference from and significant reshaping of the slave narrative. The
family memoir imperative permits Hill to reinvigorate the slave narrative. Cane I
exercises the function of memory and is not polemical in tone or content. Having no
agenda of moral or ethical uprightness other than this family communication – a goal of
reconciliation resembling that of the family memoirs described above more than the goals
of slave narratives – he need not flinch from unsavory actions in his past such as murder,
adultery, and the abandonment of family; transmotivation means that he need not claim to
be an upstanding, upwardly mobile, and respectable individual, but can be a complex and
whole individual, one whose life began in slavery but whose life is not limited to slavery.

Instead of the slave narrator, Langston Canes II, III, and IV occupy this role of
heroic model. Langston Cane V, who has not found a pattern for his life in the lives of
these ancestors, finds the freedom to recognize his weaknesses, mistakes, and career
choices as part of himself when he encounters the narrative of a man who has also found
a measure of relief in communicating his failings through writing. What seems to be the
devaluation of the character – the de-grading of the hypertextual character’s moral and
ethical stature (Genette 354) – is in fact a *transvaluation*, in which the character’s
motivations are reevaluated with a new moral perspective by Langston Cane V, who
finds them a worthy example. Langston Cane I permits Cane V to recognize the
wholeness of his humanity while he also shows by example that running away from his
responsibilities does not constitute “freedom” (474) but rather “drifting” (493).
US/Canada Borders

Border crossings occur in geographical, metaphorical (racial), and generic dimensions in *Any Known Blood*. Every Langston Cane undertakes a border crossing that takes him across the US-Canada divide. This project reiterates Winfried Siemerling’s study of border crossing in the novel; however, where Siemerling’s emphasis is on the politics of identity formation, mine is on genre transformation of family memoir novel and the embedded slave narrative. Langston Cane escapes slavery by crossing across the lake to Oakville and establishing a new life there. The first journey is clearly evocative of other nineteenth-century fugitive slave narratives (some of which are listed above) whose narrators travel northward in search of freedom. His search eventually takes him back to the slave South, to Harpers Ferry, Virginia. Later Canes’ travels recall “a regular practice of several of the [Abbott] family members to regularly traverse the border and work in both Canada and the United States at various times over the years” (Slaney 122-23).

Because of upheaval caused by the Fugitive Slave Laws and then by the Civil War, movement by blacks back and forth across the border was common. For instance, Langston Cane II’s mother takes him from Oakville to Baltimore at the end of the Civil War. From Baltimore, Langston Cane III moves to Oakville to take up a ministry there, and later returns his family to Baltimore. Langston Cane IV, raised in Oakville, moves to Baltimore as a child then as an ex-serviceman adult returns to Canada for higher education. Langston Cane V leaves Toronto, traveling to Baltimore and Virginia to explore his family’s roots. None of the characters is prepared to invest “all their hopes and dreams in the [single] nation” (Walcott, *Black Like Who*? 13). Hill has said that I wanted to begin the process (in the correct chronological direction) with one of liberation, of wrestling oneself from the peculiar institution and fleeing north into
Canada. And I was very interested in a novel that would have every member of five generations leaving his country and moving to the other, back and forth across that border. It seemed like the natural place to locate the first migration, the first border crossing...would be the one in which a boy, a child born into slavery, steals back his freedom and flees to Canada. (Telephone interview)

The journey north to freedom is an archetype of slave narratives, oft celebrated in mainstream Canadian history. This myth of Canadian refuge from racism is long-lived, surviving into present constructions of Canadian history: “[T]he mid-nineteenth-century fugitive slave era has been embraced (and all other history of Black people ignored) precisely because it has enabled the mythmakers to portray Canada as a haven for Black people in that period. After 1865 Black Canadians disappear from view” (Shadd 296). While African-America may be misconstrued as the origin of blackness, an enduring counterimage of Canada as the promised land or the “north star” — a mythological place free from slavery, racism, segregation — proves equally problematic (Moynagh 15). In the US, Canada has been seen as “a potential refuge,” equivalent to “the Promised Land, or Canaan” (Clarke 28; see also Moynagh 19). Any Known Blood employs this slip between Canaan/Canada (Any Known Blood 436). The fugitive slave’s disappointment in Canada had refuted this association between Canada and freedom. For instance, Thomas Smallwood, a fugitive slave in nineteenth-century Canada, commented that here was a place and people rife with “prejudice equal to anything I ever experienced in the South” (27). On traveling through Halifax, William and Ellen Craft experienced several instances of “the vulgar prejudice of the town” (328). And Samuel Ringgold Ward reported many cases of “pro-slavery feeling” and “Negro-hate” in Canada, both in communities with ties to the US and among the “British-born subjects, who in Canada exhibit these two sentiments in a manner that no Yankee can excel” (139-140; see also
138-151). Moreover, the nineteenth-century African-Canadian community was “not a uniform group of ex-slaves happy simply to be in Canada” (Almonte 12). *Any Known Blood* also reminds readers that Canada is a diverse, not necessarily “free” society.

In Hill’s work, as in these slave narratives, the mythology of Canada as equivalent to freedom is exposed as fallacious. The approach to the Canadian border is not synonymous with the North Star, Canaan, and freedom, and does not serve here as it so often does in hegemonic Canadian culture as a reminder of Canada’s innocence in slavery and helpfulness to the fugitive slave. Instead it works like the arbitrary boundary line between slavery and freedom violated by continued racist exploitation in slave narratives; it is a signal of continuity between differing experiences of people of colour. In other words, the Canada=free and US=slave dichotomy is interrupted through Hill’s complicated repetitions and revisitations of border crossings. As Moynagh puts it, “Hill revisits the ‘flight to Canada’ trope again and again, suggesting that the quest for Canaan continues, despite myths of nation that depend on Canaan having been achieved” (20).

The reverse chronological order of the family history manages to strongly contextualize the escape to freedom in Canada; a fugitive slave narrative that might otherwise be grist for the mill of hegemonic and whitewashed Canadian history is cleverly preceded in the novel by acts of racism perpetrated by the Oakville branch of the Klan and followed by Cane I’s own experience of segregation and second-class treatment in Canada. In fact, there is a suggestive parallel between the first and last border crossings: both the escape of the fugitive slave and the crossing of Mill, Annette, Yoyo and Cane V into Canada take place *in spite of* the vigilance of slave catchers and immigration officers. Canadian policy is not so much welcoming of blacks as working to keep blacks out. As Walcott
points out, Yoyo (a Cameroonian illegal immigrant in the US) “is entering Canada somewhat like a fugitive slave of the postmodern moment” (70), the most vivid example of other parallels between immigration and the flight from slavery. Yoyo is clearly the present counterpart of the fugitive slave, for he is an “underground” (101) refugee in the US, and he has to make daring escapes repeatedly from captivity and pursuit (see 229-231). As the Canes’ crossing of borders becomes less fraught over the years, Yoyo’s presence is required to recapture the high-stakes tension of the fugitive slave’s escape (the hair-raising perils of William and Ellen Craft’s train ride north, of “Box” Brown’s confined journey within a package, of Pennington’s desperate fights during flight). Butler uses time travel, Hill compelling reenactments to juxtapose slavery with contemporary oppression of members of the black diaspora. Thus key elements of the plot and theme of the slave narrative are modernized, brought into focus in the present.

As outlined above, Any Known Blood poses a challenge to Canadian fictions of multiculturalism. Many critics of black culture in Canada mistrust the (sometimes official) hegemonic assertions of peaceful co-existence among many ethnicities. Althea Prince writes that the discourse of “multiculturalism suggests equality in the plurality of cultures that exist in Canada, and thus serves as the mechanism under which some groups in the society are denied access to real power” (69). Walcott claims that the fiction of two founding peoples and two solitudes excludes others, and Dionne Brand affirms this: “Canada is not (and cannot ever claim to be) a homogeneous culture. It has never been such (not even before recent immigrants, who are accused from time to time of messing up the works), it has never been such despite the exhortations of state power formulated largely by the English and the French to make it so” (Bread Out of Stone 137).
challenges to hegemonic notions of Canada, Brand argues that “[a]ll immigration is seen as fleeing a horrible past/place and arriving gratefully at an unblemished present/place. So Canada presents itself as an alluring historyless place” (138) that is antiseptic, pristine, forgetful (37). What Dionne Brand writes about immigrants oppressed by Canadian racism and empty multicultural rhetoric can be used to describe the Canes’ challenge to Canada in the nineteenth century and beyond:

These are also people (by their very presence here) for whom change is not a fearful thing – they have traveled thousands of miles as well as sensibilities, that very act has already changed them, is already a mark of their complete willingness to acknowledge if not welcome the changeable, to leap into other experiences. And this leaping, this faith in landing in other geographies and life experiences, is their crucial gift to the culture. They do not arrive empty, though they arrive with latitude; neither do they enter an empty landscape, a place with no history. (143-144)

Again, the reader sees parallels between twentieth-century immigration and earlier slavery. As Cude-Dominguez points out, Yoyo “functions...as a sounding board for notions of blackness” (61). Yoyo’s presence reminds readers that Canada’s black communities are not homogenous but heterogeneous, and they “[fissure] along regional, linguistic, gender, class, and ethnic lines, thus rendering the incarnation of race solidarity a difficult enterprise” (Clarke, “Introduction” xviii), as the literature is made up of the voices of numerous “exiles, refugees, fugitives, pilgrims, migrants, and natives” (xiii).

The cumulative effect of the many US-Canada border crossings is not to annihilate entirely that border, but rather through familiarity to calm its usually heightened or exaggerated presence in Canadian definitions of identity. Rinaldo Walcott explains that discussions of Canadian blackness may tend to exaggerate national differences between Canada and the US in self-defense against American cultural dominance, instead of exploring “transnational political identifications” (33),
identifications that permit Canadians to learn from African-Americans “how to invent and continually reference a tradition” (150) “for local purposes” (146). George Elliott Clarke puts it this way: “English Canada’s desire to assert its moral superiority vis-à-vis the United States muffles discussions of racism, which is cast as an American problem” (“Introduction” xvii). Dionne Brand has also noted that constructions of Canadianness at large often depend on differentiation from the US, and this results in a paralyzing effect on the cultural work of Canada. “The pride...in being different from the pariah to the south obfuscates the challenges in destroying the stereotypes [of otherness] and rather enhances them. (Nothing we can do can be as bad.)” (Bread 141). Any Known Blood shows the reader many instances of “as bad,” including everything from negative stereotypes in action, to a KJain attack, to present day institutional racism; the novel “[confronts] the complacent multiculturalism of the last 30 years with representations of a history of racism and intolerance that the dominant narratives of nation abjure” (Moynagh 17). It demonstrates an international continuum of racism that undermines notions of Canadian equality and purity. When readers can “shed the sophistry of [the country’s] ‘innocence’” (Brand, Bread 191), when the Canadian psyche’s wary opposition to the US relaxes, when the “identification with other black people, across space and time, resists the notion of the specificity of the [Canadian] nation-state as offering a unique experience or history” (Walcott 120), then ways of rethinking otherness have more room to expand, to include. To be, in brief, plural routes.

**Racial Borders**

Border-crossing is literal but other, more symbolic, boundaries are crossed in the novel as well. “[F]rom the beginning of the family genealogy we must contend with the ways in
which the Cane family symbolizes black North American border crossing in terms of its inter-raciality” (Walcott 68). Each generation explores interracial sexual politics in tense situations, as “pure cultures, so-called, tend to fear or scorn what is mixed or apparently impure” (Wilson Harris qtd. in Brand, Bread 135). Langston Cane I has an affair with Diana, the fictional white daughter of John Brown. Cane II becomes part of the Quaker Shoemaker family. Cane III helps Aberdeen escape the violent repercussions when he has an affair with a white woman. Millicent rejects her brother, Langston Cane IV, because he has married a white woman. Langston Cane’s ex-wife is white, too, as is the lover Yoyo hopes to join in Toronto. As with the interracial dynamic in Butler’s Kindred, there is much at stake in crossing racial boundaries, and people who cross boundaries sustain violence at the personal and public, physical and psychological levels. This kind of boundary crossing is more intimately or bodily personal than the transnational border crossing. These border crossings expand the sense of the Canadian (and American) body. In addition, as all the examples cited involve consensual relationships, they rewrite the trope of the “mixed-race black,” a trope that serves as a reminder of “white-practised violence against enslaved African women” (Clarke Odysseys 213), as carrying “the absolute tint of impurity, of blending, of remembered violence, of treachery – or treason – implicit in the flesh” (Odysseys 217). The long-lived stereotypes of the tragic mulatto figures of feminine victimhood (suspicious intermediary between races then martyr to the race cause) or masculine ill-fated rebelliousness are revisited as the narrator/protagonist is initially uncertain of his race, place, and plans; but these stereotypes are challenged as the narrator’s racial identity mounts a successful challenge to the precise gender and racial strictures governing sexuality. His white
mother’s choice of his black father, and his of her, rewrites sexual agency into both
femininity and blackness. Moreover, as Michelle Wright argues, “miscegenation is the
antithesis of nation” (qtd. in Clarke 217). Citing the opening pages of Hill’s novel, which
describe a scene of consensual black-white sexuality as a salvo against racial
essentialism, Clarke feels that “Canadian black writers of mixed-race heritage have felt –
or feel – freer to explore their identity confusions and dislocations, or even to interrogate
their blackness in ways that may seem strangely abstract – or worse, stupefyingly
compromising – to African-American readers” (Odysseys 220), a sentiment first voiced in
his review of Hill’s novel (reprinted in Odysseys 312). Whether or not Americans are on
the whole more or less free to pursue such lines (see Werner Sollors for many exceptions
disputing this generalization), it is true that Hill does cross the boundaries of race and
nation. Any Known Blood’s explicit emphasis on sexual expression of identity and on the
protagonist’s racial confusion does not permit the sacrifice of the “interracial location” in
literature to “black-white dualism” (Sollors 15) or “monoracial occupancy” (6). Clarke
argues, finally, that Hill (among other African-Canadian authors) upsets “any easy
assertions of a homogenous African-Canadian identity” and “[repudiates] the perilous
notion of a univocal aesthetics of blackness” (Odysseys 232).

In addition to challenging the dualistic notion of black/white race, Hill is working
across boundaries of race as meaning family, too. Mill claims twice, first at the Harpers
Ferry hotel and then again while she is “conducting” others across the Canada-US border
rather like Harriet Tubman (Siemerling 44), that she, Langston Cane V, Yoyo and
Annette are all members of the same family. She addresses them all as her “folks” (504),
and the border guard agrees with her assessment, telling them to “Have a safe trip home,
folks” (505) in response. They all become part of the family story, of the family novel; hence Yoyo’s articles and Annette’s letter to Langston enter the book, the family archives. They write themselves into the story, crossing the boundaries into Canada and into the Cane family.

Hill has drawn upon his own experiences growing up in Canada in formulating fluid boundaries of race. In *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, an informal survey of so-called mixed-race Canadians, he has written that “People knew what I wasn’t – white or black – but they sure couldn’t say what I was” (5).\(^\text{18}\) His white mother’s family raised objections to her marriage to a black man. “We blacks of light skin are used to the fact that we may, from time to time, be subjected to racism. Still, those of us who seek to identify with black people can feel insecure about the depth of our belonging” (113). By choosing romantic relationships with blacks, and by having black children, one may affirm one’s own blackness. *Any Known Blood* delineates the vulnerabilities of those who occupy indistinct zones, or rather those individuals who appear to challenge simplistic racial binaries. Many Canadians express faith in a kind of “colour blindness,” which in its most optimistic form is put forward as anti-racism but in fact denies racism. “‘Colour blindness’ … ignores or denies the political and social significance of ‘race’ and therefore ignores or denies the realities of that [mixed-race] child’s life” (Emily Carasco qtd. in Hill, *Black Berry* 161). Individuals run the risk of not fitting in any community, of feeling like interlopers, of being forced to choose one race or the other, of denying the importance of differences between different races and their communities. The uncertain race of the narrator threatens nihilism of the “sliding signifier of blackness” (Walcott 25) in the early stages of the novel, but this threat is resolved by the narrator’s meaningful
quest for family and his decisive affiliations with other black communities – in effect his
performance of blackness. Clarke argues that African-Canadian disparity and diversity
illustrate Stuart Hall’s point that “‘black’ is essentially a politically and \textit{culturally
constructed} category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or
transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature” (qtd. in
Clarke, \textit{Odysseys} 16): according to Clarke, “[i]n Canada, some are born black, some
acquire blackness, and others have blackness thrust upon them” (\textit{Odysseys} 16). At the
same time, Clarke balances the performativity of blackness by citing Anthony Appiah’s
challenge to that sliding signifier of blackness: “[t]hat racial identities ‘are founded on
mistaken beliefs does not deprive them of their power to shape people’s attitudes and
behavior’… is a fact the liberal ideal of racelessness ignores” (qtd. in Clarke 17). What
to outside observers might look like the “best of both worlds” (Minerbrook 37, 166) may
easily be the worst of both. Hybridity may theoretically present a crucially important
challenge to simplistic dualities, but Hill focuses instead in both his novel and the
nonfiction book cited above its oft-painful cost to the bearer and its rare rewards, thus
recalling the multiple meanings of and associations with the word \textit{hybridity} (and related
terms) over time: \textit{hybridity} carries “the heavy historical load that weighs down much of
the problematic vocabulary applied to interracial relations” (Sollors 3). Like \textit{mulatto},
\textit{miscegenation}, and \textit{amalgamation}, \textit{hybridity} also ranges in meaning, from assertions of
hybrid weakness and inability to reproduce (129) to claims of “hybrid vigor” (Sollors
133). Hill’s version of “Zebra” mixed-race is, like the concept of \textit{métissage}, a more
neutral vehicle for the crossing of boundaries and the exploration of race (family and
ethnicity).
The title of the novel signifies on the first epigraph, an epigraph describing the absolute certainties of race: the phrase “any known blood” makes intertextual reference to the paratextual epigraph of Gunnar Myrdal’s “a known trace of Negro blood” and suggests the racial, familial and historical dimensions of the novel. The distance between the epigraph and Hill’s phrase (as it is used by characters within the novel, as on 317) indicates that, in the protagonist’s attempt to know his blood, blood will be not “known” as in recognized, calculated, labeled and dismissed, but “known” as in discovered, understood, embraced. The second epigraph from the last stanza of Langston Hughes’ poem, “Cross,” openly acknowledges the burden of racial blending, indicates the material effects of racial separation in terms of housing (as seen above) and challenges racial binaries with the questing and questioning first-person voice.

My old man died in a fine big house
My ma died in a shack
I wonder where I’m gonna die
Being neither white nor black?

Whereas the first epigraph refers to genealogy through the pseudo-science of tracing “ancestry,” the second refers to genealogy personally and informally through the figures of “[m]y ma” and “[m]y old man.” The suffering and homeless persona occupies a pause at a crossroads of American geography and a crossroads of race – here meaning both family lineage and black/white relations – while the questioned reader thinks through the persona’s somewhat fatalistic perplexity and its interrogation of social determinism. Hill has referred to this part of the poem in connection to his own racial identity19 and named his protagonist Langston Cane, after Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer’s Cane. His prominent placement of Hughes’ question invites the reader to see similarities between Hill, his first-person persona Langston, and Hughes’ persona. All occupy a viewpoint of
métissage, one that does not give them access to the best of both worlds, but one that is an isolated perspective, removed to differing degrees from both white and black family members, and from white and black communities. Both Langston and the speaker in the Hughes poem ask questions that disturb and interrogate received knowledge about race (again, family as well as perceived differences between black and white in Canadian-American contexts). Here I return to the role of setting and cite another African-American writer, Alice Walker, who upon visiting plantation houses thinks of the slaves in the quarters and their work in building such homes. “I stand in the backyard gazing up at the windows, then stand at the windows inside looking down into the backyard, and between the me that is on the ground and the me that is at the windows, History is caught” (In Search 47). Through his portrayal of characters that are racially mixed, through populating the captain’s home with black objects of charity and black owners, and through the range of responses to and labels for these characters, Hill blurs racial distinctions and by extension generic categories. And thus, History is caught.

It should by now be evident that the Cane family is not exclusive: not exclusively genetically defined, not exclusively black, not exclusively bound to one nation, not exclusively bound to a single myth of origins. The impetus of the book explicitly forces the opening of these doors. Lawrence Hill’s novel centers geographically and figuratively on freedom, family and home, but these are fluid categories. His characters expose political, national, and racial divides by identifying and crossing the policed boundaries. Similarly, Hill is not exclusively bound to the slave narrative, but approaches it via several routes: through the family novel, through the African-American
family memoir, and through creating a slave narrative himself within the sweeping task of uncovering and collating family stories that is undertaken by the main protagonist, Langston Cane V. The narrative links early instances of African-American and African-Canadian autobiography with accounts of the John Brown attack on Harpers Ferry. The embedded slave narrative is a document that replaces heroic and unsustainable models with human-scale strengths and weaknesses and functions as a distinctly Canadian and black origin myth for the Cane family. Its unusual prominence in the novel and its stylistic separation from the novel sustain genre-conscious exegesis of the novel, and demand particular attention to the narrative’s dynamic and multilayered interaction with the larger family memoir novel that *Any Known Blood* is. Family novels and slave narratives are defamiliarized and critiqued in their proximity to African-American family memoirs, resulting in the “pluralizing of blackness” (Walcott 146). As Gilmore writes of memoirs, “the self becomes oddly multiple just at the time one might think it was most organized and coherent – the moment of telling its own story” (36). The use of a family memoir novel as a nest, and the different quality of the Canadian environment, gives the slave narrative a chance for a rebirth of kinds; though its flight is somewhat restricted to the family space, the fledgling slave narrative here is free of many of the limitations imposed by abolitionist editors or political expediency on nineteenth-century slave narratives. Encapsulating the force of the slave narrative and embedding it in a family memoir novel does not deprive it of its power but rather forces a fundamentally optimistic and liberating confrontation between slave narratives and contemporary family memoir novels. Hill’s novel reserves a place of pride for the slave narrative at a junction with the family memoir novel, from which situation he can formulate fictional responses
to ongoing questions of black and Canadian histories and identities. Working from models such as *Roots* and working alongside contemporary memoirists, Hill creates a series of uniquely African-Canadian voices, and, exploring the uses of primary genealogical and historical research, he reflects on the significance of historiography, autobiography, and fiction within one expansive family.
Endnotes

1 See Hill’s article, “Zebra: Growing Up Black and White in Canada” for further explanation of this metaphor.

2 According to George Handley’s reading of genealogy in postslavery literatures, Hill’s genealogical novel exposes the ironies of “the slave owner’s aspiration to a clear and exclusionary line of descent and of inheritance from white father to white son” (14). In these terms, “[g]enealogy, though traditionally understood to reach back through time, becomes a means of unveiling the latent heritage of the present” (14).

3 Noted African-Canadian scholar George Elliott Clarke asks the question, “why should Canada be registered as a black (minority) space by scholars of the transatlantic African Diaspora?” then answers that “blackness possesses a Canadian dimension that is recognized by engaging with black cultural works located here or that address black existence here. Canadacentric research is necessary because the expansive cosmopolitanism of the African Diaspora cannot be understood without taking into account the creative ways in which blackness has managed to thrive in this predominantly white settler-state” (Odysseys 10; original emphases).

4 “Because African-Canadian history is ignored in Canada, African-Canadian writers are forced to act as historians” (Clarke, “Introduction” xx). In opposition to Europeans “needing an empty space, a space without painful history,” black people “have the task of the necessary retrieval of our stolen history. We do not wish to run from our history but to recover it; our history is to us redemptive and restorative; inasmuch as it binds us in a common pain it binds us in a common quest for a balm for that pain” (Brand, Bread Out of Stone 37).

5 In Black Berry, Hill explains that the incident in the novel is based on a historically-authenticated episode in which seventy-five Oakville men (a much larger group than that in the novel) targeted the interracial couple Ira Johnson and Isabella Jones by burning crosses and taking the white girl back to her mother. Public opinion in Oakville largely supported the Klansmen’s violence. By contrast, in the novel, this incident is frightening but nonetheless comic, with Aberdeen’s loudmouth sister bossing the Klan members and the forces of law and order intervening to protect the interracial couple, so reminding this reader of another fictional, famous confrontation between Atticus Finch and the would-be Lynchers, defused by Scout Finch’s comically innocent question and reminder of obligation in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird.

6 See Fowler’s definition (123-25).

7 For instance, although Hill did assist Slaney in her research, and his father, Daniel Hill III, wrote an introduction to her book, it was not published until 2003, some six years after the publication of Any Known Blood.

8 Margaret Walker’s Jubilee is a historical novel that is a wholly fictionalized family story. Unlike historiographic metafiction, or the family memoir novel I outline here, this book contains few textual cues to the author’s involvement and investment in family history; these are claims made extra-textually in Walker’s explanation, How I Wrote Jubilee. Walker’s deep and abiding concerns over the status of truth and history, the
importance of diligent research, and the relationship between fact and fiction are worry wrinkles throughout this brief piece.

Although the lineage Cane V pursues is patrilineal, the novel’s inclusion of Mill, Annette, and the writings and personalities of other women recognize women’s contributions into the black family to an extent. Bell hooks reminds readers of the tangle of race and gender within the family.

Traditionally it has been important for black people to assert that slavery, apartheid, and continued discrimination have not undermined the humanity of black people, that not only has the race been preserved but that the survival of black families and communities are the living testimony of our victory. To acknowledge then that our families and communities have been undermined by sexism would not only require an acknowledgement that racism is not the only form of domination and oppression that affects us as a people; it would mean critically challenging the assumption that our survival as a people depends on creating a cultural climate in which black men can achieve manhood within paradigms constructed by white patriarchy.” (Talking Back 178)

There are many connections between Hill’s family’s history and that of the Canes beyond the scope of the present study which the interested reader can pursue through a comparison of Any Known Blood with the memoir Black Berry, Sweet Juice, and, to a lesser degree, in the brief memoir “Zebra: Growing up Black and White in Canada.”

Hill has written about this event on at least one other occasion, in his essay, “Zebra.”

Roughly speaking, Clarke would like to see blacks as a material and lived part of Canada’s “normative narrative,” whereas Walcott would like to stress blackness as a theoretical challenge to the normative narrative (Walcott, Black Like Who? 19).

Antislavery writers, narrators, and editors had access to a certain set of rhetorical tropes and an oft-euphemistic vocabulary to describe consensual sexual activity and sexual violence. Although at least two narrators, William Craft (292) and William Anderson (19), use the word “rape” to describe sexual exploitation under slavery, far more frequent is the use of phrases characterizing “licentious men” (Henry “Box” Brown 9) or the “licentious villain” (Josephine Brown 11) as having “hellish passions” (William Anderson 22), “base passions” (Kate Pickard 67), “deep moral corruption” (Mattison 50), “licentious passions” and “brutal designs” (John Thompson 31, 32), “base designs” (Elizabeth Keckley 40), “diabolical wishes” (Milton Clarke 75) or “infernal purposes” (Lewis Clarke 67). For the “victims to his unbridled passions” (Pickard 169), the act is “prostitution” and “shameful degradation (Pennington 200, 197) or “the greatest indignity” (Craft 274). A review of Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl echoed Jacobs’ own language in claiming that “[this book shows] as forcibly as any story we have ever read the moral pollution and perversion inevitable in a community where slavery is a recognized institution” (“Linda”). Clearly, such euphemisms of sexuality deprive black women of agency and pathologize interracial sexuality, sometimes known and deplored as “amalgamation” (Josephine Brown 11). (It is worth noting that some of the WPA slave narratives collected during the 1930s refuse these euphemisms.) Any Known Blood’s refusal of sexual euphemism is therefore linked to the novel’s regeneration and representation of healthy interracial relationships. To borrow Cornel
West’s terms (84), the novel demonstrates the taboos against black sexuality as it simultaneously opens a dialogue about black sexuality.

14 So pervasive is this archetype that Clarke’s review of Hill’s novel asserts “the journal [of Langston Cane I] reinforces the novel’s theme that pluck and luck can allow even a black slave to rise above his circumstances and find love and prosperity” (Odysseys 311). First, this is a lengthy letter with an intended audience; second, this slave initially escapes not to love and prosperity but to responsibilities he has no taste for. When the fighter escapes Harpers Ferry, he finds only temporary companionship with Diana and lasting penury.

15 Jean Vivie`es provides a definition of the picaresque’s “poverty, homelessness, marginality and beggary, hence the subsequent adventures on the high roads” (84). See also Charles Nichols’ article for an appreciation of the picaresque’s contributions to the slave narrative.

16 Some other examples of moral complexity are as follows: Harriet Jacobs struggles to explain her adulterous liaison with Mr. Sands and to maintain the sympathy of her Northern female audience. Both Moses Grandy (24) and Robert (or their editors) offer “justification” (Trumbull 23) of their decisions to remarry while their first (slave) wives were still alive. As with Wells Brown, all use such examples of moral culpability to further attack the system of slavery.

17 However, it is possible to read Hill’s first novel, Some Great Thing, as an attempt to configure African-Canadian identities through tense English-French relations (see Cuderr Dominguez 61).

18 As Winfried Siemerling has noticed, Hill titles one section of this book, “Crossing Borders” (Siemerling 31).

19 Hill quotes “Cross” and relates it to his racial identity in “Zebra: Growing Up Black and White in Canada” (45).
Chapter 6

Conclusion

Although slave narratives are certainly the most prominent influences on neo-slave narratives, authors of neo-slave narratives do not rely solely on slave narratives for simple historical and emotional verisimilitude, but rather pull together aspects of a number of literary models to accompany one another in articulating slaves’ experiences and legacies. The participation of the slave narrative in the neo-slave narrative is rarely a literary form of unquestioning nostalgia and is instead a set of visions and revisions of the slave narrative as its cultural position and meaning shifts. Such revisions enable the critique of multiple discourses and genres. Readers of neo-slave narratives should be wary of categorizing and interpreting these works in national or generic isolation and thereby denying their rich postmodern complexity of hypertextual relations. To ignore their multiple discursive and generic strands would be to drop the threads linking these works to pressing questions in current literary scholarship about identity, race, history, and the status of representation and testimony, and it would risk repeating a dismissal of the sustained imaginative endeavors and unique literary expressions of slave narratives themselves as inauthentic, formulaic, or ephemeral to larger literary movements. This thesis therefore demonstrates how neo-slave narratives employ varied modes of generic métissage or braiding that combine slave narratives with other genres and discourses in order to make slavery’s moral and experiential matrices meaningful and contemporary to readers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The attention given in each chapter to a single novel’s specific evocations of genre and discourse amply demonstrates the neo-slave narrative’s collective urgent
imperative toward plural identifications of slaves, of location, and of genre: a slave or an ex-slave can be a traveler, a missionary, a revolutionary, a prisoner, a victim, a criminal, a twentieth-century woman, a founding member of a family, and more; similarly, West Indians can be English, Americans can be Canadian, Africans can be American, and so on; finally, a neo-slave narrative can be a slave narrative, but it can also be speculative fiction, family memoir novel, prison writing, holocaust writing, travel writing, and so forth. I have attempted to identify and to theorize these pluralities and to remain aware of shared spaces as well as competing tensions between genres so as to “interrupt the totalizing momentum of both the study of genre and the critique of ideology” (Pratt 5).

Clearly, the novels illustrate that there are many different styles with which to revive genre and language but, more importantly, the study of these combinations demonstrates that métissage also permits a submerged critique of forms, including that of the slave narrative of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In short, there are different aesthetics of discursive confrontation.

Such braiding results in startlingly creative conjunctions that enfold and collapse distances between the contemporary and the historical, and also, somewhat unexpectedly, between the real (body) and the representational (language), in such a way as to identify the potentialities and limits of postmodern and postcolonial models of creation and interpretation. In Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge, the pastiche travel journal and slave narrative split analogy and actuality, in particular with references to reproduction, consumption, and animals. The postmodern fragmented polyphony of voices requires the reader to make connections and to work out the critique of the overtly Christian slave narrative and sentimental travel writing. In Higher Ground, the same author deploys
slave narrative and Holocaust writing to point out the differences between a prisoner’s insufficiently contextualized allusions and the remembered experiences of trauma, yet structurally relies on the prisoner’s sweeping statements to unite the three sections of the novel. Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* uses the perils of time travel to disarm the assumptions and analogies of the present day about slavery as these perils literally dis-arm the protagonist. In addition, time travel disrupts chronological coherence for both protagonist and reader. Lawrence Hill’s *Any Known Blood* provides a structuring genealogy and origin, but the protagonist’s research imposes its own structuring agenda to what is as much a collection of documents as a narrative, thus bringing present next to past. The narrator’s development imposes its own much more inclusive definition on the family and on racial identity. In short, all the novels suggest that the act of representing slavery (and therefore the act of writing neo-slave narratives) can be tantamount at times to a betrayal of history; nevertheless, demonstrating the seductions of hindsight through pushing the past up against the present can also be a means of working through history and historiography to reach this person called the slave.

In each novel, the particular form taken by this braiding shapes and is shaped by the thematic, stylistic, and structural elements of the book, which are in turn shaped by hypertextual negotiations. My analysis of precursor texts untangles these negotiations, in so doing contributing to knowledge about each novel. For instance, as I suggested in the introduction, the logic of each novel’s particular variety of hypertextuality and *métissage* is intimately related to the destination or outcome of the novel’s actions. In what follows, I quickly revisit each chapter in order to draw out the implications of the collective and
independent emphases and discoveries of the thesis and place them in their proper relations to one another.

The first two chapters examine two of Caryl Phillips’ novels, both of which contain sections that rely heavily on pastiche to evoke enslavement and incarceration. In discussing the first, Cambridge, I track the genre métissage in detail to many sources of late eighteenth-, early nineteenth-century English travel journal writing and British/West Indian slave narratives. This hypertextual analysis unearths what has been neglected in existing criticism of the novel: Phillips’ subtle program of selection, which allows the discourses of the two main characters and narrators, Emily (daughter of a West Indian plantation’s owner) and Cambridge (educated slave on the plantation), to overlap in places and to diverge in others. The departures, enshrined structurally in the novel’s fundamental division and juxtaposition of their narratives, especially enable a critique of each other’s preconceptions and limitations of discourse. For instance, Cambridge’s recorded experiences vividly illustrate the material impact of Emily’s philosophical maneuvering on the contentious topic of slavery, and resolutely exercise a gravitational pull toward the real, lived slavery she observes from afar. Though both characters attempt to resist scripts of colonial slavery, and though the heteroglossic voices of their narrating personae struggle within and against the imperatives of monologic discourse, they seem to be absorbed and silenced by the news report’s monopolizing and final account of events.

Polyphonic juxtaposition is a technique Phillips also has employed in Higher Ground, the second of his novels discussed, which differs from Cambridge in its more radical departure from novelistic coherence. As in the first chapter, an original
hypertextual analysis is undertaken, but here my emphasis is less on slave narratives and more on the second section’s pastiche of black men’s autobiographical and epistolary prison writing from the 1960s and 70s, its embrace of American black nationalism, and its rhetorical strategies. The new and substantial analysis of this prison writing presented here outlines how these rhetorical strategies, including analogies between prison and slavery and concentration camps, construct a bridge between the African slave narrative of the first section and the European holocaust writing of the third section, each of which implicitly and simultaneously confirms and challenges the prison writer’s use of such comparisons. More emphatically even than in Cambridge, each lonely protagonist’s story ends in the rejection of inadequate language and representation under the pressures of trauma. Only the reader’s appreciation of the intricately folded layers of hypertextuality, discourse, and generic métissage in these two novels permits one to construct and hold on to polyphony as a route to imaginative liberation; the actual prospects for each of these isolated characters are much more grim.

Generic braiding is much more diffused throughout Octavia Butler’s Kindred, which uses time travel, among other features of speculative fiction, to enable her 1976 protagonist to experience slavery firsthand instead of celebrating the US bicentennial of independence. Butler’s combination of speculative fiction and slave narrative cuts through the fallacies of contemporary historical judgments about slaves’ bounded choices, diminishes the distance between twentieth-century life and representations of slavery and violence, and exposes the weakness of analogies between paid work and slavery. This firsthand account of slavery rather self-consciously refers to slave narratives, but much more abruptly and compellingly enacts them as the protagonist finds
herself unable to remain a spectator of the past. Reading against the grain of many Butler critics, I focus on time travel’s logic to find that many aspects of the lived slave narrative pose a series of challenges to the gendered and racial assumptions of much speculative fiction. The difference between past and present is blurred repeatedly as perceptions of interracial relationships echo across time and as the damage of the past marks the protagonist’s body, which she carries into the future. Indeed, it is her maimed body that establishes itself in the narrative framework and continually reasserts materiality against historical representation. The diffusion or mingling of different (sometimes competing) popular genres results in a heavily damaged version of freedom from slavery, one that is more knowledgeable about and vigilant toward the present past.

The most optimistic version of generic métissage, as well as perhaps the most independent of its hypertexts, is Lawrence Hill’s relatively recent Any Known Blood. This novel records the narrator’s search for family origins, a stable sense of (racial) selfhood, and a writerly persona and goal. These searches take place predominantly within a loose form that I have termed a family memoir novel. Though attracting a growing body of critical commentary, the novel’s relationship with contemporary memoirs and its evocations and revisions of Alex Haley’s Roots and Osborne Anderson’s narrative have gone unnoticed until now. This novel tells the stories of five generations of family members in the structural context of the narrator’s discoveries of documents and creation of narratives from his family’s past. Only one of these documents, the last to be discovered, is in fact a slave narrative, which is embedded in the novel proper. The analysis of intertextuality explores this narrative’s, and the family memoir novel’s, connections with Canadian and American textual antecedents. The enclosed genre of
slave narrative is the logical destination of the search for origins. Its discovery precipitates comparisons between contemporary and nineteenth-century versions of racism and resistance, and it powerfully draws together the different versions of family history in a microcosm of shame and responsibility, providing a means for the narrator to heal himself and his family, and to create new connections.

The investigation of these novels’ hypertextual and generic affiliations has uncovered some areas requiring future attention if scholars are to fully understand the contributions of genre, and particularly of the imbrication of genres, to contemporary novels. In the simplest way, for example, readers might usefully apply the concept of métissage and its critical containment of tensions to other neo-slave or postslavery narratives I have been unable to include for reasons of space: Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*, Ernest Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, Charles Johnson’s *The Middle Passage* and *Oxherding Tale*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora*, Phyllis Perry’s *Stigmata*, Lorene Cary’s *The Price of a Child*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and many other novels. An interrogation of method and results could only increase our understanding of neo-slave narratives. To turn to an opportunity for a thematic approach, my emphasis on genre métissage partly obscured an initial line of questioning having to do with the presence and meanings of scars and their coding of sexual violence in postslavery literatures. Pursuing this motif might be another way to unpack and test some of the speculations about the real and the body put forward in the introduction and touched on throughout the thesis. This approach would be more systematically attuned to the ways gender and race intersect than I have been able to be. Moreover, the prevalence
of the scar/wound metaphor for slavery is central to postslavery cultures, and therefore sites of language other than the ostensibly literary could be included.

Though I anticipated these issues, I did not recognize others till later. Of importance to the continuing study of postslavery literatures is developing the implications of the neo-slave narrative’s emphasis on autobiographical forms and its central theme of the journey. The intimacy of slave narratives with many autobiographical forms – letter and journal writing, the confession, travel writing, the memoir – manifests a fascinating complex of personae and narrative strategies directly related to current questions about identity formation and identity politics. Given the recent popularity of and critical attention paid to autobiographical forms, this focus seems likely to provide a topical entry to neo-slave narratives for many readers. Additionally, thinking about the politics of location as the result of the roundabout motif, I notice that travel and displacement are clearly central to neo-slave narratives. Often these novels situate their defining journeys precisely in the space between travel as luxurious tourism and travel as complete dispossession. *Cambridge* counters a wealthy Englishwoman’s lamented travails of travel with the twice-dire losses of a slave; *Higher Ground* more allusively suggests the horror and resulting fractures of the journey as both escape and confinement; *Kindred*’s time travel is the primary vehicle of speculative fiction in the novel and contrasts the white male’s opportunism with the slave’s fear; and in *Any Known Blood*, the narrator’s pilgrimage of research is privileged in comparison with his ancestor’s fraught journey North as a fugitive slave. If we were to include in this pattern Paule Marshall’s novels *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, which contrasts temporary residence with permanent privation, and *Praisesong for the Widow*, which
contrasts the cruise ship and the slave ship, and then the lens provided by Jamaica
Kincaid’s nonfictional indictment of Caribbean tourism in *A Small Place*, I suspect this
approach would focus many of the prevailing concerns and strategies of neo-slave
narratives in a timely and poignant discussion of privilege and poverty. My findings
suggest that developing these four areas further could clarify the relations in
contemporary fiction between slave narratives and other genres.

Finally, and most crucially, along with the growing understanding that neo-slave
narratives rely in unexpectedly fractured ways on precursor slave narrative texts, the
discovery of neo-slave narratives outside of the US is of utmost significance to the study
of postslavery literatures. In spite of twenty years of black diasporic and postslavery
studies, there is, astonishingly, no book-length study of British, West Indian, Canadian,
and/or African reworkings of the slave narrative. Only a few articles on the subject have
been written, in fact. Such a project should be influenced by yet counterbalance the
many American studies of slave, neo-slave and postslavery narratives. The shape my
research takes in the future may well be dictated by the dearth of critical attention to
works such as David Dabydeen’s *A Harlot’s Progress*, George Elliott Clarke’s *Beatrice
Chaney*, Orlando Patterson’s *Die the Long Day*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Slave Girl*, Caryl
Phillips’ *Crossing the River*, Nalo Hopkinson’s *The Salt Roads*, Michelle Cliff’s *Free
Enterprise* and Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*, in addition to the novels by Phillips
and Hill that are discussed here. Such a project should contribute greatly to scholarly
understanding of the ways in which American models are adopted and perhaps modified
by writers in other parts of the black diaspora and should highlight the literary legacies of
slavery in places – Canada and the U.K. – that seem to have a tendency to overlook the far-reaching implications of slave testimony for the world and for literature.


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