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Rewriting the Past in Postmodern Slave Narratives

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Abstract

This paper traces the evolution of the postmodern slave narrative. It pays special attention to the emergence of this genre as a continuation of nineteenth-century slave narratives and a response to pro-slavery writing, which appropriated African American history to encourage prejudice, stereotyping, and cultural misrepresentation. Using William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) as the paradigmatic text, which initiated a critical debate over its authenticity, as well as subsequent intertextual deconstructions of its historical bigotry, the paper juxtaposes Styron's text to two postmodern neo-slave narratives – Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986) and Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979). Highlighting the correlation between the novels' postmodern narrative strategies and their attempt to engage in historical revisionism and convey the authentic reality of the slave experience, it argues that both Williams and Butler successfully de/re-construct and re-write/right the dominant narrative of African American history by depicting a black woman's first-hand experience of the past and inscribing the physical wounds of slavery into the present. Finally, it reviews the cinematic representation of slavery and racial stereotypes through several representative slavery films – D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013) – and classifies Gerima's and McQueen's films as representatives of a new trend of transferring slave narratives to the big screen.

*Keywords***:** slave narrative, postmodern slave narrative, racial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, slavery, historical revisionism, master text.

Introduction

Postmodern slave narratives originate from antebellum slave narratives and represent a contemporary attempt to convey and reevaluate the reality of slave experience in response to the long history of pro-slavery writing. Pro-slavery writers distorted African American history, promoted prejudice against black people, and treated misreadings, misinterpretations, and presumptions as historical facts. These "historical facts" were then used and re-used in popular culture and everyday life in countless books, films, and cartoons. The 1960s Civil Rights- and Black Power Movements brought about a change in the way we view African American history. Master texts created by pro-slavery writers and used by the dominant culture to misrepresent African American experience were exposed by black historians as fraudulent representations of the past. Resisting such representations, they turned to examining history from the "bottom up," using slave narratives, folk heritage, and unwritten history of African American cultural life under slavery. African Americans became empowered and acquired a renewed respect for black culture and history, and this change positively affected writers of postmodern slave narratives. These black writers were the key to rewriting the past and correcting history's wrongs.

Postmodern slave narratives examine slavery from the slave's point of view; they raise the questions of racial stereotypes and cultural appropriation, open a debate between the oppressive pro-slavery representations of the past and the slaves' authentic experience of that same past, and present a battle between the dominant pro-slavery form of writing, which perpetuates the slavery mentality, and a new form of writing that seeks to liberate the slave. Postmodern slave narratives are contemporary works of fiction about slavery in its historical context that also reflect upon modern times, integrating numerous elements of the postmodern style, such as the fantastic, satire, speculative fiction, and realism, to rewrite history and correct its wrongs.

This paper examines the circumstances of the emergence of the postmodern slave narrative and the ways African American writers rewrite the past in those narratives. The first chapter introduces the slave narrative and outlines its history. The second chapter explores the cause of the appearance of the postmodern slave narrative in William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) and describes the circumstances of the development of the postmodern slave narrative. The third chapter interprets the way Sherley Anne Williams rewrites history, challenges the master text, deconstructs stereotypes, and corrects history's lies through her novel *Dessa Rose* (1986). The fourth chapter investigates how the usage of

time travel as a narrative device in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) enables a better understanding of the past through first-hand experience and examines the consequences the past has on the present. The final chapter reviews the cinematic representation of slavery and racial stereotypes through several representative slavery films – D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993), Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), and Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

1. A Short History of the Slave Narrative

The history of black America began "a year before the arrival of the celebrated *Mayflower*, 113 years before the birth of George Washington, 244 years before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation," when a Dutch "man-of-war" ship sailed into Jamestown, Virginia, harbor "and dropped anchor into the muddy waters of history" (Bennett, Jr. 28). Black history began with the European slave trade that began in 1444 and lasted for more than four hundred years. According to Lerone Bennett, Jr., Africa lost an estimated forty million people during the slave trade, and some twenty million of them ended up in America. Millions lost their lives in Africa during and after their capture or on the ships and plantations (29). Bennett, Jr. illustrates the slave trade through the experience of "a black man who stepped out of his house for a breath of fresh air and ended up, ten months later, in Georgia with bruises on his back and a brand on his chest" (29). However, prejudice against people of color appeared only as a direct result of slavery and was not the cause of it. White people regarded themselves as either Englishmen and/or Christian, and "the word *white*, with its burden of arrogance and biological pride" (Bennett, Jr. 40) appeared after the creation of the ideology of racism that justified the "superiority" of white people and the "inferiority" of black people. The people who created this ideology of racism were the very same people who "decided to base the American economic system on human slavery organized around the distribution of melanin in human skin" (Bennett, Jr. 45). According to the 1860 U.S. Census report, there were about four million slaves in America by 1860 (qtd. in Bennett, Jr. 87). It was against the law to teach them to read or write; families were torn apart; children were sold from their mothers, and slavery truly became a "peculiar institution, and Southerners knew it" (Stampp 20). Slaves were regarded as "chattels personal" or "human property" (Stampp 192-3), and legally, they were more property than human.

Slave owners usually presumed how slaves felt because of racial prejudice. They believed slaves to be contended in their state as slaves because of their "innate inferiority," and most slaves took advantage of this and even pretended to be what their masters wanted them to be: "No, massa, me no want be free, have good massa, take care of me when I sick, never 'buse nigger; no, me no want to be free" (Stampp 87). Pro-slavery writers promoted the prejudice against black people and treated presumptions as facts in their writings. In fact, pro-slavery writings were considered as the only source for the study of slavery until the middle of the twentieth century. Historians, such as Ulrich B. Phillips, whose book *American Negro Slavery* (1918) was "the most authoritative work on the subject as late as the 1950s" (Blight),

portrayed slavery as a benevolent institution with happy slaves and good owners. In his book Phillips claimed that "every plantation of the standard Southern type was, in fact, a school constantly training and controlling pupils who were in a backward state of civilization" (Phillips). Besides Ulrich B. Phillips, sociologist Robert E. Park and anthropologist Franz Boaz claimed that "the experience of slavery had erased most, if not all, African influences" (Trap). Only in the middle of the twentieth century were the slave narratives acknowledged as sources for the study of slavery and only then did the "plantation myth" actually become a myth.

According to Trap, a large number of autobiographies written by African Americans who escaped slavery were published in the first half of the nineteenth century and were a part of abolitionist literature that aimed to make their readers aware of the cruelty and immorality of slavery. The narratives that were published in the 1840s and 1850s helped fuel Northern opposition to slavery and helped to intensify the sectional crisis that would lead to the breakdown of the Union in 1861. The majority of slave narratives were written by slaves who escaped slavery from the southern border states, while slaves in the Deep South had far less opportunity and faced far greater risk in attempting to escape to the North (Trap).

According to Gould, the slave narrative first emerged during the 1770s and 1780s with the rise of secular social philosophy, the rise of sentimentalism, and the proliferation of more radical and revolutionary ideas about natural rights. These movements shaped the genre's publication history, its major themes and narrative designs (11). These early narratives were sponsored and published by Evangelical Christian groups that shaped the language and themes of the slave narrative, and they focused both on religious and racial experiences of the day. The first black writers of narratives "largely wrote within the norms of 'civilized' or 'Christian' identity – one that was more often than not associated directly with 'Englishness'" (Gould 12). One such narrative is the *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760). These narratives were "generically fluid" (Gould 13), and were frequently received and categorized as spiritual autobiography, the conversion narrative, the providential tale, criminal confession, Indian captivity narrative, sea adventure story, and picaresque novel. Many of these eighteenth-century narratives exhibited "an uneasy tension between evangelical didacticism and titillating commercial value" (Gould 13).

In the 1770s, another antislavery genre emerged that critiqued slavery – the political petition. One such petition was filed by a slave named Belinda to the Massachusetts legislature in 1782. According to Gould, this petition "employs two strategies that will

become staples to the antebellum slave narrative: the sentimental drama of the slave trade's disruption of the African home, and the moral bankruptcy of social law compared with natural law" (13-14). However, Belinda's petition, as well as Hammon's narrative, cannot be easily classified in one specific genre as political writings often blend with sentimental autobiography, "lending political arguments the emotional weight of autobiography, and providing a source of political arguments for the developing slave narrative" (Gould 14).

One of the main reasons why Evangelical Christian groups, like the Methodists and Baptists, published slave narratives was that these early narratives could also be read as a religious genre. These groups emphasized the importance of the individual's "new birth" and published black autobiographies because of their "spiritual value in disseminating religious ideas and thereby converting souls" (Gould 14-15). The first narrative to directly address the evils of slavery was *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukasaw Gronniosaw, an African Prince* (1772). In addition to emphasizing "the virtue of benevolence" that was important to evangelical piety, the narrative also describes a religious conversion from "African heathenism to Protestant Christianity." Accordingly, "Religious conversion and Christian feeling" became important conventions of the slave narrative by the end of the eighteenth century (Gould 15-16).

From the early 1770s until 1807, the abolition of the slave trade marked the rise of organized antislavery movements on both sides of the Atlantic. Supporting black writers, the movements produced an abundance of antislavery literature. These groups, mostly Quakers and humanitarians, helped to form a "transatlantic print culture" which provided the slave narrative with "flexible rhetorical strategies and helped to sharpen its political focus" (Gould 16). The politics of abolishing the slave trade is visible in many early narratives, such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (1787), and *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1791). Abolitionism also introduced more secular arguments in the slave narrative. Reinterpreting Locke's philosophy about natural rights became an antislavery strategy that found its way in the slave narrative as well. Writers like Thomas Paine, Anthony Benezet, Clarkson, Granville Sharp, John Marrant, and James Forten "re-possessed Locke's ideas to argue for the absurdity of equating human beings – who inherently possessed the right to life – with material possessions." Accordingly, "The full humanity of the African" became the slave narrative's central premise (Gould 17-18).

According to Gould, during the 1830s and 1840s, abolitionism became more radical and more organized, and this drastically affected the thematic and formal features of the slave narrative (18). William Lloyd Garrison changed the direction of antislavery politics by founding American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) in 1833. His newspaper *The Liberator* became very important for antislavery issues: "*The Liberator* was Garrison's response to his frustration that abolitionism was not working and that many of the churches were entrenched in a slave-owning culture" (Sinanan 67). The priority of the antebellum slave narrative, which was closely tied to the abolitionist movement, was to expose "the evils of the Southern plantation (and the false paternalistic myths supporting it)" (Gould 19). The slave narrative started focusing on the daily lives of the slaves because the readers and publishers required "detailed evidence" (Gould 19). The thematic and narrative conventions of the slave narrative, which were not fully developed in the early eighteenth-century narratives, took shape in the antebellum slave narrative, exposing:

> the depravity of Southern planters and the irrepressible fact of sexual miscegenation, the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity, scenes of brutal whipping and torture, rebellious slaves who are murdered, and the strategic mechanisms by which the plantation maintains what Douglass called the "mental and moral darkness" of enslavement. (Gould 19)

According to Bruce, Jr., slave narratives tended to look in three distinct, though related, directions. Firstly, they countered pro-slavery arguments by undermining the ideas and images on which those arguments were based. Secondly, slave narratives participated in larger processes of democratization by helping shape the process of democratic rhetoric and practices in the nation's politics. Thirdly, they helped making the idea of freedom valued and contested in the era (28-29).

Nineteenth-century debates over slavery significantly shaped the slave narrative. Actually, many authors, like Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, J. W. C. Pennington, and Samuel Ringgold Ward, were also speakers. Bruce, Jr. describes several key issues which were the focus of antebellum debates over slavery. First and foremost, the debates revolved around the issue of race since slavery's defenders argued that people of African descent were intellectually and morally inferior to white people and were, naturally, only fit for slavery. Frederick Douglass challenged racist pro-slavery writers by example, demonstrating his own ability, and the ability of others like him, with his "own biography." Another key issue was to

disprove the advocates of slavery by disputing their claim that the institution of slavery was actually a "positive good" for the nation and the slaves. The defenders of slavery contended that the institution of slavery could prove valuable to the slaves since they could be taught the Christian religion. Naturally, countless examples in slave narratives demonstrated this to be false. Their narrators instead demonstrated the perversion of true Christianity in the South where Southern churches offered a religion that served slavery more than God. Family and sexuality, key issues in the debates, are described in countless narratives by slaves. These narratives demonstrate how slavery destroyed families by selling their members, and they portray the male slaveholders as sexual predators. After about 1800, slavery existed only in the South, so by the 1830s, the national slavery debates focused on sectional divisions in the United States. The key issue of Southern defenders of slavery became the patriarchal plantation system with happy slaves and kind slaveholders working together in peace and harmony. The narrators exposed the "plantation myth" by emphasizing the centrality of violence to slavery as a social form and a labor system (29-33).

As anticipated, pro-slavery writers responded to slave narratives usually by trying to discredit the narratives' authenticity. They claimed that African Americans could not be literate, let alone as articulate as, for example, Frederick Douglass, and that the narratives were ghostwritten by white abolitionists. There were, in fact, fake narratives and narratives that were dictated to and molded by white abolitionists to further their cause. Additionally, abolitionists frequently used prefaces to legitimate these narratives, so that, as Weinstein put it, slave narratives are surrounded by the voices of white people: "Their function is to vouch for the integrity of the narrator and to authenticate the facts of her narrative lest a suspicious reader think that a slave remembers too much, writes too well, or has had experiences too romantic to be believed" (115). If a narrative was too good, then the supporters of slavery thought that a slave could not have written it, and if it was too melodramatic, they thought that it could not have been true. While reviewing these works, even well intentioned abolitionists revealed racial condescension and primitivism referring to African Americans as "poor slaves" or "native peoples." Even Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), debunked the quality of Wheatley[1]'s poems and used her as an example of the "inferiority of Africans in general" (Gould 22). Even though fraudulent narratives written by white abolitionists existed, they were easy to identify. In the Introduction to *The*

[1] Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) was an African slave and poet in colonial America. Her best known poem is "On Being Brought from Africa to America."

Bondwoman's Narrative, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., reveals how such a fraud can be detected. He says that white authors did not use real names of people in their narratives; the narratives always read "like a novel[s]," they usually unconsciously revealed racist assumptions about black people, and their "acts of literary minstrelsy or ventriloquism" could never successfully 'pass for black'" just like Al Jolson, Mae West, Elvis Presley, or Eminem, who imitated blackness to one degree or another, could never be confused with real black people (Crafts xxix). Unlike white authors, black authors described black people as people, first and foremost. White authors, on the other hand, "used whiteness as the default for humanity" (Crafts xxxii). Blackness is always marked by white authors with descriptions of *their* color and distinctive "African features." Sinanan uses an example from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to show how abolitionist writing was often as racist as pro-slavery writing. Stowe describes Eva as "the fair high-bred child" and Topsy "the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil and vice" (Sinanan 61).

Yet, despite all the prejudice and racism, slave narratives amassed a huge audience in the antebellum era. Many slave narratives became bestsellers; Douglass's *Narrative* sold 30,000 copies within the first five years of its publication, and the narratives written by Charles Ball, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, Henry Bibb, James Pennington, Solomon Northup, and Ellen and William Craft were also widely read (Blight). Many narratives were translated into French, German, Dutch, and Russian. Blight writes that the slave narratives were responsible for Harriet Beecher Stowe's great success with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. Blight considers slave narratives in America to be "the foundation of an African American literary tradition, as well as unique glimpses into the souls of slaves themselves." He estimates that there were between sixty-five and seventy slave narratives published in America or England between 1760 and 1860, and that they were "windows into the nature of slavery itself; they were first-person witnesses to the will to be known and the will to write among a people so often set apart and defined out of the human family of letters" (Blight).

The slave narrative continued to play a dominant role from the end of the Civil War until well into the 1920s. From the turn of the nineteenth century to the end of the Civil War, eighty-seven slave narratives were published in the United States, 1.3 narratives on average annually. Between 1866 and the publication of *Up from Slavery* (1901), fifty-four more narratives, 1.5 narratives on average annually, appeared (Andrews viii). Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, African American writers attempted to soften the horrors of slavery. Post bellum narratives were thus dedicated to the "proposition that something positive, something sustaining, could be gleaned from that past" (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in

'Freedom's' Time" 151). According to Eyerman, slavery was not treated as "the ultimate evil," as was the case in abolitionist literature, but as a "tragic condition" that not only brought hardship and misery to black people but also provided grounds for racial uplift (qtd. in McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 151). For Andrews, the slave narrative after slavery was the most democratic literary genre accepted by African Americans in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century (ix).

According to Andrews, slave narratives in the post-slavery era evolved out of Reconstruction (1865-1877), which aimed to help the defeated South recover from the devastation of conquest and allow the newly freed men and women of the South to claim the rights and opportunities that emancipation seemed to promise (ix):"If the slave narrative of the abolitionist era focused on the separation of families, judging it one of slavery's greatest sins, narratives during and after Reconstruction focused on reunions" (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 153).

At the turn of the century, African Americans confronted the problem of "the color line," a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, which refers to an invisible but powerful social divide structured to separate the races. Booker T. Washington came to prominence at this time and dedicated himself to making Tuskegee Institute a "Black Utopia" (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 154). After Frederick Douglass's death in 1895, Washington desired to become his "heir apparent" although their views on slavery were completely different. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, according to McDowell, signaled a "new wave of revisionism in post-bellum Afro-American literature" ("Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 155). Douglass had likened slavery to a "tomb," whereas Washington likened it to a "school" (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 155). Washington's narrative, which arose from the slave narrative, produced "a counter-narrative" which was full of optimism at a time when the position of African Americans was far from optimistic (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 156).

According to McDowell, the literary marketplace of late nineteenth-century America offered limited options. It favored either plantation fiction or racist fiction from the likes of Thomas Dixon, from whose novel *The Clansman* D. W. Griffith adapted his film *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Yet, some authors broke these rules. One of them was Charles Waddell Chesnutt, who did not conform to the popular formulas of the "plantation" fiction and its stereotypic treatment of former slaves. At a time when popular fiction had become idyllic and benign, pastoralizing slavery and idealizing the antebellum South, he brought up the topic of slavery, disrupting "the literary economy of whiteness at the turn of the century" ("Telling

Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 157-158). W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) was yet another direct challenge to postbellum representations of slavery and a challenge to the forms and assumptions of the slave narrative. Unlike Washington, Du Bois considered slavery to be a social evil, "the germ of a range of intractable social ills amounting to a form of neo-slavery" (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 159). Du Bois' *The Souls* abandoned the developmental logic of the antebellum slave narrative, helped inaugurate an "inward" turn to the spiritual realm, and paved the way for alternative models for subsequent African American writers (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 160). One of the writers Du Bois paved the way for was James Weldon Johnson, who in his *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* focuses on the "inner life" of a character who analyzes his feelings as opposed to "publicly fighting the cause of [the] race" (qtd. in McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 161). Furthermore, his work is a clear indication of the distance African American narratives made, following both the ante- and the postbellum narratives, and is considered to be a transitional figure linking the nineteenth century to the Harlem Renaissance (McDowell, "Telling Slavery in 'Freedom's' Time" 162).

After the turn of the nineteenth century, the slave narrative's value came into question. Slave narratives became "quaint, historical documents about a (sometimes regrettable) past" (S. Smith 190). The truth about the horrors of slavery became replaced by racist misrepresentations of the past in films like *Birth of a Nation* or *Gone with the Wind*. Only with the Civil Rights Movement and the 1960s will the slave narrative become of value once again and the misrepresentations of the past be rewritten in postmodern slave narratives.

2. William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and the Postmodern Slave Narrative

According to Rushdy, postmodern, or neo-slave narratives, are "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). Spaulding claims that the writers of postmodern slave narratives view the history of slavery as in need of *re-formation*, and that they set out to reform our conception of American slavery by depicting a more complex, nuanced view of black identity in the context of American slavery. The postmodern slave narrative represents a political act of narration designed to reshape our view of slavery and its impact on our cultural condition, and is designed to intrude upon history as a means to re-form it (4). Angelyn Mitchell, on the other hand, prefers the term "liberatory narratives." She claims that the narrative is "self-conscious thematically of its antecedent text, the slave narrative; is centered on its enslaved protagonist's life as a free citizen; and is focused on the protagonist's conception and articulation of herself as a free, autonomous, and self-authorized self" (qtd. in V. Smith 170). Carolivia Herron defines postmodern slave narratives as "contemporary narratives of slavery" that theorize about "the nature and formation of black subjects under the slave system and in the present by utilizing slave characters and the condition of slavery as focal points" (qtd. in V. Smith 170).

Generally, postmodern slave narratives are contemporary works of fiction about slavery in its historical context that also reflect upon modern times with innovations in the formal characteristics of slave narratives. The postmodern slave narrative uses elements of the fantastic, satire, speculative fiction, and other characteristics of the postmodern style, but it can also be a realist novel. According to Valerie Smith, the earliest postmodern slave narrative is Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966); however, the discussion of the genre would not be complete without some mention of Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (1936) that anticipates much of the cultural work that later texts in the genre perform (170). The representative works of postmodern slave narratives are Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (170-172).

The story of the postmodern or neo-slave narrative started in the 1960s with the civil rights and Black Power movements that created "a change in the historiography of slavery" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). According to Rushdy, the years between 1966 and 1968 brought about a shift in the current social movements and the intellectual trends in the

American historical profession with the emergence of the Black Power movement and the rise of New Left social history (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). New Left social historians recognized that history was made from the "bottom up," and they began to study it that way, changing the way slavery had been studied. In the midst of these changes, in 1967, William Styron published the first novel written "from the slave's point of view" – *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). Black Power intellectuals started a new discourse on slavery by confronting Styron's novel on a number of issues, namely, his representation of Nat Turner, his use of the slave's point of view, his appropriation of African American culture, his traditional portrayal of slavery, and the novel's troubling political message. Rushdy argues that all these events – the shift from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power movement, the evolution from a consensus to New Left history in the historiography of slavery, and the development of a Black Power intellectual presence in the dialogue over Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* – constitute the moment of origin for the neo-slave narratives (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 4-5).

The book that deeply influenced Styron's *Confessions*, and even served as its supplemental text, was Stanley Elkins's *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Academic Life* (1959). Rushdy provides three reasons why it is important to focus on this book. First, Elkins provides us with a key text at the transitional moment between the demise of consensus and the rise of New Left social history. Second, historians in the sixties persistently focused on Elkins because they believed his work to be representative of precisely that school of historiography whose premises and dictates they wished to contest. Finally, *Slavery* influenced the authors of two of the most controversial texts to emerge from the sixties: the Moynihan Report, the "most refuted document in American history," and Styron's *Confessions* (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 27-28). Elkins's book was written in 1959 and was divided into four chapters. From these four chapters three distinct theses developed, each of which came under attack by historians and scholars. The first thesis was a comparison of Latin American and North American slave systems and the "closed" nature of the North American slave system. The second, and the most widely discussed, thesis was that this "closed" slave system produced a personality type of the "Sambo," a slave who was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but also a liar who steals. Finally, the third thesis was that the abolitionists were products of Transcendentalism (Rushdy 30). Apart from being reprimanded for his theses, Elkins was also criticized for not using slave testimony in his research. This discourse prompted historians to write the history of slavery "from the bottom up," by allowing slaves to speak for themselves via testimonies, folklore, and

autobiographies. However, historical writing on slavery was not only affected by what Elkins wrote about the subject but also by what people read into it, or more precisely, what they misread. This misreading of Elkins's main thesis found its way into popular psychology texts, social commentary, government policy, and finally back into academic discourse by 1968 because Styron wrote his *Confessions* based on his misreading of *Slavery*. Readers between 1963 and 1965 misread Elkins's thesis about the infantilization of slaves in a "closed" institution of slavery, and interpreted it in a way that African Americans remained infantilized, to a lesser extent, even in the "open" institutions of contemporary society. What is even worse, a number of books arose between 1964 and 1965 that extended Elkins's analysis of slave personality to an analysis of the personalities of contemporary African Americans (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 40-41).

In early 1968, John Henrik Clarke published a book of literary criticism titled *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. Together with William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, it "form[s] a site of historical and cultural contestation at a crucial moment in the post-civil rights era" (Rushdy 54). This debate between the novel's critics and Styron's defenders is an interesting cultural phenomenon that reveals not only how the political climate of the sixties was changing but also the formation of a new discourse on slavery and the rise of a new intellectual movement. Rushdy uses three terms to differentiate between those who were part of the debate over Styron's novel – "reviewers," to designate those who wrote initial reviews of Styron's novel in 1967 or 1968; "critics," for those who wrote critical commentaries on the novel in 1968 (mostly the critics from Clarke's book); and "respondents," for those who wrote in response to Clarke's *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 55). According to Rushdy, the issues raised by critics during this debate over Styron's *Confessions* have affected the study of slavery since 1968. Furthermore, the issues of cultural appropriation they raised have determined the trajectory of the neo-slave narratives published since then, and they also set a paradigm for the neo-slave narratives of the seventies and the eighties by mobilizing the new discursive formation on slavery in the field of cultural production (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 56).

Some reviewers, however, praised Styron's novel and called it "the most profound treatment we have had of slavery in our literature. And the only one that tells the story from the slave's point of view." Furthermore, they claimed that the only person who could write from a "slave's point of view" in 1967 was a white southerner because a black writer "would have probably stacked the cards, producing in a mood of unnerving rage and indignation, a melodrama of saints and sinners" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 56). On the other

hand, the respondents argued that the whole debate was over an innocent man attacked by a group of ten "thugs" who resorted to a smear campaign of Styron himself. Additionally, the respondents, using insulting and racist language, suggested that the critics lacked "objectivity" because of their race and affiliation to the Black Power movement, "which increasingly demands conformity, myth-making, and historical fabrication" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 57). Withal, the critics argued that Styron's work was an appropriation of a slave's voice and less a "meditation on history." They claimed that the central problem was that the "writing of Styron's book was a political gesture," an act of "cultural dominance" and "cultural imperialism" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 58).

Because of their disinclination to examine history from the "bottom up," to include slave testimony into their research, the historians have failed to comprehend the cultural traditions of black people, and have misunderstood and misread certain accounts. One of these misreadings is the absence of Nat Turner's wife from the book, and another one is the exaggerated presence of Margaret Whitehead. According to Rushdy, the critics and respondents misread Thomas Gray's *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831) and presumed that Nat Turner did not have a wife, and in misreading Styron's novel, they gave too much importance to Margaret Whitehead (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 59). Although the critics refer to Gray's *Confessions* as the "primary historical document," they also point to its limitations in the form of "obviously spurious" sentences and the fact that it is a text "prepared by a white man hostile to Nat Turner and the cause he represented" (qtd. in Rushdy 59). While the respondents argue that the absence of Nat Turner's wife from the narrative is proof that he did not have one, the critics argue that he indeed had a wife and they give an explanation as to why Turner would not mention her in his interview with Gray. In a letter to the *New York Review of Books*, Anna Mary Wells argues that Turner's wife was "tortured under the lash" in order to reveal her husband's hiding place; therefore, wanting to spare her further suffering, Turner does not mention her to Gray (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 60). Furthermore, there were records and mentions in papers of Turner's wife after the rebellion, which both Styron and the respondents failed to research. Moreover, Turner does not mention anyone still living at the time to Gray for the same reason he does not mention his wife. The only people he does mention are already dead or presumed dead. He only mentions his mother, father, and grandmother (Gray 7).

The respondents argued that Turner was motivated by his religious sensibility and his love for his people, not by his lustful infatuation for a white woman, whereas the critics saw only an author "immersed in a white-racist sexual fantasy" who has his protagonist constantly

masturbate while fantasizing about white women, and having white women mediate his relationship with God and his relationship with his community (qtd. in Rushdy 61). At the very end of the novel, Turner says that he would have done it all again, kill everyone, yet spare "her that showed me Him whose presence I had not fathomed or maybe never even known. God, how early it is! Until now I had almost forgotten His name" (Styron 337). Even though the respondents and Styron deny this claim, it is clear that Margaret Whitehead mediates his relationship with God. Furthermore, Styron describes Turner as a man who hates his own people. He considered Hark to be a "bootlicking Sambo" (47); he even called him a "snivelin' black toadeatin' white man's bootlickin' scum" (48); field hands, for him, are "a lower order of people – a ragtag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth . . . faceless and nameless toilers" (109), the very sight of them "touched me with a loathing so intense that it was akin to disgust, bellysickness, and I turned my eyes away" (139). Nevertheless, when he sees Margaret Whitehead, "then slowly and softly, like a gentle outrush of breath, my hatred of the Negroes diminishes, dies, replaced by a kind of wild, desperate love for them" (Styron 85). It is clear that she mediates his relationship with his community as well. The critics were right in suggesting that Styron had performed an act of cultural appropriation "by reading the past, and reading slave testimony about the past, through the filter of a decaying discourse on slavery" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 62).

Not only did Styron use texts that created myths about black people and promoted racism but he also created new myths and racial stereotypes in his book based on misreadings and misunderstandings. His portrayal of Margaret Whitehead implies that sexual lust for white women determines Nat Turner's relationship with God, and is also the force that drives his rebellion against white people. What is more, Styron's novel repeats and enhances racist stereotypes and myths about black males, constantly confuses political violence and sexuality, and "constitutes a regressive replaying of the national history of those stereotypes" (Rushdy 63). Styron consistently conveys Turner's spirituality through sexuality. At the end of the novel he describes Turner in his cell with his last thoughts of God mixed with sexual fantasies about Margaret Whitehead. The phrase "I come quickly" is repeated a number of times, and as he thinks of her, "the desire swells" within him and he "feel[s] the warmth flow" into his "loins" while his legs "tingle with desire," and at last "with tender stroking motions I pour out my love within her" (Styron 335). As Rushdy remarks, Turner achieves redemption by achieving orgasm (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 63). This is certainly not a laudatory description of someone awaiting death, and this is not even remotely based on actual events described in the original narrative. Gray describes Turner in his final moments "daring to raise his manacled

hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man" (19). In his final moments, Turner turns to God and his hands are chained so he is not able, even if he wanted to, to masturbate. However, this is not the only occasion that Styron portrays Turner in this way. Turner masturbates throughout the novel. His masturbatory fantasies are always about "a nameless white girl . . . a young girl with golden curls" (138). Styron does not fail to imply that Turner is not the only black man having fantasies about white women, reinforcing the myth about black men's lust for white women: "In later life, of course, I learned that such an infatuation for a beautiful white mistress on the part of a black boy was not at all uncommon, despite the possibility of danger" (Styron 142). The critics claimed that Styron used the theme of sex to reduce "the social to the personal," "institutionalized oppression to isolated acts of personal outrage," "history to sex" (qtd. in Rushdy 64).

With descriptions of sex, Styron repeats the old stereotypes of the black rapist and the black penis that were present in the sixties as well. Turner imagines raping white women on several occasions. He fantasizes about raping Margaret Whitehead as they are riding alone: "I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration. And let her scream until the empty pinewoods echoed to her cries and no one would be the wiser" (Styron 291). Later on, a voice says to him to take her, "without mercy take your pleasure upon her innocent round young body until she is half mad with fright and pain" (295). The voice even tells him to abandon his great mission just for the "terror and bliss" of having Margaret Whitehead. However, Margaret Whitehead is not the only woman he imagines raping. He also imagines raping Major Ridley's fiancé "with abrupt, brutal, and rampaging fury, watching the compassion melt from her tear-stained face as I bore her to the earth . . . and forcing apart those soft white thighs, exposed the zone of fleecy brown hair into which I drove my black self with stiff merciless thrusts" (Styron 209). Interestingly, the fantasies about rape come after the women show pity and compassion. The reviewers and respondents call the scene with Major Ridley's wife "one of the finest episodes in the novel" and a crucial moment in the story that provided us with "a psychologically 'true' observation" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 65). Turner himself explained that "it was not a white person's abuse or scorn or even indifference which could ignite in me this murderous hatred but his pity, maybe even his tenderest moment of charity" (Styron 210). Every time Turner feels hatred for the women, he imagines raping them, and every time that happens, his penis becomes his "self," or his "black self," that he wants to "stick" into someone. It seems that Styron's Turner wants to "stick himself" into just about everything: "I thirsted to plunge myself into the earth, into a tree, a

deer, a bear, a bird, a boy, a stump, a stone, to shoot milky warm spurts of myself into the cold and lonely blue heart of the sky" (Styron 275). Rushdy suggests that the only point being made here is that Turner's way of being-in-the-world is, quite literally, to come-in-the-world. Furthermore, Turner's penis is the primary source of his identity and selfhood, and the sole means he appears to have of communing with nature. Rushdy thus concludes that Styron's representation is deeply troubling not only because it celebrates the phallus but also because it replays the history of the most damaging racist stereotypes (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 66).

Styron includes only two black female characters in his novel, more precisely, two black women stereotypes. One stereotype is the perfect counterpart of the "black rapist," the "oversexed-black-Jezebel," and the other is the rapable black woman (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 70). The only black woman Turner fantasizes about while masturbating is "a Negro girl [whom he] had seen often in the streets of Jerusalem – a plump doxy, every nigger boy's Saturday piece, a light-skinned kitchen maid with a rhythmic bottom and round saucy eyes" (Styron 274). Images of black women described in this way have frequently been used in the past to justify slave masters' raping their female slaves and their lust for them.

The stereotype of the rapable black woman is also described in the character of Turner's mother, Lou-Ann Turner. Rushdy calls her the female equivalent and etiological cause of the black male rapist (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 70). Turner's mother is raped by the Irish overseer McBride. However, the respondents completely ignored her and this fact and went on to claim that there were "no instances of rape in Styron's book" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 70). The rape of a black woman was so unimportant that it was completely ignored while all the attention focused on the imaginary rape of a white woman. Styron does not even mention the word "rape" with regard to Turner's mother; he refers to it as an "encounter." Turner was a boy when his mother was raped, and he remembers playing underneath the elevated house and hearing his mother singing. Afterwards he hears McBride entering the house and his mother resisting him: "'Gwan away! I ain'thavin' no truck with you!' Her voice was shrill, angry, but edged with fear" (Styron 117). They then move to another part of the house so Nat cannot hear her distinctly. He then goes to the edge of the house and hears his mother saying something "insistent, still touched with fear, but her voice is blotted out by the man's grumble, louder now, almost a roar" (Styron 117). Nat goes into the house and sees McBride holding a broken bottle "like a dagger at my mother's neck" while she is on her back and McBride is on top of her trying to take her clothes off. He stands there watching them and hears his mother's voice change: "a shudder passes through my mother's body, and the moan is a different moan, tinged with urgency, and I do not know whether the sound I hear now is

the merest whisper of a giggle ('Uh-huh, aw-*right*', she seems to murmur)" (Styron 118). He continues watching as McBride makes a quick move, "while her brown long legs go up swiftly to embrace his waist, the two of them now joined and moving in that same strange and brutal rhythm" he has witnessed before through the cracks of cabins and which he had thought was "the pastime, or habit, or obsession, or something, of niggers alone" (Styron 118). After the "encounter" McBride goes away in a great mood giving the field hands the rest of the day off, while Nat's mother resumes sweeping the floor and singing, "her voice again, gentle, lonesome, unperturbed and serene as before" (Styron 120). In this description, Styron shows us a slave woman who enjoys her rape so much that she even has an orgasm and embraces her rapist, and afterwards resumes sweeping and singing as if nothing had happened. What starts out as a description of rape ends as a description of consensual sex. This representation of a woman who "enjoys being raped" is another way "Styron dehumanizes every black person in the book" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 71).

Styron does not only misread or misinterpret Gray's *Confessions*; he also deliberately omits facts. In Styron's *Confessions* the entire Gray's *Confessions* are read out in court as evidence for the prosecution. Styron's Gray reads a passage about Nat's childhood: "And my mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence that I was intended for some great purpose" (28). In Gray's *Confessions*, however, the sentence goes as follows: "And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose" (7). Furthermore, Gray's narrative mentions Nat's grandmother: "My grand mother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached" (7). Styron changes this to: "My mother, to whom I was much attached," omitting the grandmother completely (28). Additionally, Gray's Turner grew up among slaves, whereas Styron's Turner is disgusted by them: "The sight of them suddenly touched me with a loathing so intense that it was akin to disgust, bellysickness, and I turned my eyes away" (139). Gray's Turner learns to read and write, "to the astonishment of the family" (8), whereas Styron's Turner has the white Miss Nell teach him to read (8). Although these changes seem small and insignificant, by omitting Turner's father, religious grandmother, and disregarding the slave community, Styron deconstructs the family and the importance of the community in African American culture.

Not only does Styron incorporate Elkins' thesis in his work but he also makes Turner say it: "I realized that it wasn't the man himself who annoyed me so much as it was Hark's manner in his presence – the unspeakable bootlicking Sambo, all giggles and smirks and oily, sniveling servility" (47). However, Styron's Turner believes that the "Sambo" is only an act,

so he starts treating Hark as an experiment and tries to eliminate "this weakling trait" (49) from his character. Furthermore, Styron mentions the distinctions between "house niggers" and "field hands," another stereotype found in many books and films. He describes "fat house nigger[s]" as being "docile as a pet coon" (81) and claims, again in Turner's words, that many of them "to gain no more than a plug of tobacco or a couple of fishhooks or half a pound of stew beef would tattle away their own mother's life" (284). He also describes them as being the opposite of the "black rapist": "like some grotesque harbinger of all in black folk gone emasculate forever, the egregious house nigger Hubbard wiggled out on sloping ladylike hips" (287-8). The field hands, on the other hand, are in Turner's words "a lower order of people – a ragtag mob, coarse, raucous, clownish, uncouth . . . faceless and nameless toilers" (109). To Styron's Turner, all "darkies" are "animal[s] with the brain of a human child that will never get wise nor learn honesty nor acquire any human ethics though that darky live to a ripe old age. A darky, gentleman, is basically as unteachable as a chicken" (132). The critics criticized Styron because he completely ignored the fact that the "Sambo" stereotype was created in the aftermath of the Nat Turner revolt. "Sambo" was created as a means of controlling the consequences of that revolt. Styron failed to see "that antebellum southerners and their modern descendants had to believe that Sambo existed in order to deal with the contradictions of their own existence." Both the "antebellum southerners," afraid of slave rebels, and their "modern descendants," afraid of Black Power, created stereotypes to control their fears (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 85).

Styron's critics, mainly the contributors to the Clarke collection – Lerone Bennett, Jr., Alvin F. Poussaint, Vincent Harding, John Oliver Killens, John, A. Williams, Ernest Kaiser, Loyle Hairston, Charles V. Hamilton, Mike Thelwell, and John Henrik Clarke, also maintained that Styron's reading strategy was governed by the dominant historical representation of American slavery and challenged his act of cultural appropriation. They demonstrated how Styron misread African American history and culture under the influence of texts produced by historians who completely denied slave narratives as valuable sources of slave history. Additionally, by using slave narratives as sources and appending to their collection a significant piece of slave testimony, they criticized the historians Styron referred to. Furthermore, they appended Gray's *Confessions* to their text so as to return the written historical record to public discourse and to demonstrate how Styron read and misread Nat Turner's narrative, pointing out that the real Nat Turner, the representative of African American cultural life, "still awaits a literary interpreter worthy of his sacrifice." Clarke

confirmed this, adding that "our Nat is still waiting" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 85).

Because the Clarke collection raised a good point, incorporating slave testimony to historical research, a project was initiated, one of collecting and making public the folk heritage and unwritten history of African American cultural life under slavery. The critics explained that the "[e]vidence and materials concerning the slave culture and world view, although largely ignored, do exist," and that the "reality of slavery" is to be found in the "testimony of the slaves themselves" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 88). Rushdy argues that African Americans developed a newly empowered sense of black subjectivity and a renewed respect for black cultural practices, and all this positively affected contemporary slave narrative writers. Publishers started adding black writers to their lists in the late sixties, and there was a demand for texts written by African Americans with the development of Black Studies programs. The authors of the seventies and eighties produced texts that helped rewrite the past, both distant and recent. The Neo-slave narratives, argues Rushdy, insistently view slavery from the slave's point of view, raise issues regarding cultural appropriation, and reflect on their moment of origin in the Black Power movement. They "establish a dialectic between slave masters' oppressive literary representations and the slaves' own liberating oral witnessing of slavery, staging a struggle between a form of writing that would master and the practice of self-representation that would free the slave" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 91).

3. Conflicting Narratives in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*

In her novel, *Dessa Rose* (1986), Sherley Anne Williams exposes what she calls the "hypocrisy of the literary tradition" and presents the process by which the historically oppressed reclaim their own narratives, telling "the story of how the dispossessed become possessed of their own history" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 135). As Rushdy puts it, Williams dismantles both the master narratives that define and reify racial categories and the master texts that appropriate and colonize enraced voices (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 135). She retells history in order to set the record straight, to correct history's lies and to restore its omissions. Not only does she rewrite history but she also does it in a black woman's voice. She was writing "in the days when black women had no history, when black people barely had one," so she created a possible historical reality where she could deliver the voice of a nineteenth-century black woman to late twentieth-century readers (qtd. in Michlitsch 330). However, Williams does not see the writer as a social historian. She creates a personal history that is not limited by historical facts but is constructed around the "inside of [the] characters, the undocumentable inside." When people asked her why she would want to write about slavery and probe old scars, she responded: "Slavery, however, is more scab than scar on the nation's body. It's a wound that has not healed and, until the scab is removed, the festered flesh cut away, it cannot heal cleanly and completely" (qtd. in Henderson 61).Williams makes use of slave narratives and other sources and uses them in her novel: "Nineteenth-century black oratory, the lore, songs and stories created by what were then American slaves, gave me a key to unlock the intimate history that had escaped the attention of formal historians" (qtd. in Nunes 98).

In her "Author's Note," Williams states that *Dessa Rose* is based on two historical incidents. The first one is about a pregnant black woman who helped to lead an uprising on a coffle in 1829 in Kentucky, and was, just like the protagonist of Williams' novel, Dessa Rose, caught, convicted, and sentenced to death, but was hanged after the birth of her baby. The other historical source is a story of a white woman living on an isolated farm in North Carolina in 1830, who was reported to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves. Williams discovered an account of the first story in Angela Davis' essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," and found the information on the second incident by tracking Davis to her source in Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts*. She thought that it was sad that these two women had never met, so she made it happen in her novel (5). Patricia Maida observes that in bringing the two women together Williams created

"a form of meta-history" (qtd. in Mitchell 66). Similarly, Mitchell argues that this conjoining of two separate historical events highlights Williams' concern with one-sided representations of history (66). Exactly because of this concern, Williams uses two historical incidents told by two historians.

Williams' "Author's Note" reveals much about the issues she faced publishing her book. In "The Lion's History: The Ghetto Writes B(l)ack" (1993), a response to criticism of *Dessa Rose*, she claims that she wrote the "Author's Statement" under protest. Her editors were "scared to death" that readers would not know where "fact ended and fiction began." However, that was her whole point because "white boys won prizes for doing just that," and she did not understand that sudden concern for "historical accuracy" regarding her text. That is why she "authenticated" her own fiction in order to subvert such double-standard conventions. She adds that "'history' is often no more than who holds the pen at a given point in time" (qtd. in Mitchell 67). In her "Author's Note," she writes how African Americans, whose culture has survived by word of mouth, and made into high art, "remain at the mercy of literature and writing," and often literature and writing betray them. She used to love history as a child, "until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free" (5-6).

Williams' novel was treated by her editors like an antebellum slave narrative had been treated before, in a way that they questioned her authority just like they had done to slaves who had written their narratives. She admits that her novel is a fiction, and that all the characters in it and everything they do are inventions, even though they are based on fact. She adds, though, that "what is here is as true as if I myself had lived it" (6). As McDowell put it, "while there might not be one 'truth' about Dessa (or about slavery more generally), there are 'certainties' that the text stubbornly claims and validates and those it tries to subvert" ("Negotiating Tenses" 145). By using slave narratives and historical records as sources, and by removing prejudice, one can write fiction that is closer to the truth than a text based on facts but whose author does not use the right sources.

In her Author's Note, Williams also mentions being outraged "by a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader, Nat Turner" (5). Williams parodies Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* in the first section of her novel titled "The Darky" by having Adam Nehemiah play the role of Thomas Gray. Nehemiah interviews Dessa while she is locked up, just like Gray interviewed Nat Turner. Nehemiah wants to write a book that would give helpful advice to masters on how to prevent slave revolts, just as Gray wanted to write a book that would document the rebellion

in order to examine the roots of the slave revolt, which in Styron's case turned out to be Nat's lust for a white woman. This first section of Williams' novel is actually a rewritten version of a short story originally titled "Meditations on History." It is a parody on the term Styron employed in his "Author's Note" to describe the kind of fiction he was writing: "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history" (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 136). According to Rushdy, Styron's influence on Williams was confined to the original short story; she did not write a revision of Styron's text. While his novel outraged her, as it outraged a lot of other people, it did not condition the terms of her own work. She instead wrote a novel that directs the readers' attention to the disparity in access to power between those who write master texts and those who write slave narratives, a novel that attempts to come to terms with the historiography of chattel slavery in America, and she gives her own vision of Black Power politics. In other words, "she wrote a Neo-slave narrative that established a discontinuous intertextual relationship with the social and historical epoch of its formal origins" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 136). Mitchell argues that Williams revises Styron's revision of history which is full of racial stereotypes. Her narrative offers insights into the narratives of both black men and black women, as well as white women and men. As opposed to Styron, who "took a hero and made him impotent," Williams took unknown women and "made them heroines" (68-69).

There are three parts in *Dessa Rose*. Each part gives us a different perspective. The first part, "The Darky," "refers to an ungendered, racially pejorative focalization" (Mitchell 71). It is told from the point of view of a white writer, Adam Nehemiah. "The Wench," the title of the second part, is written from a racist, gendered point of view. This part has an omniscient narrator as it describes the relationship between Rufel and Dessa. The third part, "The Negress," provides Dessa's point of view, and with it a more appropriate racial representation. However, Williams begins her book with the "Author's Note," so that "Dessa would have the last word" in the book (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 142). The "Note" is followed by the "Prologue," which gives us a glimpse of the love between Kaine and Dessa. According to Rushdy, in her short story "Meditations on History," Williams started the section after the prologue with a diary entry written in the voice of Nehemiah. In the novel, however, she "subsumed" his voice within a third-person omniscient narrator because she "didn't want to give him that much importance or that much control" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 143).

In the first part of the book, "The Darky," Adam Nehemiah interviews Dessa Rose who is imprisoned in the sheriff's cellar. She is sentenced to death for participating in a revolt

on a slave coffle that killed five men. However, due to her pregnancy, her execution has been delayed until her child is born. Adam Nehemiah tries to gather the facts about the revolt from Dessa in order to write a book about its causes. The first part of *Dessa Rose* can be interpreted as a battle between writing, represented by Nehemiah, and orality, represented by Dessa. Robert Stepto notes that the written word in nineteenth-century slave narratives represents "primarily racist institutions against which the slave gains his or her subjectivity by assuming control over his or her 'voice'" (qtd. in Rushdy, "Reading Mammy"). The black voice, on the other hand, operates through what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls, the "speakerly text," that is, a text that privileges "the representation of the speaking black voice" (*Figures in Black* 249). In this battle between writing and orality, Nehemiah's literacy attempts to master Dessa's orality. According to McDowell, Nehemiah actually wants to fit Dessa "into a recognizable proslavery text" ("Negotiating Tenses" 148). As if speaking a foreign language, Nehemiah has difficulty understanding what Dessa is saying. Williams explains this phenomenon in her work on "ethnopoetics" from 1979, stating that "the vernacular rests on the idea that the standard English version of a word . . . has one meaning and the standard black version has another, often contradictory meaning . . ." (qtd. in Seliger 315). Nehemiah does not catch every word Dessa says because he "[puzzles] overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase" and loses her tale "in the welter of names the darky called," or he just forgets to write. However, he has a clear picture in his mind "as he [deciphers] the darky's account from his hastily scratched notes and he [reconstructs] it in his journal as though he remembered it word for word" (Williams 18). However, what he "reconstructs" in his journal is not what Dessa actually said but his version of her story, or his revision of her history. Furthermore, Nehemiah usually does not get answers to his questions from Dessa. She answers him "in a random manner, a loquacious, roundabout fashion – if, indeed, she can be brought to answer them at all" (Williams 23). In this way, she uses Nehemiah to tell her own story. Nehemiah, just like Styron, believes in racist myths and stereotypes about African Americans, and so, when he sees Dessa with her eyes closed, he remembers that "he had been told they fell asleep much as a cow would in the midst of a satisfying chew" (Williams 36). Dessa misleads Nehemiah and even mocks him. To his answers – "Where were the renegades going?" "Who were the darkies that got away?" – Dessa starts singing or starts talking about Kaine out of the blue and surprises Nehemiah who "wrote quickly, abbreviating with a reckless abandon, scribbling almost as he sought to keep up with the flow of her words" (Williams 37). Of course, Dessa, just as Nat, does not want to answer these questions, so she misleads Nehemiah. According to Burns, Dessa's refusal of Nehemiah is directed at Styron and even

echoes Williams' call to reduce racist white critics (139). These talks are a game to her, "it marked time and she dared a little with him, playing on words, lightly capping" (Williams 60). By doing this, she always "led him back to the same point as the previous session and he had taken notes on nothing save the names she called in her first burst of speech" (Williams 39). However, most of the time she could not answer him even if she had wanted to:

> She couldn't always follow the white man's questions; often he seemed to put a lot of unnecessary words between his "why" and what he wanted to know. And just as she had puzzled out what that was, he would go on to the next question. "Who had the file?" he would ask, and how would she answer that? There had been no file. Nathan had knocked out the trader where he slept and taken the keys to the chains from the saddlebags the trader used as a pillow. So, having no answers, she gave none, though she had listened carefully at first: Maybe this white man would tell her something she didn't know. But it was soon apparent to her that the white man did not expect her to answer. (Williams 56)

Nehemiah presumes that he knows what happened, so he asks specific questions to fit his own notion of his own "facts," and apparently gives his own account of what happened between asking those questions, leaving Dessa confused. However, he does not need an answer because he will just "reconstruct" the "facts" from his head and his scribbles.

Dessa sings quite often either while alone or during her interviews with Nehemiah, "an absurd monotonous little tune in a minor key, the melody of which she repeated over and over as she stared vacantly into space" (Williams 35). According to Seliger, "By incorporating blues music into the everyday lives of its characters, Dessa Rose represents an incipient art form, which is metaphoric of a larger social conflict that began with captivity in Africa and broke out in the American Civil War" (317). Similarly, Woods explains that "the blues conveyed the sorrow of the individual and collective tragedy that had befallen African Americans" (qtd. in Seliger 317). While Dessa is imprisoned in the cellar, she communicates with the other slaves through song: "Tell me, sister; tell me, brother, / How long will it be? / That a poor sinner got to suffer, suffer here?" The other voices, joined in a chorus, answer her: "Oh, it won't be long. / Say it won't be long, sister, / Poor sinner got to suffer, suffer here" (Williams 64). Nehemiah does not understand that music is a mode of communication and he takes "no notice of it" (67). However, "the plaintive note of this song" catches his

attention and he starts listening to the words of the song that to him sounds like "something about the suffering of a poor sinner" (Williams 68). He does not understand the slaves' communication and departs on "a wild goose chase." The communication between Nehemiah and Dessa is in contrast to that of Dessa and Kaine, or Dessa and any other slave. Seliger argues that Nehemiah's interviews with Dessa simulate a court deposition, or a witness's out-of-court testimony that is designed to elicit the response or testimony desired by the interlocutor (318). While all communication between Nehemiah and Dessa stop when she begins to sing, singing is the time when communication starts for Dessa and Kaine or the slaves. Thereupon, Dessa and the other slaves use the music and language of slave songs to mislead and deceive their captors. Furthermore, Dessa's vernacular speech, according to Seliger, "crosses racial boundaries to indict white society, not only by placing its representatives, 'Nemi' and 'Rufel' individually on trial, but holding society collectively accountable for the racist institutions sanctioned by the patriarchal white supremacist social order" (315). Nehemiah's incompetence at understanding Dessa led to her escape from the cellar. Her friends from the coffle who managed to escape come back for her and take her away.

In the second part of the novel, "The Wench," Dessa wakes up to see a white woman, Rufel, breastfeeding her son. Rufel is a white woman whose gambler husband left her and her children in an unfinished house at a farm. In order to survive, she takes in runaway slaves who farm the land and help her maintain the farm for their keep. Dessa is forced to sleep with Rufel in her bed because she is recovering from childbirth and is unable to breastfeed her son, so Rufel acts as the wet nurse. However, the two women, just like Dessa and Nehemiah, do not communicate on the same level. This part of the novel is about what Keith Byerman calls "the struggle for discursive power" (qtd. in Rushdy "Reading Mammy"). According to Rushdy, this struggle is between one form of representation, which has historically been used to create and transmit African American culture, and, on the other hand, a form of representation which has been employed to violate and control that culture ("Reading Mammy"). This part of the novel is told from the point of view of Rufel, a white woman. McDowell explains that the first and the second part of the book juxtapose two consubstantial systems of representation. Whereas the first part is verbal, the second part of the book is visual. Furthermore, Rufel mirrors Nehemiah's practice of consigning slaves to places. While his part of the book is titled "The Darky," which is a gender neutral nomination, Rufel's is titled "The Wench," which is a female-specific nomination. However, it is not any closer to truly naming Dessa Rose ("Negotiating Tenses" 151). Just like Nehemiah, Rufel also has a

distorted image of black people due to racial prejudices and myths; yet she starts seeing them differently, and that even shocks her. The first time she sees Nathan, Dessa's friend from the coffle who helped rescue her from the cellar, he is just a "dark figure," "a shapeless darkness contained by ragged clothes, topped by the light-colored hat." This sight makes her laugh until Nathan stands up "fluid, looming black against the sky, stopping the laugh in her throat" (Williams 122). She expected a stereotype: "the bulbous lips and bulging eyes of a burnt-cork minstrel. Instead she looked into a pair of rather shadowy eyes and strongly defined features that were – handsome! She thought shocked, almost outraged" (Williams 124-5). Although she still "associated even Ada with the stock cuts used to illustrate newspaper advertisements of slave sales and runaways: pants rolled up to the knees, bareheaded, a bundle attached to a stick slung over one shoulder, the round white eyes in the inky face giving a slightly comic air to the whole," Dessa and Nathan make her realize that there is more to them than the stereotypes she is used to (Williams 140). Dessa reminds Rufel of her *mammy*, Dorcas: "her long, narrow white apron was spotless, pinned under the bust rather than tied at the waist of her dark gown; a white kerchief was arranged in precise folds over her broad bosom; a cream-colored bandanna" (Williams 123). However, at a closer look, Rufel corrects herself:

> [T]he silky-looking cloth on the darky's head bore little resemblance to the gaudy-colored swatches most darkies tied about their heads. This was a scarf, knotted in a rosette behind one ear. Rufel, used to the rather haphazard dress of the other house slaves, was made uncomfortable by the darky's tidy appearance. Why, she thought, again in confusion, she's almost stylish. (Williams 123)

At first glance, Rufel tries to categorize Dessa; yet, she is unable to fit her in the "*mammy* box," and somehow cannot fit her in any other box either. Dessa's eyes "looked like Mammy's," and when she looks at Rufel she seems to "recognize her" but her "expression had changed to fear and loathing." Rufel cannot stand "to see eyes so like Mammy's, staring such hatred at her" (Williams 97-8). He sees *mammy* in Dessa, but she is different, and she cannot deal with seeing *mammy* in a different light. She wants Dessa to fit the category of her *mammy*; yet, Dessa is unwilling to bend to her wishes.

Having preconceived notions of people of color, Rufel cannot believe their stories. When Ada and Harker tell Rufel that Dessa "had been sold south by a cruel master," she does not believe them because she sees no proof of this since "the girl's back was scarless and to

hear Ada tell it, every runaway in the world was escaping from a 'cruel master'" (Williams 91). Ada herself escaped from "a lecherous master who had lusted with her and then planned the seduction of Ada's daughter" (Williams 91). Yet, Rufel does not believe a word Ada says because she sees nothing attractive in either Ada or her daughter, and furthermore "'no white man would do that,' she'd insisted; unless he tied a sack over her head first" (Williams 91). Rufel does not accept Ada's story as truth so she reconstructs her story to fit her view of the world. Dorcas, however, does not need any evidence to believe Ada's story because she knows the world Ada comes from; she is a part of her world and understands her, and responds to Rufel: "'MizRufel!' Mammy had said sharply. 'You keep a lady tongue in your mouth. Men,' Mammy had continued with a quailing glance as Rufel opened her mouth, voice overriding Rufel's attempt to speak, 'men can do things a *lady* can't even guess at'" (Williams 92). *Mammy* implies that Rufel, being a lady, cannot understand what it is like to be a slave woman, and she should not pretend to be able to speak for one. Yet, "knowing" white men and their preferences, Rufel responds: "everyone know men like em half white and whiter" (Williams 92). However, having the last word, Dorcas replies: "Lawd know it must be some way for high yeller to git like that!" (Williams 92). Dorcas points out to Rufel that there is a reason why some slave women are whiter than others, and the reason is white masters' rape of enslaved women. Nonetheless, Rufel still cannot believe, even though Dorcas gave her the evidence, and chooses to live in her world; she reconstructs in her mind *mammy*'s words and her own interpretation of their meaning:

> (White man, indeed! Both of them probably run off by the mistress for making up to the master), but she was glad she hadn't provoked Mammy that day. Mammy had probably not believed Ada's story herself, Rufel thought now, but had not wanted to antagonize Ada. Mammy, perhaps even then foreseeing her own death, trying to secure the help Rufel would need until Bertie came back, knew Rufel would need that scheming Ada. No, Rufel had concluded, hurrying now lest she be trapped in grief and fear, the "cruel master" was just to play on her sympathy. (Williams 93)

She puts both Dessa and Ada in the "Jezebel box." This is easier for her than to believe their story because believing them would mean that she has been living a lie.

Even though Nathan tells Rufel everything that happened to Dessa, how "they lashed her about the hips, and legs, branded her along the insides of her thighs," even though "Rufel

could see the scene as he described it . . . . She could almost feel the fire that must have lived in the wench's thighs," she does not believe it, "that couldn't be true, it was too, too awful, she thought . . . . To violate a body so. That's if it happened, she told herself" (Williams 133-5). Most of the time Rufel does not believe the stories the slaves tell her about Dessa or about themselves. She cannot accept the truth that white people are cruel. To justify the cruelty white people inflict upon slaves, she fabricates a reality in her mind in which they deserve what happened to them. Therefore, when she hears what happened to Dessa, she assumes that "she [Dessa] must have done something pretty bad . . . . I bet she was making up to the master; that's why the mistress was so cruel. I bet that's what it was" (Williams 136). Rufel needs visual evidence to be able to believe Dessa's story, "Miz Lady had to see the goods before she would buy the story" (Williams 189). The thought of actually inspecting Dessa's scar makes her flush with shame; "yet, almost of its own volition, her hand reached to draw back the covers from the darky's body" (Williams 139). Basu explains that Rufel's inspection of Dessa's scars "serves primarily as a confirmation of her past, as a validation of her narrative and that of all the fugitive slaves on Sutton's Glen" (392-3). Rufel does not hear Dessa's story from Dessa, but from Nathan. According to McDowell, for Dessa, exposing her story is equal to participating in a slave auction, to be publicly exhibited. She argues that Dessa's body is her text, and she owns the rights to it. Concealing her story from Rufel is "a radical act of ownership over her own body/text in a system that successfully stripped slaves' control over this, their most intimate property" ("Negotiating Tenses" 154).

The biggest conflict between Dessa and Rufel is about *mammy*. There are two different perceptions of *mammy*, one is *Mammy* (with a capital M), that according to Kemp Davis refers to a black woman who cares for her white "children," the stereotype, while *mammy* (with a lower-case m) is Dessa's mother, the real person (qtd. in Seliger 319). The character of *mammy* was one of the most controversial roles black women were forced to play during slavery. It was usually the complete opposite of the most famous *mammy* played by Hattie McDaniel in the film *Gone with the Wind*. A typical image of *mammy* was a black woman who cared for a white family, especially the children. She was part of the family, a friend, and everyone's "mother." White authors in plantation fiction also refer to *mammy* as "granny" or "aunt(y)" that serves white families as a wet nurse, nanny, and oversees childcare and housekeeping (qtd. in Robinson 50). According to Robinson, the role of *mammy* legitimized slavery because she was the opposite of "Jezebel," the stereotype that permitted the sexualized abuse of black women as chattel slavery; but *mammy*'s sanctioned sexuality fit into the ideology of white culture and therefore humanized, upheld, and even perpetuated the

institution of slavery (51). As a result of emancipation, *mammy*'s "children" and the slaveholders go through what Eugene Genovese calls the "terrible moment of truth" in the South when they, just as Rufel, suffered a severe shock when their "devoted" *mammy* appeared in a new light (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 155). As it turns out, *mammies* did not do their chores out of love for their white families, but because they were forced to do them. Even after the "Sambo" figure was shattered, as late as 1974, historians realized that "no figure stands out so prominently in the moonlight-and-magnolias legend of the Old South" as does the figure of *mammy*. Promptly, historians began to undo that image by reading antebellum slave narratives in which *mammy* is represented as someone "cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot," rather than a devoted maternal figure (qtd. in Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 159). Rufel talks about *mammy* a lot, and Dessa finds it strange that *mammy* would ever have that kind of a relationship with a white person: "No white woman like this had ever figured in mammy's conversations" (Williams 117). Dessa realizes that Rufel actually talks about what *mammy* did for her and her family rather than about *mammy* being a part of her family: "Well, I know Mammy didn't know a thing about history, but I knew she was right about the clothes. She used to dress me so pretty . . . . I always said, 'Oh, this a little something Mammy ran up for me.' So when I walked into the great hall at Winston, I had on a dress that Mammy made and it was Mammy's . . ." (Williams 117-8). Dessa is angry because Rufel keeps confusing *mammy* with her mother when she is nothing more than a slave for Rufel and her family:

> "Wasn't no 'mammy' to it." The words burst from Dessa. She knew even as she said it what the white woman meant. "Mammy" was a servant, a slave (Dorcas?) who had nursed the white woman as Carrie had nursed Young Mistress's baby before it died. But, goaded by the white woman's open-mouthed stare, she continued, "Mammy ain't made you nothing!" . . . . "You don't even know mammy. (Williams 118)

Dessa rebuffs Rufel's notion that *mammy* stands for mother, saying "'Mammy' ain't nobody name, not they real one" (Williams 119). She proves this point when Rufel is unable to recall her *mammy*'s name and instead says that her name is "Mammy." Dessa, thus, deconstructs *mammy* and proves that she is just a stereotype, something white people made up because without a real name she has no identity and is nothing more than a job title. In addition, she describes her own mother to further make her point:

> Her name was Rose . . . . That's a flower so red it look black. When mammy was a girl they named her that count of her skin – smooth black, and they teased her bout her breath cause she worked around the dairy; said it smelled like cow milk and her mouth was slick as butter, her kiss tangy as clabber . . . . Mammy gave birth to ten chi'ren that come in the world of living . . . .The first one Rose after herself . . . . (Williams 119)

The description of her mother is nothing like Rufel's description of *mammy*. Dessa remembers intimate details of her mother's life, including her name and how she got it. She remembers all of her children and their names and whether they lived or died or were sold off. In other words, Dessa remembers a real person while Rufel remembers a stereotype, a slave. Rushdy argues that *mammy* figures are "recreations of romantic memories and memorials that have to be disrupted and destroyed in order for any revisionist historical reconstruction to be performed" (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 160). Dorcas was chattel property, and when Rufel remembers her as part of the family, she actually appropriates her and diminishes all her pain and misery. Micki McElya claims that "when black women's work was appropriated by the white household, their care-giving labor was reframed as motherly instinct and love in the figure of the mammy, thus not as work at all" (qtd. in Robinson 57). Similarly, the reason why Rufel does not remember *mammy*'s name is because her family appropriated her. They changed her real name to a stereotype, so that she could become that stereotype for their family. Rufel's family was proud to have the slave Dorcas because she traveled to France and they believed that this fact would somehow enhance their social standing. However, having a *mammy* turned out to be more distinguished, so Dorcas became *mammy*: "They called her Mammy because Mrs. Carson thought the title made her seem as if she had been with the family for a long time" (Williams 123).

As Robinson points out, the very fact that *mammies* breastfed white children could mean that they were part of the white family. Yet, this fact actually does the opposite; it reinforces the role of *mammies* as slaves (57). Rufel claims that her *mammy* loved her and Dessa proves that she did not because she knows that even if you are breastfeeding white children you do not consider them your children: "The words exploded inside Dessa. '*Your* "mammy" – 'Never, never had that white baby taken Jessup's place with Carrie. 'Your "mammy"!' No *white* girl could ever have taken *her* place in mammy's bosom; no one. 'You ain't got no "mammy,"' she snapped" (Williams 118). Dessa knows, on account of her sister and mother being *mammies*, that not even breastfeeding a child could turn slaves into mothers

of white children. To show that this is in fact true, Williams makes Rufel a *mammy* to a black child. As she is the only nursing woman at Sutton's Glen, and Dessa cannot nurse her child, Rufel takes over out of "necessity." Her breastfeeding Dessa's child does not mean that she considers him her own or that she loves him. In fact, she holds some kind of power over Dessa being the only woman that can feed her son and keep him alive: "I wouldn't let him go hungry, she thought a trifle self-righteously; yet, she was rather pleased to realize that she had some real power over the wench and Ada . . . . She had used the baby's hunger to spite the wench and was shamed by the knowledge" (Williams 130). Being wet nurses to white children did not make *mammies* their loving mothers; on the contrary, *mammies* were forced into performing this task. Fox-Genovese reports that *mammies* were not allowed to care for their own children out of fear that it might prevent them from giving white children their full attention. While they were given some time to care for their biological children, they were at risk for being punished for neglecting their duties in a white household. Moreover, *mammies* were forced to neglect their children if the white children also needed nursing. According to Fox-Genovese, lactating female slaves had to wean their own children in the early months of their lives, so that they could nurse a white baby (qtd. in Robinson 63). Consequently, some black babies even died from neglect as a result of a lack of nutrition from no feeding, or not enough feeding. According to Robinson, using black women as wet nurses reinforced the racial divide between them and their white mistresses. White women were considered "paragons of womanhood" whereas black women performing the female duties were "disempowered, seen as little more than beasts of labor." Furthermore, white women were considered above such earthy tasks, and that is why they used black women to perform this "animal-like task of breastfeeding" (58). That is why when Rufel performs this act of breastfeeding, "she violates social norms and initiates a chain of events that reshape the black and white characters' understanding of each other" (Michlitsch 330). In this way, Williams "exposes this duplicity by portraying it as romanticized nonsense, a way only to perpetuate the mammy stereotype" (Robinson 59).

Because of the "*mammy* myth," Rufel believes that her *mammy* loved her, and even goes that far as to say: "She just had me! I was like her child" (Williams 119). However, talking with Dessa makes her realize that she did not really know her *mammy* and starts seeing the truth:

> She treated me just like, just like – She stuttered and could have wept again, seeing with an almost palpable lucidity how absurd it was to think of herself as Mammy's child, a darky's child. And shuddered. A pickaninny. Like the

> ragged, big-bellied urchins she had seen now and then about the streets of Mobile, running errands, cutting capers, begging coppers. Mammy was a slave, a nigger, and, and "She – She was my maid," she finished lamely, confused; "my personal servant." (Williams 125)

As Robinson points out, at this point in the novel, the text starts functioning as a neo-slave narrative, a counter narrative to the master narrative on the identity of *mammy* (60). Describing *mammy* as a real person and not a stereotype, Williams sets the black woman free from her bondage to *mammy*. Rufel starts wondering about Dorcas's life as Dessa alters her way of thinking about her and black people in general:

> Dorcas. She mouthed the name, seeing Mammy's face now, but finding no comfort in the familiar image. It was as if the wench had taken her beloved Mammy and put a stranger in her place. Had Mammy had children, Rufel wondered, suckled a child at her breast as she did the wench's, as she did with her own? And how had Mammy borne it when they were taken away – That's if she had any. Rufel interrupted that train of thought. She had only the wench's word for that. And they were not, she repeated, talking about the same woman. But Mammy might have had children and it bothered Rufel that she did not know. (Williams 128)

Realizing that she did not know the real Dorcas at all, she starts re-creating her in her memories. She realizes that being a slave, and being bought and sold, taken away from her children, if she had any, Dorcas would not feel love for her or her family, for "How could you love someone who used you so?" (Williams 143). She starts wondering if maybe *mammy* did some things to her out of resentment rather than love as she had thought all along. Dorcas gave Rufel a pet name "Miz 'Fel" (Williams 100) long ago, and now Rufel wonders if *mammy* did that to spite her because Rufel's family had taken away Dorcas's name: "Had mammy minded when the family no longer called her name? Was that why she changed mine? Rufel thought fearfully. Was what she had always thought loving and cute only revenge, a small reprisal for all they'd taken from her?" (Williams 129). Angelyn Mitchell suggests that Dorcas, like her namesake in the Bible, is brought to life by the evocation of her name (83). According to McKible, names are "constant reminders of resistance and the will to freedom . . . [they] disrupt, delegitimize, and displace Master narratives." Rufel first named

Dessa's child "Button," and then later helped name him Desmond Kaine. Giving somebody a name, or taking a name away from somebody, is like giving or taking away pieces of one's identity:

> Now she took a private pleasure in having had some hand in naming Button, felling repaid in some measure for the wench's continuing aloofness. Maybe this is what Mammy had felt when she had changed Ruth Elizabeth's name, that somehow she had snuck a little piece of the child for herself, had marked at least some part of him with something of her own making. (Williams 148)

In a way Rufel's act resembles that of the slave owners who named all the children on the plantation and gave new names to their slaves. To a certain extent, she "marked" or branded Dessa's child for life, just like the slaves were marked by their names that were given to them by their white masters.

In the third part of the novel, titled "The Negress," Dessa tells the story in her own voice. Here, Dessa and her fellow slaves start a scam with the help of Rufel, and they "turn the 'authoritative' texts of slavery back on themselves." They use all the features of those texts but strip them of their meaning and power (McDowell, "Negotiating Tenses" 158). They devise a plan to repeatedly sell themselves back into slavery only to escape again in order to make money. They each have a role to play in order for this plan to work: "If they was caught, they was to act dumb and scared and show the pass from Miz Lady, which they all hid in the toe of they shoes. She was to act high-handed and helpless if she was in a tight spot" (Williams 194). Dessa assumes the role of *mammy*; Rufel, being the only white person, is the "Mistress," and Nathan is her "Nigger driver." However, despite "earning" a lot of money, not everything goes as planned. While walking in the street, Nehemiah recognizes Dessa and takes her to the sheriff. Nonetheless, it seems that "Nemi," as the sheriff calls him, is on a mission to find Dessa, and she is not the first slave woman he brought in, so the sheriff does not take him seriously. Nemi says that she matches the description in the poster: "The one I wants got scars all over her butt . . . . Let's have that dress off; let her prove she ain't the one" (Williams 222). However, Dessa remembers something from the coffle that stopped men from raping "pretty high yellow" slaves, so she cries: "Ware the goods!" (Williams 222). Even though she does not know what it means, she remembers that it stopped the white men out of fear of damaging the "goods." As she is waiting for Rufel to come to the jail, she is looking at Nemi and wondering why he is following her, and finds herself in a position of power over Nemi even though she is in jail. While he was interviewing her, she was in a cellar dressed in

rags and smelled really bad, and now it is Nemi who is dirty and with a shirt with no collar. She realizes: "they couldn't take the word of no white man like that, not against the word of a respectable white lady. . . . The white man was crazy; I'd make them see that" (Williams 225). Dessa touches the place where her money belt is hidden to show Rufel that she cannot let them look under her clothes: "Cept for them scars, it was the word of a crazy white man against a respectable white lady" (Williams 226). After failing to prove to the sheriff that Dessa is who he claims she is, Nemi tries to prove it with his book: "I got her down here in my book" (Williams 231). That book makes Dessa fear him:

> "I kill Mistress," Nemi say, reading, walking up on me, "cause I can!" That's what she say, pointing at me. "Here's some more" – he was flicking through the book. "Here," he say shaking it in my face. Clara reached for the book and knocked it out his hand. The pages wasn't bound in the cover and they fell out, scattering about the floor. Nemi started grabbing the papers, pushing them in the sheriff's hand, into Miz Lady's. "Nemi, ain't nothing but some scribbling on here," sheriff say. "Can't no one read this." Miz Lady was turning over the papers in her hand. "And these is blank, sheriff," she say. (Williams 232)

Nehemiah's book, that consists of scattered half-written pages and scribbling, reveals not only his failure to understand Dessa and record her narrative but also his inability to dominate her and thus (re)produce the master narrative of slavery. As a result, as McDowell points out, "Dessa Rose is the final authority on her story, controlling her own text" ("Negotiating Tenses" 160). Dessa's orality remains and replaces Nemi's scattered pages.

In the first part of the novel, Dessa uses her orality over Nehemiah's written narrative and uses it against him. She resists his control over her narrative and frees herself in the process. In the second part of the novel, Dessa again wins "the struggle for discursive power." With her narrative, she shatters myths and stereotypes, and separates the real people from their stereotypes, and with it, sets them free. Finally, in the third part, she becomes the narrator of her own story. By using the features of master texts, acting out the myths and stereotypes, she frees herself from bondage and dismantles the master texts that defined and appropriated her. In the "Epilogue," she has her story written down for future generations, so that her story and her name remain forever written in history. With her novel, *Dessa Rose*, Williams has created a "place in the American past" that she can "go [to] and be free" (Williams 6).

4. The Past in the Present and (the) Present in the Past: Understanding the Present with the Help of the Past in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* might be labeled as "a sort of inverse slave narrative" (Steinberg 467). For Donadey, the novel is about "the centrality of slavery in American history and its contemporary consequences," and can be read as a national allegory whose protagonists are representative Americans (67). Although Butler uses time-travel in her novel, her text "de-emphasizes its fantastic dimensions in order to analyze the impact of slavery on the sexual politics of interracial relationships in the present" (Spaulding 26). Butler's novel represents a "metaphoric Middle Passage" between the antebellum South and contemporary America (see Mitchell 43), and its main protagonist, Dana, acts as a bridge, an anachronism between the past and the present that links the two time periods together (see Spaulding26). Even though Butler's use of science fiction might seem to set her apart from other neo-slave narrative authors, Sherryl Vint considers *Kindred* to be a key example of the neo-slave narrative (241). However, according to Yaszek, Butler's use of science fiction aligns her with another African-American literary tradition – with authors extending back to Ralph Ellison and W. E. B. DuBois, who used science fiction tropes, alternate worlds, invisibility, and the "encounter with the alien other" to divorce their readers from the dominant American history and to re-introduce Black history and culture (1058). Butler's use of speculative fiction allows her readers to "comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing" (Dubey 784). The spark that caused Butler to write *Kindred* was a statement by a young man of her age that she heard when she was in college, during the height of the Black Power Movement:

> He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents". . . . That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred*. I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary not only for their lives but his as well. (qtd. in Yaszek 1057)

This is the reason why Butler uses time-travel and moves her protagonist from the 1970s time frame to the antebellum South, to show how a modern-day person would behave as a slave. According to Butler, "the young man clearly did not understand the true heroism of his people. He was the kind that would have killed and died, as opposed to surviving and hanging

on and hoping and working for change" (qtd. in Young 32). Yet, Butler's novel shows us that true heroism is surviving against all odds.

The protagonist in *Kindred* is Dana Franklin, a black woman writer who is married to a white man, also a writer. Dana travels back in time and space six times, starting in 1976, from California to the antebellum Maryland plantation of her ancestor, Rufus Weylin. How Dana travels back in time is not explained because *why* she travels back is the important thing. Starting on her twenty-sixth birthday, Dana is summoned back to the past by Rufus every time his life is in danger in order to rescue him. Correspondingly, Dana is returned to her present when she feels that her life is in danger. She realizes that Rufus is her ancestor, and that keeping him alive ensures her own life and that of her ancestors. However, her life is determined by the rape of her great-great grandmother by Rufus Weylin, the man whose life she has to protect, and whom she has to aid in that rape.

One would think that someone from the future might fare well in the past because knowledge of the past might be of great value; however, Butler, as many before her, illustrates how lacking and inadequate history books and films about the black past are. That is why Butler sends Dana back in time to a setting in which the history of slavery becomes a present-day reality for her and the readers, and through Dana's experience, Butler illustrates how easy it was for some people to become "monsters" in a world where doing cruel things to other human beings was seen as normal. Dana realizes that Tom Weylin, Rufus's father, "wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper" (Butler 134). According to Hampton, Dana's experience exceeds memory that is acquired from reading history books or even "second-hand slave narratives" (they are second-hand because the ex-slaves wrote their stories from memory). Moreover, Dana's "re-experiencing" the horrors of slavery is even more radical than the accounts from slave narratives because she is made to live an experience that happened before she existed (106). Benjamin Robertson claims that "bodies are a link to history" (371), and in this manner, the body of a beaten slave is not a symbol of slavery, but it exists in the world entirely determined by the experience of slavery. Accordingly, a nation's history cannot be located outside of the body, as in language, texts, and ideas. So, if history is only a text, black people can be written out of that history; however, bodies interacting with history, as Dana's body does, can never be removed from it (372-3). In this way, Butler makes sure that Dana's story becomes part of history, and also a part of the present. According to Wagers, Dana's body becomes a text, "an animate emblem of perhaps the only reliable document drawn from

slavery" (28). In her first trip to the past, Dana is only there for a few minutes, and other than the shock of time-travel and "looking down the barrel of the longest rifle," the scare of which transported her home, nothing happens to her body that scars her (Butler 14). Thereupon, it leaves no lasting consequences on her: "As real as the whole episode was, as real as I know it 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" (Butler 17). However, on her second trip to the past, she sees and smells things that she did not experience before:

> 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. (Butler 36)

Soon after witnessing this horror, Dana is attacked by a patroller who intends to rape her. She is physically assaulted: "I had never been beaten that way before – would never have thought I could absorb so much punishment without losing consciousness" (Butler 42). Only after he beats her unconscious does she return to the present. She describes everything that happened to her to Kevin, who thinks that it "is getting crazier and crazier" (Butler 46). However, to Dana, who now bears the marks, physical and psychological, of her experiences, it is "getting more and more believable. I don't like it. I don't want to be in the middle of it. I don't understand how it can be happening, but it's real. It hurts too much not to be" (Butler 46). Bearing the physical marks of slavery on her body makes the whole experience real for her. History is written on the bodies of those slaves who survived it, and the scars left on their backs from whippings tell their own stories of the horrors they had to endure. Similarly, Dana takes "writings" of slavery on her back with her to the future. After Tom Weylin whips her, Dana returns to her present and tries to put what happened to her in some kind of a context:

> I read books about slavery, fiction and nonfiction. I read everything I had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject – even *Gone with the Wind*, or part of it. But its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than I could stand. Then, somehow, 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. The books depressed me, scared me, made me stuff Kevin's sleeping pills into my bag. Like the Nazis, ante bellum whites had known quite a bit about torture – quite a bit more than I ever wanted to learn. (Butler 116-17)

Dana cannot find anything about her recent experience in books or films about slavery. All of the books she has access to in her time are inadequate and often misrepresent the facts about slavery. Consequently, she must turn to books about the sufferings in World War II, and in them she finds what she is looking for – stories of survivors, just like her. The whipping happens on her third trip to the past, which she takes with Kevin. The more she travels back, the more she stays in the past because it is becoming more difficult to return to her time. What triggers Dana's return to her present is fear for her life; however, the more experience she gains, the less fearful she becomes. Through physical experience, Dana understands what her ancestors had to endure, and she herself becomes much more resilient to the horrors of slavery. During this whipping, Dana thought that she was going to die: "All I was really aware of was the pain. I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing and lecturing as he beat me. By then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain" (Butler 107). The genuine fear for her life she feels there on the ground sends her back to her apartment, to 1976. On her fourth trip back, Dana is whipped once more. However, this time she spends even more time in the past, and learns more about plantation life, so she knows the whipping will not kill her, only hurt her:

> He beat me until I tried to make myself believe he was going to kill me. I said it aloud, screamed it, and the blows seemed to emphasize my words. He would kill me. Surely, he would kill me if I didn't get away, save myself, *go home!* It didn't work. This was only punishment, and I knew it. Nigel had borne it. Alice had borne worse. Both were alive and healthy. I wasn't going to die – though as the beating went on, I wanted to. Anything to stop the pain! But there was nothing. Weylin had ample time to finish whipping me. (Butler 176)

Not only does she learn how to be a slave but she also learns how to endure pain, and most importantly, how to survive and keep going. To return to her time for the fifth time, Dana has to cut her wrists.

What scares Dana more than the physical scars of slavery are emotional scars that can change a person. On her third "jump" to the past, Kevin holds Dana's hand and they are both transported back. However, Dana is scared because she fears that he might be stranded in the past without her if he were unable to come back with her. She is afraid of what that place and that time might do to him:

> 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. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. He wouldn't have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. Free speech and press hadn't done too well in the ante bellum South. Kevin wouldn't do well either. The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility. (Butler 77)

Even though Kevin, a free white man, could provide some kind of protection for Dana in times of slavery, she is more afraid for him than for herself. Kevin does not understand things like Dana does. When they arrive in the past together, he says: "This could be a great time to live in" (Butler 97). He does not see the antebellum South as Dana does. To him, the antebellum South is a romantic ideal, the plantation myth. Kevin is actually surprised that "there's little to see" on the Weylin plantation (Butler 100). He does not see the bad things, and even feels that the slaves are treated fairly: "No overseer. No more work than the people can manage . . ." (Butler 100). However, as Dana points out to him, "you don't have to beat people to treat them brutally" (Butler 100). Without even realizing it, he is minimizing the wrongs of slavery. After some time in the past, Dana comes to realize "how easily people could be trained to accept slavery" (Butler 101). She is afraid that the antebellum South would somehow alter his personality and make him tolerate the horrors of slavery. Nonetheless, Dana's fears, or at least part of them, do not come to pass as Kevin, being stranded in the past for five years, becomes an abolitionist and helps fugitive slaves reach freedom.

Correspondingly, Kevin also has fears about Dana. Foster suggests that Kevin has anxieties about his interracial marriage (154). At the time Dana is under attack by the

patroller, she is transferred back home because she fears for her life. At home, she sees Kevin and confuses him for the patroller and punches and scratches him while trying to protect herself from what she thinks is the white patroller. Kevin asks her: "Do I really look like that patroller? . . . Do I look like someone you can come home to from where you may be going?" (Butler 51). Although Dana reassures him, Kevin is still afraid that someday Dana might look at him and see a white man, an image of brutality; someone who is capable of hurting her. After seeing Dana for the first time after five years, Kevin tells her: "You're still you" (Butler 192). However, this conclusion is a little premature since he cannot see her emotional scars on her body.

While Dana is concerned over the impact slavery would have on Kevin, she does not even think what effect it might have on her. She realizes that the whippings serve a purpose, and that purpose is to keep the slaves in line. The fear of the whip generates a slave mentality in her that she thought she would never have. The third time Dana travels to the past, and the first time she sees the Weylin plantation in daylight, she realizes that it is different from what she imagined. The house is not white, it does not have columns or a porch, and it is not big enough to be called a mansion; and most importantly, there is no white overseer anywhere. She later finds out that there is no need for one. Weylin knows how to keep his slaves in line. When he punishes people, the slaves are "invited" to watch, and Dana witnesses the beating of a slave for the crime of answering back:

> The whip was heavy and at least six feet long, and I wouldn't have used it on anything living. It drew blood and screams at every blow. I watched and listened and longed to be away. But Weylin was making an example of the man. He had ordered all of us to watch the beating – all the slaves. Kevin was in the main house somewhere, probably not even aware of what was happening. 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? (Butler 92)

After being whipped twice, Dana realizes that she is not performing the role of a slave anymore, but that she actually is one. She is whipped for running away, and she realizes that she was not as smart as she thought she was; she had no advantage over the illiterate slaves:

> 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? Why was I still slave to a man who had repaid me for saving his life by nearly killing me. Why had I taken yet another beating. And why . . . why was I so frightened now – frightened sick at the thought that sooner or later, I would have to run again? (Butler 177)

Dana never thought that she would actually become a slave. She is, or rather was, just like the man from Butler's college years, ashamed of his ancestors for not fighting back. However, experiencing slavery, taking the beatings, makes her realize just "how easily slaves are made" (Butler 177). Thus, the next time she finds herself in a situation where she has to submit or take a beating, she gives in to the slave mentality: "And I went out, God help me, and tried to do the wash. I couldn't face another beating so soon. I just couldn't" (Butler 182). Although Dana only "played the slave" in the beginning, she now realizes that she is one (Butler 91). She is no longer the emancipated black person from the future who is better than the slaves; she is someone who knows better than to judge. Accordingly, when she thinks about Sarah, the Weylin's cook, who is still with them after they have sold her children leaving her only one, she does not judge her, but now she finally understands her:

> She 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. (Butler 145)

Spending time in the past makes Dana realize that she cannot judge her ancestors by the standards of her own time. She tells Kevin that "to survive, my ancestors had to put up

with more than I ever could. Much more" (Butler 51). However, there is a line she does not let others cross. Even though it was almost an everyday occurrence that black women were raped on plantations by their masters or overseers, she refuses to let that happen to her. When talking to Kevin, she refers to rape as worse than death. For her it is "suicide or worse" (Butler 51). If raped, she will either kill herself or Rufus:

> I'm not property, Kevin. I'm not a horse or a sack of wheat. If I have to seem to be property, if I have to accept limits on my freedom for Rufus's sake, then he also has to accept limits – on his behavior toward me. He has to leave me enough control of my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying. (Butler 246)

Even though she succumbs to the slave mentality out of fear of being beaten, she refuses to become property; she refuses to surrender the last bit of control over her own physical and emotional self. She draws the line at rape, the very thing almost every slave woman had to endure during slavery, because, as she tells Kevin: "I didn't have their [her female ancestors'] endurance. I still don't. Some of them will go on struggling to survive, no matter what. I'm not like that" (Butler 246). According to Sherryl Vint, Dana's decision implies "allegiance to patriarchal constructions of female chastity as crucial to female existence; it allows Dana to avoid a crucial aspect of the reality of female enslavement" (253). In this sense, Dana is closer to the sentimental heroines, who would rather die than to submit to rape, than to black female slaves. Dana feels that rape would somehow hurt her more than any other form of abuse. Vint suggests that, given the complicated history of gender discrimination in the Civil Rights and Black Power struggles, it is understandable why Butler refuses to allow Dana become a sexual victim (253). Even though Dana is spared, Butler writes about the sexual exploitation of black women on the plantation for, according to Vint, along with the racist construction of black sexuality, it is one of the ways in which this period of history still continues to haunt American culture (253).

However, Dana does participate in a rape, in that of her great-great grandmother, Alice. Alice is a free-born black woman whom Dana first meets on her second trip to the past while she is witnessing the beating of Alice's father, one of Weylin's slaves, visiting his free mother. Unfortunately, despite the advice of her mother never to marry a slave, Alice marries Isaac, a slave from a neighboring plantation. She also has another misfortune of being the

romantic interest of Rufus Weylin. On her fourth "jump" back to the past, Dana is summoned by Rufus just as he is fighting Isaac, who is beating him up for raping his wife, Alice. Dana helps Rufus in exchange he not tell anyone that Isaac is the one who beat him, giving Alice and Isaac ample time to escape North. However, both of them are caught. Isaac's punishment is having his ears cut off and being sold to Louisiana, while Alice is sold to slavery to the highest bidder, Rufus. However, Alice is badly injured and it is Dana's duty to nurse her to health. After Alice regains her health, Rufus tells Dana that she must convince her to come to him willingly. Dana realizes that Rufus actually loves Alice:

> There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one. "I didn't want to just drag her off into the bushes," said Rufus. "I never wanted it to be like that. But she kept saying no. I could have had her in the bushes years ago if that was all I wanted. If I lived in your time, I would have married her. Or tried to." (Butler 124)

Thus, Dana tells Alice that she has three "choices;" she either can go to him willingly, refuse him, and be whipped, and then be raped anyway, or run away. Forgetting that Alice is a slave, Dana tells her that she cannot advise her because it is her body, to which Alice replies: "Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?" (Butler 167). Alice picks the "choice" that appears to be the least deadly and goes to him willingly: "She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (Butler 168). Even though Dana has to help Rufus rape Alice in order to ensure her own existence, according to Robertson, she does not oppress Alice to extend her own power. On the contrary, in aiding Rufus, Dana takes responsibility for a history that she has had no direct role in constructing. Robinson argues that she *must* take responsibility for the actions of her ancestors. Furthermore, he claims, her inheritance is more than those bits of history that she likes, but also those events that offend her and cause her pain; the fact that she is white as well as black and that she is and is not American. In conclusion, Robertson argues that even though history is not Dana's fault or responsibility, she must take responsibility for it, for to deny it would be to deny her place in contemporary America. What looks like Dana's betrayal is actually her inability to do anything but participate in the United States and its past, even if she is by definition excluded from it, which is the paradox of American history (see Robertson 374).

Despite the fact that slaves did not openly resist their oppressors, like Nat Turner did, it is wrong to claim that they did not offer any resistance at all. In her novel, Butler gives

ample evidence of slave resistance. Even though it seems that Alice succumbed to Rufus, she "forgave him nothing, forgot nothing, hated him as deeply as she had loved Isaac" (Butler 180). According to Angela Davis, Alice has a "profound consciousness of resistance;" although this resistance is not manifested openly, "her survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance" (qtd. in Levecq 545). Alice never completely accepts being Rufus's concubine. Even after she bears him four children, she tries to escape: "I got to go while I still can – before I turn into just what people call me" (Butler 234). To most of the slaves, settling down and having children means that they will no longer run away. Most masters regarded slaves' children as leverage. That is why Tom Weylin did not find it necessary to sell Nigel after he married Sarah's daughter and had children with her. However, even having children did not prevent Alice from trying to escape: "I'm tellin' you, he uses those children just the way you use a bit on a horse. I'm tired of havin' a bit in my mouth" (Butler 235). In the end, it is because of her children that she decides not to escape and continue to act as Rufus's sexual slave. However, Rufus takes the children to their aunt, but tells Alice that he sold them to spite her, and Alice, having nothing to live for, commits suicide. Nevertheless, her suicide, as Mitchell argues, is not an act of emotional weakness, but Alice's right to choose death over bondage. Furthermore, as Mitchell claims, this makes Alice more powerful than Rufus because by killing herself she irreparably wounds him and escapes bondage without risk of recapture and return (54). In the end, Alice realizes that she does in a way own her own body and has a choice, however deadly it may be, and she regains power over her own self. Through the character of Dana we get to hear her inner monologue, which shows us a sort of inner resistance probably all slaves used. When cornered by Margaret Weylin, Rufus's mother, who wants to know where Dana has slept, Dana thinks to herself:

> How lovely it would have been to say, *None of your business, bitch!* Instead, I spoke softly, respectfully. "In Mr. Franklin's room, ma'am." I didn't bother to lie because all the house servants knew. It might even have been one of them who alerted Margaret. So now what would happen? Margaret slapped me across the face. I stood very still, gazed down at her with frozen calm. (Butler 93)

This way, Dana can talk back without getting into trouble, and even her posture and looking down on Margaret is a kind of resistance. After she rescues Rufus from Isaac, she cannot

carry him home, so she has to leave him in the field and go get help. While on the wagon, on their way to get Rufus, Weylin tells Dana: "You've got to tell us where to go" (Butler 129). Dana replies: "It would have been a pleasure to tell him where to go, but I spoke civilly" (Butler 129). Here, she does not even have to voice her thought; the reader understands the implication. When Dana escapes and is caught by Rufus and his father, she gets beaten, and Rufus tells her how lucky she was because she could have been more hurt. Dana replies to herself: "I spat blood and he never realized that I had made my comment on such good luck" (Butler 175). Through this inner monologue we get to see how oppressive her situation is and how she covertly resists her oppressors. Butler allows Dana to voice her opinion and even undermine the power structures without them even realizing it. While talking to the doctor who comes to fix Rufus's leg, Dana manages to regain control of the narrative, even though the doctor looks down on her and speaks to her in the third person although she is right there:

> I . . . stood by while the doctor asked Weylin whether I had any sense or not and whether I could be trusted to answer simple questions accurately. Weylin said yes twice without looking at me, and the doctor asked his questions. Was I sure Rufus had had a fever? How did I know? Had he been delirious? Did I know what delirious meant? Smart nigger, wasn't I? I hated the man. He was short and slight, black-haired and black-eyed, pompous, condescending, and almost as ignorant medically as I was. He guessed he wouldn't bleed Rufus since the fever seemed to be gone – bleed him! He guessed a couple of ribs were broken, yes. He rebandaged them sloppily. He guessed I could go now; he had no more use of me. (Butler 137)

This section clearly shows that slaves were treated as less than human, and how they managed to resist this oppression, even if only in their own minds. However, Dana is forced in the end to resist Rufus overtly. After Alice's death, Rufus tries to rape Dana, and leaves her with no choice but to kill him. Killing Rufus severs Dana's bond to the past, and she is automatically transported back to the future without ever having to jump back again. However, her experience in the past makes one last mark on her body. While Rufus is dying, he holds on to Dana's hand which gets stuck in the wall upon her return to the future, leaving part of her forever behind in the past as a constant reminder of it.

Butler does not choose random dates for Dana's travels back and forth through time. The novel begins with Dana's twenty-sixth birthday, 9 June 1976, and ends with 4 July 1976,

the bicentennial of the mythical birthday of the United States. Robertson argues that Butler's use of these dates underscores the importance of the relationship between personal and national history, or the relationship between the individual black body and a nation in the midst of celebrating the "obfuscation of that body" (371). Even Dana feels that there is more to her being sent back in time to help Rufus than their blood tie:

> There had to be some kind of reason for the link he and I seemed to have. Not that I really thought a blood relationship could explain the way I had twice been drawn to him. It wouldn't. But then, neither would anything else. What we had was something new, something that didn't even have a name. Some matching strangeness in us that may or may not have come from our being related. (Butler 29)

Other dates in the book are more subtle reminders of US history. On her third travel back to the past, Dana arrives in 1819, which is a less known bicentennial. In August 1619, the history of black America began with the landing of twenty blacks at Jamestown, Virginia (Bennett, Jr. 443). Dana returns to the present for the next-to-last time on June 19, 1976. According to Donadey, June 19 may be a reference to "Juneteenth," the celebration of the end of slavery, which began in Texas on June 19, 1865, and is considered to be African American Emancipation Day (67). Additionally, even their names bear significance on US history. Donadey argues that Dana and Kevin's last name, Franklin, is relevant to an interpretation of the book as a national allegory, since Benjamin Franklin was part of the nation's foundation, as well as of its slavery history. Furthermore, Benjamin Franklin was in favor of the education of former slaves and also signed a petition to Congress calling for the abolition of slavery in 1790 (67). Moreover, Donadey argues, Butler chooses California and Maryland as the two main sites for her narrative for a reason. California was not a slave state, and became part of the US only in 1850. Maryland, on the other hand, is considered to be either a part of the North or the East, and not as a former slave state. According to Donadey, Butler chooses states that cannot be easily identified as North or South to illustrate that the entire country needs to confront the history of slavery and that racism should not only be blamed on the South (68).

In her novel, Butler illustrates that the history of slavery still has consequences on our present. By turning a modern-day person into a link between the past and the present, she

exposes the true horrors of slavery and proves that one should not judge people's actions in the past by modern standards. Physically transporting a body from the present to the past clearly illustrates how inadequate history books are as opposed to real experience. Butler gives us an extraordinary first-person account on the horrors of slavery, which categorizes her novel as a slave narrative. Moreover, its elements of the fantastic and the unique experience of its heroine, through which she can better understand the past and transfer that knowledge back to the present, distinguishes *Kindred* as a postmodern slave narrative. Dana's body, with her experience in the past, becomes a historical artifact, a testament to the history of slavery, and a reminder that we are all responsible for our past, good or bad.

5. From *The Birth of a Nation* to *12 Years a Slave*: Cinematic Representations of Slavery and Racial Stereotypes

The history of African Americans in the film industry is rather long and complex. In the beginning, African Americans were rendered as racial stereotypes. The first decades of the twentieth century offered a nostalgic vision of the antebellum South, glorifying its image by portraying the "plantation myth," highlighting white superiority, while depicting African Americans as child-like, inept, overly-sexualized, and criminal. Not only were African Americans depicted as mere stereotypes but they were also usually portrayed by white actors using blackface, like in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Blackface was stage makeup mostly used in minstrel shows in the nineteenth century (Thompson and Carew). According to Behnken and Smithers, there were two reasons why white actors performed in blackface. One was that white women needed to be protected from the sex-crazed black men, and so they should only perform alongside white men, and the other reason was that most white Americans considered blackness to be so monstrous that the only solution was to represent blackness with blackface actors (48). The blackface makeup consisted of a layer of burnt cork on top of a layer of cocoa butter or black grease paint. In the beginning, actors painted huge red lips resembling those of clowns; however, later they either painted their lips white or left them unpainted.



Fig. 1. Al Jolson as Jakie Rabinowitz in *The Jazz Singer* (1927). Hulton Archive/Getty Images <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/01/history-of-blackface_n_4175051.html>.

The stock characters from the early minstrel shows had a long lasting influence on the characterization of African Americans. Racist black stereotypes, which originated from the

characterizations of plantation slaves, and even free black people, impinged upon the imagination of white Americans so much that they expected every black person to fit one or more of the stereotypes. Some of the racial stereotypes were: Jim Crow, Zip Coon (later Jim Crow and Zip Coon merged into Coon), Mammy, Uncle Tom, Buck, Wench/Jezebel, Mulatto, and Pickaninny (Padgett).



Fig. 2. Judy Garland as Judy Bellaire (in blackface playing the stereotype of Pickaninny). *Everybody Sing* (1938), Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/01/history-of-blackface_n_4175051.html>.

The 1940s and 1950s brought a shift in the way African American characters were depicted on screen. The main reason for this shift was the involvement of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1942, representatives of the NAACP met with Hollywood executives and negotiated to improve the depiction of African Americans and to reduce racial stereotypes. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s brought about the shift in the way black and white actors shared screen time, and their roles became more diverse. After World War II, Hollywood began reducing stereotypical representations of African Americans in film. In the 1960s, black characters developed more, and there was greater cast integration. The 1970s were marked by a new genre: blaxploitation films brought about great changes in the way the black community was depicted on film.

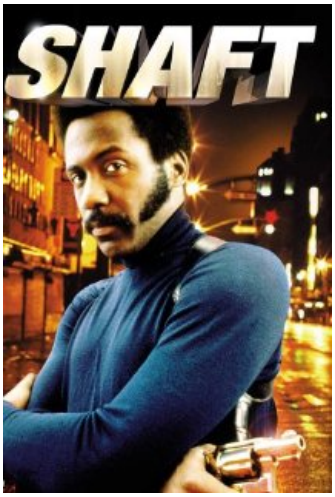


Fig. 3. Richard Roundtree as John Shaft in *Shaft* (1971). Blaxploitation film <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0067741/?ref_=nv_sr_2>.

These films confronted racial stereotypes of African Americans as servants or criminals and introduced them as avengers. Although most of these blaxploitation films were action thrillers filled with drugs, sex, and violence, they reflected the success of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement.

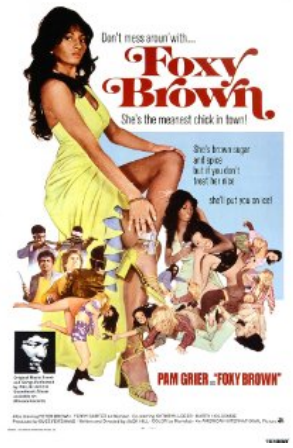


Fig. 4. Pam Grier as Foxy Brown in *Foxy Brown* (1974). Blaxploitation film <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0071517/?ref_=nv_sr_1>.

However, mainstream Hollywood still continued with its portrayal of black people as racial stereotypes (Thompson and Carew). The eighties saw an end to blaxploitation films and turned to a more realistic depiction of the black community. Spike Lee, with his film *Bamboozled* (2000), highlights the legacy of blackface minstrelsy and illustrates the presence of its racial stereotypes in the black characters of the 1990s. Yet, family comedies and sitcoms in the 1990s and 2000s still use the stereotype of the Coon and the Mammy (Padgett). African

Americans have come a long way, but even in the 2010s there are a lot of instances of racial stereotypes in film and in the music industry. In 2011, the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role went to Octavia Spencer for the role of Minny Jackson in the film *The Help*. She became only the sixth black woman to win an Oscar at the 84th Academy Awards. What is even more troubling is that she was awarded for the role of a maid. Out of the six black women that won an Oscar, three of them were awarded for the role of a racial stereotype. Hattie McDaniel won her Oscar in 1941, and she was also the first African American to win the Academy Award. She won it for playing the character of "Mammy" in *Gone with the Wind*. In 2002, Halle Berry won an Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her role in *Monster's Ball*, which embodies the Jezebel stereotype ("The Official Academy Awards Database"). There have been over 350 white actors and actresses nominated for Best Actor/Actress, and only 21 black actors and actresses are among them: "Even Babe the Pig was nominated before Denzel Washington, demonstrating that the achievements of black actors largely remain invisible within the academy and are often not taken seriously" ("Representations of Black People in Film"). Not much has changed in Hollywood for African Americans, and even today, black people are portrayed as stereotypes. Ralph Ellison realized long ago that "Movies are not about Blacks but what Whites think about Blacks" (qtd. in "Representations of Black People in Film"). According to the Dr. Vishette Merritt, chair of the Radio, Television, and Film Department at Howard University's School of Communications, the real reason why Hollywood still relies on racial stereotypes is that "the mindset in Hollywood is that positive images of blacks on the big screen don't sell" (qtd. in "Representations of Black People in Film").

According to Ava DuVernay, "the worst piece of film you will ever see, if you believe in the equality of all people," is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (qtd. in Lumenick).

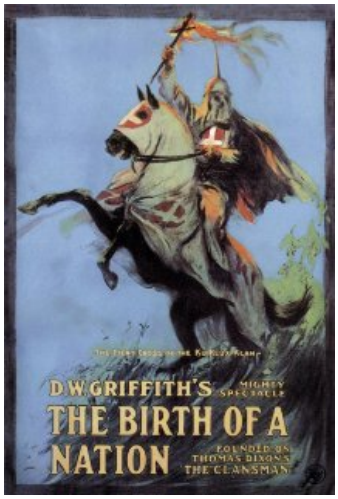


Fig. 5. *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Poster <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm681627904/tt0004972?ref_=ttmd_md_nxt>.

Originally called *The Clansman*, after Thomas Dixon Jr.'s novel, it was renamed by David Wark Griffith, on 3 March 1915, for "a grander title," *The Birth of a Nation* (Corliss). D.W. Griffith begins the film with "a plea for the art of the motion picture:"

> We do not fear censorship, for we have no wish to offend with improprietiesor obscenities, but we do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may illuminate the bright side of virtue – the same liberty that is conceded to the art of the written word – that art to which we owe the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. (*The Birth of a Nation*)

The film concentrates on two families to illustrate the differences between the North and the South – a northern family, the Stonemans, with two sons and a daughter, Elsie, and Austin Stoneman's "mulatto" mistress, and a southern family, the Camerons, and their two daughters, Margaret and Flora, and three sons. The Camerons live in South Carolina, "where life runs in a quaintly way that is to be no more" (*The Birth of a Nation*). Griffith depicts the South in an idyllic way with happy slaves and "the kindly master," and the "daughter of the South" that is "trained in the manners of the old school" (*The Birth of a Nation*). The Camerons' youngest daughter even has a "pet sister" that is actually a black girl of her age with whom she plays, and she is happy to do so. The slaves in the South are treated fairly; they pick cotton only "from six till six," and have a "two-hour interval for dinner" (*The Birth of a Nation*). The Stonemans' sons visit their friends in the South where the eldest son falls in love with Margaret, and Ben Cameron falls in love with Elsie upon seeing her picture.

However, as Griffith "subtly" suggests, showing hostilities between the Camerons' cats and dogs, trouble arrives in the form of the Civil War. After the first "Negro" regiments are formed, Griffith shows them raiding South Carolina, attacking white people, and stealing from the Camerons' home and other white families. However, the Confederates come to the rescue, and the Camerons' *mammy* is so pleased that she cannot help but hug them. The *mammy* is played by a white actress in blackface, as are most black characters. Ben Cameron is wounded in battle and earns the nickname "the Little Colonel." He is sent to a northern hospital where he finally meets Elsie who is a nurse there. After Lincoln is assassinated, the Southerners mourn the death of their "best friend," and Austin Stoneman and his "mulatto" protégé, Silas Lynch, are happy since they can now enforce their radical views in the South (*The Birth of a Nation*). Griffith once again reminds his viewers that "this is an historical presentation of the Civil War and Reconstruction Period, and is not meant to reflect on any race or people of today." With "Negroes" in office, there is an "overthrow of civilization," whereby the "white South [is put] under the heel of the black South" and, in the words of Woodrow Wilson, only the "great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South" can protect the Southern country (*The Birth of a Nation*). Griffith's "historical presentation" includes scenes with an almost completely black state legislature, in which the black representatives are either drunk or asleep at their desks, eating fried chicken and drinking whiskey with their shoes off and feet on the table. The only bills they pass are those stating that all members must wear shoes and that all whites must salute "Negro" officers in the street, and they also pass an intermarriage bill. With Lincoln gone, "Negroes" and carpetbaggers sweep the state while "the helpless white minority" is left in agony (*The Birth of a Nation*). Miserable because of the situation in the South, "the Little Colonel" goes outside and sees white children playing with a white sheet, scaring black children by hiding under it. This inspires "the Little Colonel" to form the Ku Klux Klan, "the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule" (*The Birth of a Nation*). Gus, a "mulatto" man played by a white actor in blackface, after watching Flora for a while decides to take action; he follows her when she goes to get water and tells that her he wants to marry her. Flora runs from him, but the sex-crazed "mulatto" does not take "no" for an answer and follows her to a cliff. To defend her honor, Flora jumps off the cliff rather than to be defiled by a black man. The KKK track Gus down and, even though they are greatly outnumbered by the black people, they manage to kill Gus, whose body they leave at Silas Lynch's doorstep.



Fig. 6. Actors costumed in the full regalia of the Ku Klux Klan chase down a white actor (Walter Long as Gus) in blackface in a still from *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/history/2015/03/the_birth_of_a_nation_how_the_fight_to_censor_d_w_griffith_s_film_shaped.html>.

Silas sends his spies out to find members of the KKK. He finds out that the Camerons are its members and arrests the old Cameron. The former master is paraded through the streets in chains in front of his former slaves, who mock him while the "faithful souls," *mammy* and *Sambo*, only pretend to mock him, so that they can help him escape. Fleeing from the "Negro" army, they come across a cabin with two Union veterans, who help them: "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright" (*The Birth of a Nation*). Meanwhile, Silas, the "mulatto," proposes to Elsie and threatens to horsewhip her if she refuses him. He wants to build a Black Empire and wants Elsie to be his queen. While "helpless whites look on," the black people are victimizing KKK sympathizers in the streets (*The Birth of a Nation*). However, an army of KKK members finally comes to the rescue, marching to the music of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." They rescue Elsie and the town from the "Negroes," and they arrive just in time to the cabin to save the Camerons, who were just about to smash their own women's heads to save them from the sex-crazed *bucks*. In the end, the KKK triumphs over the black people, and even Jesus makes an appearance to bless the Klan.

Through his "historical presentation" of the Civil War and Reconstruction, Griffith employs all of the racial stereotypes of African Americans, using white actors in blackface, no less. He either depicts African Americans as faithful servants to their masters, through the characters of "Mammy" and "Sambo," or as criminals and sex-crazed "bucks" who lust after white women. Moreover, he manages to blame black people and abolitionists for the Civil War, and provides an excuse for the formation of the Ku Klux Klan – to save the honor of

white women and with it the whole white race. Richard Corliss described *The Birth of a Nation* as:

> . . . not simply a racist film; it was one whose brilliant storytelling technique lent plausibility and poignancy to the notion of blacks as stupid, venal and brutal. Viewers could believe that what they saw was true historically *and* emotionally. *Birth* not only taught moviegoers how to react to film narrative but what to think about blacks – and, in the climactic ride of hooded horsemen to avenge their honor, what to do to them. (Corliss)

It is no wonder that civil rights organizations wanted to stop the opening of *The Birth of a Nation* at the Liberty Theater in New York City's Time Square in 1915 (Shipp). By 1941, even Griffith had realized that his film was not fit for the general audience:

> It should be seen solely by film people and film students. The Negro race has had enough trouble, more than enough of its share of injustice, oppression, tragedy, suffering and sorrow. And because of the social progress which Negroes achieved in the face of these handicaps, it is best that *The Birth of a Nation* in its present form be withheld from public exhibition. (qtd. in Shipp)

Although released in 1939, 24 years after *The Birth of a Nation*, *Gone with the Wind* still portrays African Americans as stereotypes, and still glorifies the Old South and Southerners. However, there are some significant differences between the two films. *Gone with the Wind* does not use actors in blackface; it is in Technicolor, and it is not a silent film. Victor Fleming, just like Griffith, begins the film by romanticizing the old days:

> There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton fields called the Old South. . . . Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knight and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave. . . . Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered. A Civilization gone with the wind. . . . (*Gone with the Wind*)

The film is set just before the War, during the Civil War, and during Reconstruction. It begins with a scene depicting the main character, Scarlett O'Hara, at Tara, her family's plantation.

She has just learned that the man whom she loves, Ashley Wilkes, is to be married to Melanie Hamilton, his cousin from Atlanta. Their engagement is going to be announced at tomorrow's barbecue at the Wilkes's Twelve Oaks plantation. At the barbecue, Scarlett reveals her feelings to Ashley, hoping that he will marry her instead. However, Ashley says that Melanie is a more suitable choice for him. Rhett Butler, a guest at Twelve Oaks, overhears their entire conversation and promises to keep it a secret. The barbecue is interrupted by the news of the declaration of war, and all the proud Southerners charge to enlist. Melanie's younger brother, Charles, before joining the Confederate Army, asks Scarlett to marry him, and even though she loves Ashley, Scarlett agrees. However, Charles leaves as soon as they marry, as does Ashley. Soon afterwards, Charles dies of pneumonia and Scarlett is left a widow. Scarlett's mother sends her to Atlanta and Scarlett eagerly agrees, for it is also Melanie's home, and Ashley will be there too. In Atlanta, Scarlett sees Rhett Butler again, who is now a blockade runner for the Confederate Army. Ashley comes to visit Melanie in Atlanta for Christmas, and he and Scarlett share a kiss. Several months later, the war comes to Atlanta just as Melanie is about to have her baby. Scarlett has to deliver the baby herself since the doctor is too busy with the wounded soldiers. After Melanie gives birth, they flee Atlanta with the help of Rhett Butler. Scarlett returns home with Melanie and the baby, and finds her beloved Tara desolate. Her mother has just died of typhoid fever, and her father has lost his mind under the pressure of the war and the loss of his beloved wife. Tara is plundered by Union soldiers and the fields are untended, and it is up to Scarlett to ensure the survival of her family and the survival of the plantation. After the war ends, the defeated soldiers start coming home and Ashley finds his way to Tara. Scarlett begs him not to leave her, and even though he says that he cannot leave Melanie, he kisses Scarlett. In order to keep Tara, Scarlett must come up with a large amount of money to pay the taxes, so she goes into town to visit Rhett, who is now in jail for being a traitor. He does not give her money, but she runs into her sister's fiancé, Frank Kennedy, who now owns a profitable business, and tells him that her sister, Suellen, has married another man, so she can marry him instead. Scarlett becomes a businesswoman, and is one day attacked, so her husband, Ashley, and Rhett go on a raid, on which Frank gets killed, leaving Scarlett widowed again. Shortly afterwards, Rhett proposes to Scarlett and they marry. They have a daughter, Bonnie Blue, but Scarlett still loves Ashley. Their daughter dies tragically, and Scarlett suffers a miscarriage. Melanie, who was left weak after her pregnancy, is now on her deathbed, and she asks Scarlett to take care of Ashley. Realizing that Ashley is now free for Scarlett, Rhett leaves her. Yet, Scarlett just then realizes that Ashley has never

loved her, but Melanie, and that she has loved Rhett all along. The film ends with Scarlett deciding to win Rhett back.

This lengthy passage describing the story of the film signifies how unimportant black characters are to the film. Even though it is a film about the Civil War, *Gone with the Wind* does not deal with slavery at all. The slaves are depicted before the war, picking cotton, being mammies and servants. During the war, some join the army, whereas others stay on the plantation with their masters, as Mammy does. Even after the war, Mammy is still *mammy*, as if nothing has changed. Banks argues that the character played by Hattie McDaniel is "the physical epitome of the description of mammy" (69).

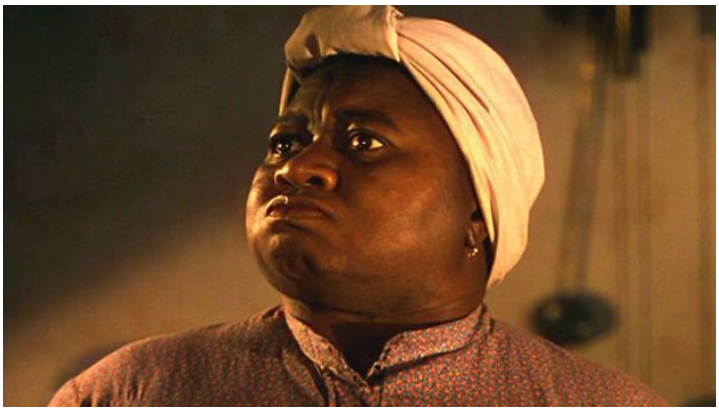


Fig. 7. Hattie McDaniel as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) <http://www.bet.com/news/national/2014/03/27/gone-with-the-wind-prequel-aims-to-give-life-to-mammy.html>.

Like many African American actors who played roles that emphasized the inferiority of the black race, McDaniel was frequently criticized. Many critics attacked her for agreeing to play stereotyped characters and for being "complicit in belittling African Americans as a race" (Boyd 70). Although Hattie McDaniel did bring something new to the character of the *mammy*, "an irreverent bossiness that she wielded to all in her path, black and white alike," that too was attributed to the "real" behavior of the *mammy* and black women (Boyd 70). However, McDaniel, in her own *mammy* fashion, responded to her critics saying: "Why should I complain about making seven thousand dollars a week playing a maid? If I didn't, I'd be making seven dollars a week actually being one!" (qtd. in Boyd 70). *Gone with the Wind* does not discuss the issues of black people or the horrors of slavery; it is only about the problems of Southern white people. Black people in this film are irrelevant; they are only stock characters, a detail in Southern life and Southern ways. Just like *The Birth of a Nation*,

Gone with the Wind was not received well by everyone. According to Shipp, African Americans picketed all over the country, and even pushed for a boycott of the film. Even before it was filmed, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* expressed its displeasure:

> This kind of picture of the Old South is false, and worse than that, it is a libel on the entire Negro people. . . . our professional Hollywood hangers-on will be so blinded by the fact that a few Negroes will get jobs playing Uncle Tom and Aunt Dinah that they will think of nothing but praise for the studio that produces the film and the director that hires these actors to help perpetuate these lies in celluloid. (qtd. in Shipp)

Other critics of the film referred to it as "a weapon of terror against black America," a film that resurrects "the racial inferiority theories which science has discarded," and "the most expensive attempt to date to show the too rapidly progressing Negro 'his proper place'" (qtd. in Shipp). David O. Selznick, the producer, was aware of the fact that he could not stay faithful to Margaret Mitchell's novel if he wanted to avoid censorship: "I, for one, have no desire to produce any anti-Negro film. In our picture I think I have to be awfully careful that the Negroes come out decidedly on the right side of the ledger, which I do not think should be difficult" (qtd. in Leff). For Selznick, to achieve that, he only had to make a few cuts, and so, for example, he cut out the Ku Klux Klan from the film, or more precisely, their uniform: "A group of men can go out to 'get' the perpetrators of an attempted rape without having long white sheets over them and without having their membership in a society as a motive" (qtd. in Leff). Because Butterfly McQueen, who played Prissy, and Hattie McDaniel, who played Mammy, complained about the word "Nigger," Victor Shapiro, the studio public-relations director, promised them that they would not have to say it, and Selznick, reluctantly, honored this promise. However, the words "darkies" and "inferiors" remained in the screenplay (Leff). Yet, racism was not only present in the film itself but at its premiere as well. At the time, Atlanta's segregation laws prohibited the film's black actors from attending the premiere, and they were not even featured in the film's promotional program, (see Mahoney). However, they were allowed to attend other events leading up to the premiere. Bernstein recounts an interesting fact about one such event: "One of the most fascinating things about the festivities is Martin Luther King, Jr., when he was 10-years-old, actually appeared on stage at a charity ball dressed as a slave in front of a mock-up of Tara singing with the Ebenezer Baptist Church

choir" (qtd. in Mahoney). Even though Hattie McDaniel was allowed to attend the Los Angeles premiere of the film, ten years after the premiere, when she passed away in 1952, she was denied her final wish to be buried at the Hollywood Cemetery on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood. Thus, she could not escape racism even in death (Mahoney).

The 1990s introduced a new cinematic trend of presenting the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved with films like *Amistad* and *Beloved* (Mitchell 43). Haile Gerima's 1993 film *Sankofa* does just that:

> One of the film's most revolutionary contributions is Gerima's portrayal of enslaved *people*, not slaves. They are people struggling with love, loss, denial, and guilt. He takes them out of the one-dimensional, passive, "victim" role, and embodies them with complications that manifest in active resistance, personal conflict, and compelling stories. (Mumin)

Sankofa presents a story of slavery from the point of view of the enslaved, while denouncing the romantic images of happy slaves and slavery still present in American culture. According to Field, *Sankofa* evolved from twenty years of research into the experiences of African slaves and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Sankofa is an Akan verb and can mean: *the king sees all*, *one must not be afraid to redeem one's past mistakes*, *turn back and fetch it*, etc. However, Gerima prefers the translation: *one must return to the past in order to move forward* (Kandé 90). In Gerima's *Sankofa*, Mona, a contemporary black woman, is taken back to the past to relive the horrors of slavery, just like Dana from Octavia Butler's *Kindred*. The film begins in Ghana, in a fortress in which slave traders used to keep captured Africans who were to be then shipped to America and sold as slaves. Mona is a model who is being photographed by a white photographer on the beach and in the fortress. As this photo-shoot takes place, we hear the sound of drums and a drummer who is chanting, calling for the "spirit of the dead [to] rise up, claim your story, possess your bird of passage. African spirits, claim your stories" (*Sankofa*). The drummer, who is the self-appointed guardian of the castle, then goes to Mona and tells her in his native language to "go back to the past, to the source," and yells at the white tourists and the photographer to go away because they are on "sacred ground, holy ground," for "blood has been spilled here" (*Sankofa*). Later, Mona follows the tourists and finds herself alone in the dungeon where they used to hold the slaves, sometimes for years, until they were shipped to slavery. Suddenly, she sees slaves in chains staring at her and guards come to shackle her, beat, and brand her. When she realizes what is happening, Mona

screams out: "I'm not an African," renouncing her roots and ancestry in an attempt to free herself from her captors (*Sankofa*). Suddenly, Shola is on a plantation; she is a house-slave named Shola, and she has no memory of her contemporary self. She is in love with a field slave, Shango, who wants Shola to run away with him and poison her owners. Even though the master rapes her repeatedly, she does not want to kill another human being. Shola was born a slave, and she believes that that is the reason why she accepts slavery more easily than those who were free before. However, after witnessing a pregnant runaway being beaten to death and her child being cut out from her by Nunu, she joins the rebels on the plantation and begins her transformation from a faithful house-slave to a rebel field hand. Nunu is the opposite of the *mammy* stereotype. She is a strong black woman who helps everyone, nurses children like a *mammy* would, and in the evening tells stories to the other slaves about strong black women who resisted their captors and even killed overseers by staring at them. Later, we find out that the main protagonist in her stories is Nunu herself. Nunu has a son, Joe, who is a product of repeated rape on the slave ship, and she refers to him as "rotten fruit" (*Sankofa*). Joe is a head slave who behaves as if he were white and better than the slaves. He has piercing blue eyes and is in servitude to a white priest who teaches him about Christianity. He is obsessed with the Virgin Mary and has a tortured sense of identity because of his mother, Nunu. Gerima paints complex characters, which is best seen in his portrayal of the headman for the white man in the character of Noble Ali. He has to whip his people if the overseer tells him to, and he has to keep them in line. However, he does have a conscience; he is not portrayed as just the villain in the film whom we have to hate. Gerima makes us see his inner struggle and pain for what he has to do. Noble Ali goes to Nunu for comfort and advice and tells her how "my own people [are] beating me down with their eyes" (*Sankofa*). Nunu tells him that "the choice is either to be a true man or a beast" (*Sankofa*). After that, Noble Ali only pretends to be the same man working for the white man, and he joins the rebels. In the end, the rebels fight back, and Shola kills her rapist. However, Joe, conflicted, drowns his own mother, Nunu, and afterwards realizes that she is a saint because of her life of suffering. He takes her body to the church, places her on the altar, and kills the priest, who, he now realizes, is the oppressor. The white people cannot make him get out of the church, so they burn it down with him, the priest and his mother in it. We are informed that Nunu's body was never found, and it is believed that she turned into a buzzard and flew back to Africa. After her complete transformation and newly gained freedom, Shola is also transported back to Africa and is now in her own body as Mona. However, the trip to the past and all her

experiences have changed her, and she now completely ignores the white photographer and joins her African brothers and sisters at the fortress, who were also in the past with her. Unlike other filmmakers, Gerima does not use the white man to help black people free themselves. The slaves in *Sankofa* transform their lives themselves, take matters into their own hands, and finally gain freedom from oppression and life of servitude, both physical and psychological.

In 2012, Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* was released. Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the film a "postmodern slave-narrative Western . . . an opposite extreme of *The Birth of a Nation*" ("Tarantino 'Unchained'"). According to Lawrence D. Bobo, "*Django* is the most cinematically and culturally important film dealing with race since Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). For too long American cinema has presented – and American audiences have accepted, digested and largely tacitly embraced – a hopelessly sanitized version of slavery in the South." However, Tarantino's *Django* received negative criticism as well, mostly from African Americans. Ishmael Reed called it "an abomination that distorts history" (qtd. in Prince), and Jelani Cobb, associate professor of history and the director of the Africana Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut, argues: "the movie's lines between fantasy and the actual myopic perspectives on history were so hazy that the audience wasn't asked to suspend disbelief, they were asked to suspend conscience."

The film begins with a scene of a slave coffle. The Speck brothers are leading a coffle when they are stopped by Dr. King Schultz, a former dentist, now a bounty-hunter. Shultz wants to buy a specific slave from the Speck brothers, one who knows the Brittle brothers. As Schultz questions the slaves, one of the brothers gets annoyed and points his gun at him. Schultz kills him and shoots the horse of the second brother, leaving him partly under his dead horse. He forcibly buys Django and frees the slaves from the coffle, leaving them with two choices – to flee North and kill the remaining brother, or to get help in the nearest town. The slaves, naturally, shoot the Speck brother. Since Schultz is against slavery, he offers Django a deal: he will give him his freedom after he identifies the Brittle brothers for him. After finding and executing the Brittle brothers, Django and Schultz become partners in the bounty hunter business since Django is a natural at shooting. After hearing that Django's wife's name is Broomhilda Von Shaft, Schultz tells him the old Nordic and Germanic legend of Brunhilde. Since Django is the only slave he ever freed, he feels responsible for him, and decides to help him find and free Hildi. They travel to Mississippi where they discover that Broomhilda's owner is Calvin Candie, the owner of the Candyland plantation. Schultz realizes that Candie will not just sell them Hildi because they want her, so he devises a plan to get close to him.

They find out that he likes Mandingo fights, in which two slave fighters must fight each other to the death for the amusement of white people, and they pretend that they want to spend a ridiculous amount of money to buy one of his fighters. They get Candie's attention with the offer and he invites them to his plantation. On their way to the plantation, Candie tells Schultz that he has a German-speaking slave, so Schultz asks Candie to send her to his room because he wants to talk in his native language. When Schultz and Hildi are alone, he informs her of their plan. However, Candie's house-slave, Stephen, becomes suspicious; he figures out the scheme and tells his master everything. Candie is angry; yet, he controls himself enough to come up with an alternate plan, according to which the ridiculous amount of money they offered for the fighter actually goes to buy Hildi. After they pay for Hildi and the papers are signed, Schultz cannot wait to get out of there, but Candie insists on a handshake to seal the deal. Angry, Schultz shoots Candie straight through the heart instead. Schultz is then shot by Candie's man, and all hell breaks loose. Despite being a natural at shooting people, Django cannot defeat them all, and also they have Hildi, so he is forced to surrender. Losing Candie left everyone angry, and all the white people can come up with are different ways to kill Django. However, Stephen knows that torturing him and killing him, no matter how slowly, is too good for him. Since he cannot really tell white people what to do, he plants the idea in his mistress's head. to sell Django and make him work to death in the mines. On his way to the mines, Stephen persuades his escorts to let him go and tells them that he is a bounty hunter, that the criminals he is supposed to kill for a large bounty are at Candyland, and that he will give them most of the bounty money. After they release him and give him a gun, he kills them all and returns to Candyland with explosives. There, Django kills everyone except the slaves. Stephen is not spared because he is "not black folk" (*Django Unchained*), and Django leaves him in the house after shooting him in the knees and blows up the mansion. Django and Hildi ride off together.

Tarantino tries to deconstruct *The Birth of a Nation* with his *Django Unchained*. His white protagonist, Dr. Schultz, is against the institution of slavery. He helps free a slave, treats him like a fellow human being, gives him a paying job, helps him free his wife, and even dies a hero killing a slave master after buying Django's wife and freeing her as well. Django gets to exact revenge on the people who tortured him and his wife; he gets to kill a lot of bad white people throughout the film, and he even gets paid to kill white men. Tarantino makes fun of the Ku Klux Klan and Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* in a scene in which, after Schultz and Django have killed the Brittle brothers, the owner of the plantation where the brothers worked

gathers the Regulators to kill them, and they are arguing about the holes in the bags somebody's wife cut out wrong, because of which they cannot see anything. Tarantino even shows us a piece of the horrors of slavery, and he does not glorify the South. However, he fails to give us a film about slavery without racial stereotypes. One can get past the characterization of Broomhilda Von Shaft as a damsel in distress that barely speaks two whole sentences throughout the film, and even faints at the sight of her savior, Django. Tarantino does in fact incorporate a Western into the film, and the damsel in distress is a part of Western films. However, as Gates Jr. points out, the character of Stephen is the perfect depiction of the Sambo/Uncle Buck stereotype, only "on steroids" ("Were There Slaves Like Stephen in 'Django'?"). Temoney indicates that Stephen "resembles the visage of Uncle Ben of the Uncle Ben's rice brand" (137).



Fig. 8. Samuel L. Jackson as Stephen in *Django Unchained* (2012) <https://cinespotting.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/stephen.jpg>.

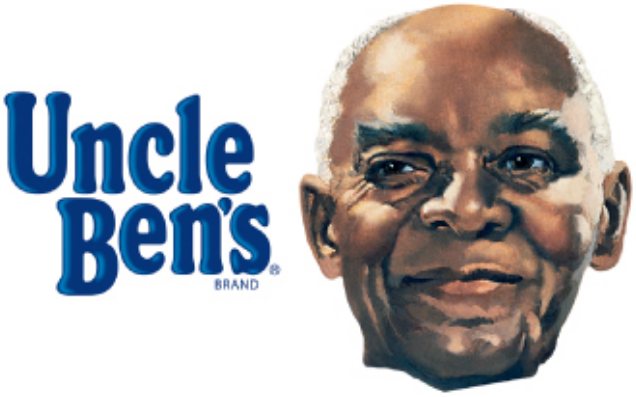


Fig. 9. Uncle Ben's Brand poster <http://www.benekeith.com/food/products/uncle-bens-classic-cornbread-stuffing-mix>.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. examines whether a character like Stephen really existed, and concludes that even though there were instances of slaves betraying other slaves, that slaves like him were not in fact real. He even shows concern over Jackson's brilliant Oscar-worthy performance of Stephen and concludes that "it will be difficult for our generation to think of the house Negro without recalling Stephen; Jackson, in other words, has, with devastating effectiveness, transformed a stereotype into an archetype, the mark of the brilliance of one of our most talented actors" ("Were There Slaves Like Stephen in 'Django'?"). Jelani Cobb points to an even more troubling fact that Django's real nemesis in the film is not the slaveholder, the white man, but the house slave, Stephen: "The central conflict is not between an ex-slave and a slaver but between two archetypes – the militant and the sellout." No matter how great an actor plays Stephen, and how amusing the scenes are to the audience, it is still wrong:

> At its most basic, this is an instance in which a white director holds an obsequious black slave up for ridicule. The use of this character as a comic foil seems essentially disrespectful to the history of slavery. Oppression, almost by definition, is a set of circumstances that bring out the worst in most people. A response to slavery – even a cowardly, dishonorable one like what we witness with Stephen – highlights the depravity of the institution. We've come a long way racially, but not so far that laughing at that character shouldn't be deeply disturbing. (Cobb)

Furthermore, Tarantino's excessive use of violence is also disturbing. It is not the depiction of violence, through which he shows the horrors of slavery, that is disturbing, because much worse happened to slaves in history than the brutality that he shows, but Django's excessive use of force to exact revenge on his oppressors. Django whips his former overseer, one of the Brittle brothers, and shoots a man in the crotch only hours after that same man wanted to castrate him. It might seem satisfactory to the audience, and they might applaud him for having a black character that finally, after years of oppression, gives the white man what he deserves, but, as Temoney argues, this kind of behavior forces us to put the victim and the oppressor on the same level when their distinction should be maintained (138). Furthermore, Temoney argues that *Django* "takes bloody violence to cartoonish heights," and this can distract and diminish the horrors of slavery portrayed in the film all the more because most of

the violence takes place near the end of the film, and most people usually remember the last things they hear or see, so after watching *Django Unchained*, they take with them Django's ultra-violence rather than the wrongs of slavery Tarantino successfully portrayed (138).

None of the racial stereotypes found in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939), or Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) are present in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Instead of Mammies, Samboes, vigilantes, and Uncle Buck's, McQueen offers a plethora of real and complex characters. McQueen reintroduces Solomon Northup to the world and manages to revive the genre of the slave narrative. Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out that Northup's slave narrative "landed on the New York Times best-sellers list 160 years after it was first published" (qtd. in Adams). Gates Jr., who served as a historical consultant on the film, also remarks:

> As a literary scholar and cultural historian who has spent a lifetime searching out African Americans' lost, forgotten and otherwise unheralded tales, I was honored to serve as a historical consultant on Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, most certainly one of the most vivid and authentic portrayals of slavery ever captured in a feature film. In its blend of tactile, sensory realism with superb modernistic cinematic techniques, this film is 180 degrees away from Quentin Tarantino's postmodern spaghetti Western-slave narrative, *Django Unchained*, occupying the opposite pole on what we might think of as "the scale of representation." ("*12 Years a Slave:* Trek From Slave to Screen")



Fig. 10. Still of Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup in *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Photo by Francois Duhamel, ©2013. Fox Searchlight Pictures <http://www.imdb.com/media/rm410363136/tt2024544?ref_=ttmi_mi_all_sf_14#>.
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The film is about Solomon Northup, a free black man living with his wife and children in Saratoga Springs, New York. He is a violinist, and two men offer him a job in Washington, D.C. After the job is finished, they drug him and take him to a slave pen where he is to be delivered to the South and sold to slavery. He is given a new identity, "Plat," and has all thoughts of freedom beaten out of him. He is shipped to New Orleans where a plantation owner named William Ford purchases him. Other than his skill of playing the violin, "Plat" impresses Ford with his ability to transport logs across the swamp, making his business more profitable. Ford's carpenter, Tibeats, feeling less superior, attacks "Plat," and he fights back. Tibeats then, with the help of his friends, tries to lynch "Plat," but Ford's overseer stops them in time, though he leaves "Plat" hanging on the noose, barely long enough to be able to balance on tiptoe, for hours while the other slaves and the mistress go about their business. Ford finally cuts him down, but to avoid confrontation, decides to sell him to Edwin Epps. Epps is one of those cruel masters who uses the Bible to justify his abuse of his slaves. He beats his slaves who do not pick enough cotton and repeatedly rapes Patsey, a young slave woman. While Patsey has to suffer the degradation of being raped by her master, she also suffers by his wife who in her jealous rage beats and humiliates her every chance she gets. Life becomes so painful for Patsey that she asks "Plat" to kill her, but he refuses. After a white field hand, Armsby, joins the slaves at Epps' plantation, "Plat" sees an opportunity to gain his freedom. Believing that Armsby is against slavery, "Plat" pays him to mail a letter to his friends in New York. Armsby agrees to do so, but he betrays him to Epps. However, "Plat" manages to convince Epps that Armsby is lying. While working on a gazebo with a Canadian worker named Bass, "Plat" sees another opportunity. He tells his story to Bass, who agrees to help him. Surely enough, his friend shows up with the sheriff to free him. After almost twelve years, Northup is finally a free man again and is restored with his family.

Northup does not kill his oppressors; he does not even kill Patsey who asked him to. He remains hopeful that one day he will find his way home somehow, and he does. Jonathan Chait argues that it is "Northup's calm, dignified competence" that enrages his oppressors. He points out that slavery was a system in which the black man's most unforgivable offense against his master was the belief that he was an equal to, or worse, better than the white man. McQueen portrays Northup not just as a slave but also as a human being who has to survive in the circumstances he is thrown into, has to adapt to those circumstances, and yet, somehow keep his humanity. He is not portrayed as a superhuman that cannot be damaged by the

horrors of slavery. He has to do terrible things to survive, as do other slaves, but McQueen does not make us judge him for his actions; rather, he makes us understand.

Although the film industry has come a long way since Griffith's 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, there is still much work to be done in educating the masses. As long as Miley Cyrus continues to be a model for cultural appropriation, refers to people as her "Mammy" (qtd. in King), and sees nothing wrong with it, and as long as black actors are being referred to as "too street" (qtd. in Blay) to play James Bond, there will be a need for films such as McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*.

Conclusion

On account of pro-slavery writers' unwillingness to examine history from the "bottom up" and include slave narratives into their research, historians have failed to comprehend the cultural traditions of black people and therefore distorted African American history, promoted prejudice, and treated misinterpretations and presumptions as historical facts. These "historical facts" were then used and re-used in countless books, films, cartoons, in culture, and in everyday life. One of the books that relied heavily on these so-called historical facts is William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). With his novel, Styron contributed to the fraudulent representation of black people and their history by repeating and enhancing myths and stereotypes from pro-slavery writings, and he created new myths and racial stereotypes. Styron's novel initiated a debate between Black Power intellectuals and defenders of Styron's text. This debate and the issues it raised affected the study of slavery and set the standard for postmodern slave narratives.

Writers of postmodern slave narratives produce texts that rewrite the past, both distant and present. Postmodern slave narratives depict slavery from the slave's point of view, raise issues concerning cultural appropriation and racial stereotypes, open a debate between the oppressive pro-slavery representations of the past and the slaves' authentic experience of that same past, and call attention to a battle between the dominant pro-slavery form of writing, which perpetuates the slavery mentality, and the new form of writing that endorses liberation from slavery and a deconstruction of its ideological roots. Postmodern slave narratives are contemporary works of fiction that re-write/right history by depicting slavery in its historical context, while employing typical postmodern features and experimental strategies, such as elements of the fantastic, satire, speculative fiction, and realism.

In her novel *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Anne Williams, retells history in a black woman's voice in order to set the record straight, to correct history's lies and restore its omissions. In her novel, she uses slave narratives, songs, stories, and other sources to revise Styron's stereotypical rendition of history. Her narrative offers insights into the narratives of both black men and women and white women and men. Williams engages in a struggle over the dominant discourse of white America that not only misrepresented African Americans but also violated and controlled their culture and history, and she triumphs; she dismantles the master texts that defined and appropriated her. With her narrative, she shatters myths and stereotypes and separates the real people from their stereotypes, and by doing so, sets them free.

In her novel *Kindred*, Octavia E. Butler gives a first person account on the horrors of slavery, and in that respect her novel can be categorized as a slave narrative. However, using elements of the fantastic, Butler transfers past experiences into the present and makes connections between modern-day events and slavery, which marks her novel as a postmodern slave narrative. Through time-travel, Butler's protagonist, Dana, experiences first hand all the horrors generated by the institution of slavery, and she gets to keep the experience forever through the marks on her body. Bearing the physical marks of slavery on her body, she becomes part of its history, and at the same time a part of the present with a unique perspective on life. In her novel, Butler illustrates how the history of slavery still has consequences on our present. By turning a modern-day person into a link between the past and the present, she exposes the truth about slavery and proves that one should not judge people's actions in the past by modern standards. Transporting her educated, modern-day protagonist from the present to the past, she clearly demonstrates how inadequate history books are as opposed to real experience. Dana's body, with her experience in the past, becomes a historical artifact, a testament to the history of slavery, and a reminder that we are all responsible for our past, good or bad.

Throughout history, African Americans have experienced discrimination and stereotyping from all strands of society and popular culture, the film industry in particular. The first decades of the twentieth century offered a nostalgic vision of the antebellum South, glorifying its image by portraying the "plantation myth," highlighting white superiority while depicting African Americans as child-like, inept, overly-sexualized, and criminal. Not only were African Americans depicted as mere stereotypes but they were also usually portrayed by white actors using blackface. The stock characters from the early minstrel shows had a long-lasting influence on the characterization of African Americans. Racist black stereotypes, which originated from the characterizations of plantation slaves, and even free black people, impinged upon the imagination of white Americans so much that they expected every black person to fit one or more of the stereotypes. This lasted up to the 1990s, and even today there are films that represent black people as stereotypes. Unfortunately, the film industry still has a lot of work to do in order to educate the public in the matters of racial stereotypes and, especially, cultural appropriation. However, more and more films are made about slavery that represent the enslaved rather than the oppressors, and rather than using stereotypes, the directors choose to portray slaves as real and complex human beings. Those celluloid counterparts to neo-slave narratives have become an important venue for combating stereotypes and promoting positive racial representation. Like Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa*

Rose, which rewrites history and deconstructs harmful racial stereotypes, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which transports us back to the past and makes us experience firsthand what it is like to be a slave so as to better understand our past, and through the past, our present as well, Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* and Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* offer a portrayal of black persons beyond racial stereotypes, hopefully, starting a new trend of transferring slave narratives to the big screen, offering the viewers an authentic representation of black people and America's past, and deconstructing negative racial myths and stereotypes that even today find their way into mainstream media.

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