

Surrogate Families and the Role of the Community in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*,
Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*

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Introduction

“In the quarters the slave was rarely under the direct surveillance of his master. Here, he could be a man. He could express his true feelings and gain respect and sympathy in his family circle. Friendship, love, sexual gratification, fun, and values which differed from those of the master were all found in the quarters.”

— *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, John Blassingame

In the 1970s there was a decisive shift in the historical interpretation of the institution of slavery. Before that time, enslaved people were generally defined as objects, obedient and acted upon by the authoritative slaveholders of the Southern plantations. It was generally assumed that chattel slavery compelled the emasculation of black men, restricted the development of strong family bonds and deprived blacks of feelings of empowerment and self-respect (Anderson 123). However, this historical perception of the slave experience was generally slanted and in many respects historically inaccurate. As Eugene D. Genovese pointed out in 1973, “we [used to] see the slaves in the master’s terms, without acknowledging the extent to which the slaves freed themselves from domination” (qtd. in White 515). In the 1970s, this old interpretation of the black personality and the institution of slavery came under scrutiny in historical studies by Herbert G. Gutman, John W. Blassingame, and Eugene D. Genovese, who discarded the old myth of the enslaved as passive victims. These historians emphasized the slaves’ constant struggle for survival and freedom and highlighted the richness of African culture and folklore. They also underscored the development of a strong slave community and its significance in fostering feelings of belonging and self-respect. Though they recognized and discussed the debilitating impact of chattel slavery and its dehumanization of the enslaved, they also emphasized the development of “a distinctive culture” and “a strong sense of group solidarity” (Blassingame 147). In his

book *The Slave Community* (1979), Blassingame argued that “[enslaved people] united to protect themselves from the most oppressive features of slavery and to preserve their self-esteem” (147). In particular, *The Slave Community* dispels the myth of the male slave as an obedient “black Sambo” and shifts attention to the empowering role of the slave community and its ability to render the institution of slavery more tolerable.

This re-evaluation of the importance of the black community influenced to a great extent the works of African American writers in the 1970s and 1980s, who used black free and enslaved communities, black empowerment and agency as central themes in many of their novels. In particular, African American writers such as Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Charles Johnson drew heavily on nineteenth-century slave narratives to explore constructions of black race and gender identity. Focusing on the legacies of the slave trade, institutionalized slavery and racial segregation, their novels dramatize the traumatic impact that the experience of slavery and segregation had on the identities of slaves and their descendants. My master thesis will be primarily concerned with the ways in which in these novels, which are sometimes called neo-slave narratives, black communities are represented as enabling the reconstruction of female and male black identity. Slave communities historically often served as surrogate families for many slaves in the plantation quarters, where black enslaved people could find solace for their inhumane treatment. The main characters in Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990) struggle to survive the dominant forces of oppression, sexism and racism and construct communities that in certain circumstances are a driving force for male and female empowerment.

I decided to place these novels side by side to explore how they speak to one another and investigate to what extent the fictional black communities they portray function as forces of male and female empowerment. Although sexism and racism clearly defined life in black

communities and in particular plantation quarters, resistance to these oppressive powers of domination and group solidarity served as vehicles for reaffirming black identity. bell hooks in her book *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1990) contends that the black community is a space of resistance, empowerment and liberation. She points to the significance of black communities by arguing that it is “a place where we can find compassion, recognition of difference, of the importance of diversity, of our individual uniqueness” (213).

The novels I will discuss, influenced by the revisionary historical studies and feminist critics like bell hooks, explore the decisive role of black communities in providing a collective sense of black identity that countered the racial and gender stereotypes imposed by the dominant white culture. However, the three writers I focus on treat black slave communities in a distinctively different way; in *Kindred* and *Beloved*, black communities are represented as enabling female empowerment and Butler and Morrison respectively provide female perspectives of chattel slavery in their effort to deconstruct pre-conceived notions of black female identity. On the other hand, the slave community in Johnson’s *Middle Passage* facilitates the process of reclaiming black manhood, but the novel devalues black womanhood and thus falls into the trap of reinforcing sexist stereotypes and patriarchal standards.

These three novels represent different levels of empowerment within the context of the black community and dramatize racial prejudices and the lingering force of patriarchy very differently. Both *Kindred* and *Beloved* probe into the limitations and possibilities of the community as a site of black male and female empowerment. Instead of romanticizing life in the free and enslaved black communities, both Butler and Morrison challenge these sites and call attention to the costs of resistance to the slavery regime. In particular, marginalization, hostility, conflicts and greed are dominant forces that define the communities the fictional characters of the novels belong to. On the other hand, in his effort to liberate his fiction from

black identity politics that foreground the works of Butler and Morrison, Johnson explores the cultural hybridity of his protagonist. However, he presents the two competing communities as places defined to a large extent by patriarchal standards and the fictional world of the novel is primarily male-dominated. He constructs a problematic and a rather naïve notion of community and thus *Middle Passage* underestimates the dialectics between group solidarity and individuality. Before analyzing the three novels, I will give a brief historiographical overview of historical studies on the role of the slave plantation community, which emerged as a new topic in slavery studies in the 1970s and influenced the writers I will discuss. As a theoretical framework I will use black feminist theory, for example, works by bell hooks and Angela Davis, as the historical studies of the 1970s alone cannot sufficiently explicate the empowering role of the black community. One of the great weaknesses of those early historical studies is that they are male-dominated and fail to portray substantially women slaves' perspective. Finally, in my analysis of *Middle Passage*, I will also use Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity.

Chapter 1

Black Slave Communities: A space of Resistance and Empowerment

My brudder sittin' on de tree of life, An'he yearde when Jordan roll;

Roll, Jordan, Roll, Jordan, Roll, Jordan, roll!

O march de an- gel march, O march de an- gel march;

O my soul arise in Heaven, Lord, for to yearde when Jordan roll.

Little chil'en, learn to fear de Lord, and let your days be long;

Roll, Jordan, &c.

O, let no false nor spiteful word be found upon your tongue;

Roll, Jordan, &c.

— From Garrison, Lucy McKim, et al. *Slave Songs Of The United States* (Chapel Hill: 2011).

Among the most distinctive features that reflected the slave experience were folk songs that were created to elevate the spirit of the enslaved despite the insurmountable degradation they were exposed to. Together with an abundance of other songs, “Roll, Jordan, Roll” is a testimony to the distinctive culture that the enslaved developed within the black plantation communities – a culture that counteracted the dehumanizing spirit of slavery, fostered their sense of identity, and enabled their survival. The Black Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the subsequent “Black is Beautiful” ideology bolstered the historical study of black slave communities in the South during the Ante-bellum era (Loewen 380). Published in the 1970s, the works of prominent historians such as John Blassingame, Herbert Gutman and Eugene Genovese emphasized the importance of the slave family and biological and fictive kinship as well as black agency, resistance and group solidarity, which are key themes in their works.

In a review of Blassingame's 1979 book *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*, economic historian Stanley Engerman argues that "Blassingame's reinterpretation of the cultural and personal development of the American slave on antebellum plantations serves as a corrective to those who might regard the plantation as comparable with a concentration camp or jail" (1476). Indeed, *The Slave Community* tries to demolish Stanley Elkin's theory that Engerman refers to. In his 1959 book, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*, Elkin gives a monolithic representation of black slaves. Comparing slavery to Nazi concentration camps, he argues that the representation of the slave as a Sambo is not a stereotype but a personality type that developed as result of an oppressive regime. The slave, he argues, is typically "docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infanticide silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration" (82). This personality type is the outcome of "his relationship with his master" which was "one of utter dependence and childlike attachment" (82). Elkin sees the slave as a "submissive half-man, half-child" and thus as relegated to an infantile position, unable to define himself without his master (Blassingame xi). He also suggests that the problem was a psychological one, as slaves "were most sensitized, in short, not to sophistication or complexity, but rather to crudity, depravity, and primitivism" (*Slavery* 92). Because of this primitivism and lack of intellectual complexity, Elkins believes that the black slave could only be seen as a child to the slave master.

Arguing against Elkin's thesis, Blassingame demonstrates that slaves were not docile and obedient human beings, but in fact created a distinctive culture upon which they framed a strong cultural and moral community that counteracted the brutalization and exploitation by their white slave-owners. *The Slave Community* gives an insight into the everyday exploitation of black slaves: "on many plantations abuse, constant floggings, cruelty, overwork, and short rations were part of the slave's daily life" (293). Many slaves "mutilated

themselves or committed suicide” and “others went insane, talked to themselves, and had hallucinations” (296-297). The systematic cruelty to which they were exposed inevitably broke the sense of self-respect of many slaves. Yet, Blassingame shows that black slaves resisted this dehumanization, proving wrong Elkin’s theory on the cultural interpretation of slaves as Sambos. He contends that the enslaved people promoted a creative and powerful culture that bolstered the development of their cultural identity. Slaves expertly used their own songs, musical instruments, folk tales and ceremonies, partly derived from African customs and rituals, in their effort to resist to an unconditional submission and create a separate community that could function as a haven from racial oppression and degradation.

The cumulative slave experience facilitated a process of creating an adaptive culture that was tailor-made to their needs and could counteract the debilitating impact of slavery. Ira Berlin argues that slaves, who came from different African cultures, in the century between 1660 and 1760 “began to forge [...] communities as ‘Africans’, and the “birth of an African identity [was part of a process] of transforming a society into a slave society” (67). Those black slave communities played a decisive role in male and female empowerment. Blassingame demonstrates that black slaves, despite their constant degradation, found the strength to create a distinctive culture that rendered their lives more tolerable and liberated. Black slaves also found comfort in each other, and this united force liberated them from the oppressive power of their slaveholders. Many masters wrote that they “noted the sense of community” and that “slaves usually shared their few goods, rarely stole from each other, and the strong helped the weak” (315). This “group solidarity in the quarters enabled the slaves to unite in their struggle against their masters” and thus reinforced feelings of elevation and purpose against the hardships of plantation life (317). The sense of solidarity and the distinctive culture they created within the context of plantation quarters gave a sense of

empowerment and relative freedom, and helped bondsmen and bondswomen to claim a black subjectivity.

The daily and recreational practices the slaves developed literally defined life in the slave quarters, and in many ways provided slaves with a positive sense of identity within a broader communal space. Blassingame argues that “the social organization of the quarters was the slave’s primary environment which gave him his ethical rules and fostered cooperation, mutual assistance, and black solidarity” (105). In his book *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972) Eugene Genovese points to the feelings of communion asserted by working collectively. These communal feelings, he contends, continued even later after the abolition of slavery and framed the core structure of post-slavery communities. As an example, Genovese quotes Ralph Ellison, who narrates his experience as boy in the cotton field: “Those trips to the cotton patch seemed to me an enviable experience because the kids came back with such wonderful stories. And it wasn’t the hard work they stressed, but the communion, the playing, the eating, the dancing and the singing” (qtd. in Genovese 315). Although the nature of the slavery institution dehumanized the enslaved, they found the strength to render their life more tolerable by developing a distinctive culture that was adapted to their own needs and standards.

Religion also provided slaves with some breathing space from constant aggression and brutalization. Against Elkin, Genovese contends that “the religion practiced in the quarters gave the slaves the one thing they absolutely had to have if they were to resist being transformed into the Sambos they had been programmed to become. It fired them with a sense of their own worth before God and man” (283). Blassingame also explains that “[religious practices] not only gave [slaves] joy and companionship, they also permitted [them] to gain some status in the quarters and gave [them] some hope” (147). Hence, the decisive role of religion in many senses emancipated black slaves, and together with recreational activities

helped them create a distinctive culture that resisted infantilization and dehumanization while bolstering a communal spirit of solidarity within the plantation quarters.

The slave family also played a significant role in constructing this adoptive culture. The ties of kinship among slaves acted as a catalyst for developing a more coherent identity rooted “in a shared Afro-American past” that was transmitted to the next generation of children from their parents, grandparents and other members of the wider slave community (Gutman 87). In his book *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (1976) Herbert Gutman points to the importance of the naming practices among slaves and demonstrates that slaves developed a social identity that was clearly defined by “cultural traditions and beliefs” (95). Many slave children were named after a father or a grandparent and this very act of naming is a further testimony to the strong family ties that existed among the slave families (95). Naming slave children after their grandparents indicates the interlocking relationship between ancestry and culture. Grandparents were responsible for enculturating their grandchildren and transmitting their values and a sense of familiarity to them. Strong ties of affection and attachment had a prominent role in their relationship. Meyer Fortes argues that “it is from the grandparents of both sexes that children learn of family history, folklore, proverbs, and other traditional lore. The grandparents are felt to be living links with the past” (qtd. in Gutman 218). Old slaves were thus an indispensable part of slave community’s life, fostering a sense of belonging and self-esteem.

However, forced separation from their wider kin network and their grandparents occurred frequently and was a painful and traumatic experience for slave children. Frederick Douglass, for example, describes the hardship he suffered when he was separated from his grandmother (King 105). The lineage of the family unit was frequently disrupted as slave-owners separated many slaves from their families and sold them to other plantations or even down-South. Despite the brutalizing character of forced separation many slaves found solace

and the desire for survival within the broader kin network of the plantations. Non-blood relatives frequently served as “surrogate” families for many slaves and children that had to experience the trauma of forced separation (Davis 201). Hence, racial solidarity and collectivity developed among the enslaved and extended kin networks fostered “social obligation” (Gutman 220). Feelings of obligation among the slave family and the wider community developed, thus shaping the social character of the community. Gutman argues that these extended social and communal obligations actually “served as very important instrumentalities in furthering slave group solidarity and in ordering a community regularly disordered by the choices owners made” (222). The slave family and the extended slave network were thereby instrumental devices in constructing resilience and self-awareness, despite slave masters’ efforts to keep slaves under control, reduce them to a state of infantilism and deprive them of any sense of belonging and cultural identity.

These historical studies of the 1970s contributed to the re-evaluation of the institution of slavery that was woven into the core structure of American society. They in fact demonstrated the development of a slave culture and community, and the pivotal role of extended family networks in encouraging survival. However, in their effort to foreground the importance of resistance and agency within the black slave communities, historians such as Blassingame, Gutman and Genovese might have underestimated internal divisions within the slave communities themselves and in many cases even romanticized life in the slave quarters. The subjects of antagonism, jealousy and conflicts are barely mentioned in these historical studies. Many of these books also focus on male slaves and fail to take into account women slaves’ perspectives. For instance, the sources that Blassingame uses are, for example, plantation records and mainly male slave narratives. He writes almost exclusively about male experiences and when he refers to the female perspective, he proceeds to generalizations. He argues, for example, that many slave children were neglected by their mothers and were left

“under the care of old women or placed in the hands of elder siblings” (181). He further supports his arguments by using slave narratives including Frederick Douglass and Booker Washington’s autobiography. However, in the midst of a brutal and totalitarian system that dehumanized black people, it would be unfair to present black women as neglectful of their children when they actually had to endure physical and verbal harassments, and work for a considerable amount of hours while being separate from their children. In *Yearning*, black feminist bell hooks argues that by “forgetting the powerful role black women have played in constructing for us home places” there is the danger of “devaluing black womanhood” (44-45). hooks explains that historically black bondswomen adopted strategies to resist to hegemonic ideologies and develop a safe space for their biological and fictive families (44). Blassingame fails to present women’s experience and falls into the trap of “devaluing black womanhood”; when he actually provides examples of black women’s suffering, he does so in a limited fashion, focusing primarily on males’ deprivation of masculinity. Indeed, in *The Slave Community* the discourse is often gender-biased. There are many instances in the book where Blassingame underscores the impact of slavery only on slaves’ manhood: “A few masters were so brutal and sadistic that they could crush the slave’s every *manly* instinct” (265; my italics) and he quotes a slave who explains that “the sight of a gun [...] knocked all of the *manhood* out of me” (319; my italics). However, as black feminists like bell hooks have insisted, the subject of slavery and its impact need to be explored both from a male and female perspective in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of the enslaved.

Written as a reaction to the limited attention given to the black female perspective, Deborah Gray White’s book *Ar’n’t I A Woman? : Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (1985) was an early effort at introducing the black female slave experience and the prominent role black women played in the slave communities. White argues that the status of black

women within the black community indeed formed a catalyst for resistance and black empowerment despite the myths surrounding black womanhood – themes that dominate the novels analyzed in this thesis. Black bondswomen were crucial members of the slave community and the active role they played in building and sustaining the community actually contradicts the sexist images ascribed to them in the effort to confirm hegemonic white power such as the depiction of them as temptresses of white masters based on the Jezebel myth. As White points out, some slave women vehemently resisted slavery by murdering their masters, refusing to be whipped or sexually exploited or even feigning to be ill (77-79). Black bondswomen acted as catalytic agents for the construction of a strong cultural identity. They transmitted to their children cultural practices, which had African roots and acted as “child bearers and nurturers” (108). They fostered kinship relationships, where old bondswomen “served as nurses and midwives” and “embodied the link between generations” (116). Despite being subjugated, bondswomen created relationships that fostered cooperation within the community and in many cases displayed great strength of character and actively resisted the dominant forces of racism and sexism. White also points to the solidarity among bondswomen, as they used to spend a considerable amount of time together. Thus, slave women bolstered interdependence and cooperative resistance against the oppression exerted by their slave owners. Helping in child-care or abortion procedures were some of the examples of female cooperation against the dehumanizing nature of slavery that White gives (120-127). As Angela Davis argues, “[those] survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance” (205). Black women thus played a central role in enabling survival and resistance, and the quarters served as a solace and haven against the painful experience of servitude.

This re-evaluation of the position of female slaves is integral to our understanding of the actual social order of the plantation quarters. White argues that they actually “made

themselves a real bulwark against the destruction of the slave family's integrity" (160). In Butler's *Kindred* and Morrison's *Beloved*, black women are represented as central to the slave family and community, and in my examination of the novels, the focus will be on the central role women played within the black slave communities in ensuring survival and resistance, without minimizing the internal divisions within the community itself that the novels also address. These two novels, however, contrast sharply with the third novel examined in this thesis, Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage*, which reproduces patriarchal patterns as the main character in his effort to reclaim his manhood, asserts a patriarchal notion of masculinity. Despite Johnson's effort to parody his characters and their embrace of patriarchy, black empowerment is equated with dominant patriarchal forces, and it seems that only the male characters of the novel have access to transformation and liberation within the community. However, as bell hooks suggests in her book *Yearning*, what we actually need is "a revolutionary vision of black liberation, one that emerges from a feminist standpoint and addresses the collective plight of black people" (64); this "revolutionary vision" is in fact achieved in Butler's *Kindred* and Morrison's *Beloved*.

Chapter 2

Revisiting the Slave Community in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*: A Surrogate Family and Female Empowerment

“The status of black women within the community of slaves was definitely a barometer indicating the overall potential for resistance.”

— Angela Davis

In her 1971 article “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” Angela Davis calls attention to the constructive role female slaves played within the slave community in ensuring a space of resistance. Possibly taking her cue from Davis, towards the end of the same decade, Octavia Butler explored the dynamics of female agency against the oppressive powers of racism and sexual exploitation that many female slaves had to endure. The themes of family and community feature prominently in *Kindred* (1979) and Butler in fact revisits history and underscores the importance of the slave community in promoting affiliation ties among slaves. Butler wrote her novel at a time when Angela Davis and other black feminist critics called attention to the fact that the black female experience was left on the margins of history. As bell hooks writes in her book *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982), “no other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women” (7). In *Kindred*, Butler revisits the plantation quarters and acknowledges black female agency as a vehicle for the slave community’s racial solidarity against white oppression. In doing so, Butler’s novel bears witness to the marginalized black female voices that history elided and positions black slave women at the centre of the slave community, recognizing them as crucial to its physical and spiritual

survival. Although Butler positions the fictional characters of the novel as agents that resist brutalization, she takes a nuanced position in the debate about resistance and presents also the cost of opposition to slavery.

Black women were seen as both promiscuous and nurturing in nature, and the conflicting images of Jezebel and Mammy structured the mythology surrounding the female slave experience and the black female body. The Jezebel image depicted bondswomen as the embodiment of lust and sin, while the Mammy myth stereotyped female house slaves as loyal, docile and nurturing figures (White 32, 58). These images affirmed the continuing institutionalization of white power and even justified the sexual exploitation of black female bodies. The black female body was treated as a means of providing more chattels and in many cases black bondswomen had to go to the work fields right after giving birth (112). Another lingering and destructive myth surrounding black slave women is that of the matriarch. In the context of the Moynihan Report, which was submitted to President Johnson as a sociological survey on African-American families in 1965, the report portrayed the black family as suffering from a “tangle of pathology” (29). The report was seriously judgmental on the role of black women in the family structure and community historically and regarded them as matriarchs: “In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of the line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (29). According to the report, black men did not traditionally adopt a patriarchal position within their families because they had no control over them. The black woman is seen as a matriarch because of her active role in the assertion of the black community. Her ascendancy to the family structure is thus considered to have psychologically castrated black men since slavery times and provoked other negative outcomes such as juvenile delinquency and violence.

Angela Davis' article "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" is a direct response to the Moynihan report. Davis challenges the myth of the matriarch surrounding black women:

The designation of the black woman as a matriarch is a cruel misnomer. It is a misnomer because it implies stable kinship structures within which the mother exercises decisive authority. It is cruel because it ignores the profound traumas the black woman must have experienced when she had to surrender her childbearing to alien and predatory economic interests. (202)

Certainly, the social order of the slavery institution can hardly be claimed to have actually allowed slave women to exercise any real power over their lives, which were primarily defined by their slave owners' needs.

These mythologies surrounding the black female slave experience perpetuated the denial of their centrality within the slave community. However, by assuming a central role in the slave family and community, and actively participating in the production force, black women performed tasks equal to those of male slaves, thus bolstering an egalitarian order within the plantation quarters. However, this egalitarian order that defined the plantation quarters conflicted with male dominance in a traditionally patriarchal society and created a fertile ground for accusing black women of being "female castrators" (Davis 216). This castration myth only adds to the perpetuation of patriarchal notions that define men as the sole family providers. In her book *Ain't I a Woman* bell hooks challenges this alleged castration of black men:

To suggest that black men were de-humanized solely as a result of not being able to be patriarchs implies that the subjugation of black women was essential to the black

male's development of a positive self-concept, an idea that only served to support a sexist social order. (20-21)

Against Daniel Patrick Moynihan's Report and its suggestion that black men were denied their masculinity because of black women's active participation historically in the economy of the black family and the broader community, Davis emphasizes their importance within the community and, in slavery times, their mutual struggle against the institution of slavery. She in fact offers a rigorous reevaluation of the position of black female slaves in the slave community and emphasizes their role in slave resistance:

Latently or actively it was always a community of resistance. It frequently erupted in insurgency, but was daily animated by the minor acts of sabotage that harassed the slave master to no end. Had the black woman failed to rise to the occasion, the community of slaves could not have developed into this direction. The slave system would have to deal with the black woman as the custodian of a house of resistance. (207)

Davis insists that bondswomen found the strength to resist slavery and thereby develop communities of resistance despite their forced subjugation. This revised image of black women debunks many of the myths surrounding black bondswomen. Survival and female agency clearly defined the female slave experience as much as, if not more than, their victimhood. In *Kindred*, Butler positions her black protagonist and first-person narrator, Dana, vis-à-vis the atrocities of slavery, where she in fact emerges as a figure of female empowerment at the side of her surrogate family: the slave community.

Revisiting the history of slavery and in particular the slave community are themes that feature prominently in *Kindred*. Butler, who is known as a writer of science fiction or

speculative fiction¹, conflates the past and present time by employing the time travel device in her novel. Dana's ancestry claims her back; whenever her great grandfather Rufus Weylin is endangered, she is transported back to time from her Los Angeles home in 1976 to the Weylin plantation in Maryland in the 1810s. Ironically, the only way of coming back to the present time is when her own life is endangered. *Kindred* has been classified as a science-fiction novel due to the use of the time travel device, but Butler herself denied this label and considers *Kindred* a "fantasy" (Kenan 495). In an interview with Randal Kenan, Butler has explained that the "time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from" (496). Dana is transported back to Maryland six times and each time she has to relive the painful experience of slavery: "I closed my eyes again remembering the way I had been hurt – remembering the pain," Dana claims when she is back in Los Angeles at one of her trips back in time (*Kindred* 10). Dana becomes an integral member of the slave community and by structuring her novel around Dana's daily contact with slave members and masters, Butler not only positions her main character in a space where she needs to react and respond against racial and sexist oppression, but she also allows her readers to vicariously experience slavery and the slaves' efforts to survive.

In an interview with Charles Rowell, Butler narrates an incident of her childhood life:

I was occasionally taken to work with my mother and made to sit in the car all day, because I wasn't really welcome inside, of course. Sometimes, I was able to go inside and hear people talk about or to my mother in ways that were obviously disrespectful.

As a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother

¹ Based on the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature speculative fiction is defined as follows: "While often reduced to a two-star system comprised of fantasy and science fiction, 'speculative fiction' is a larger conceptual category that houses a number of other nonmimetic genres such as gothic, dystopian, zombie, vampire, and postapocalyptic fiction, ghost stories, superheroes, alternative history, steampunk, slipstream, magic realism, retold or fractured fairy tales, and more. Thus, speculative fiction could perhaps be defined as a 'fuzzy' super-genre that allows grouping of diverse forms of nonmimetic fiction—from fantasy and science fiction to derivatives and hybrids that draw on the fantastic for specific purposes but often elude easy classifications—and is helpful in theorizing about their appeal and cultural roles as opposed to the uses of so-called realist fiction and nonfiction."

for taking it. This is something I carried with me for quite a while, as she entered back doors, and as she went deaf at appropriate time. If she had heard more, she would have had to react to it, you know. The usual (Rowell 51).

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement and other efforts for black empowerment in the 1960s, it seems that Butler “carried” with her the burden of shame by witnessing her mother being humiliated without standing up for herself. Her words imply her difficulty to acknowledge her mother’s subordinate condition and the burden that her mother carried with her in order to provide for her family. However, she continues:

As I got older I realized that this is what kept me fed, and this is what kept a roof over my head. This is when I started to pay attention to what my mother and even more my grandmother and my poor great-grandmother, who died as a very young woman giving birth to my grandmother, what they all went through (51).

Butler comes to realize later in her life the efforts of her family and the prominent role her mother and her grandmothers played in her family’s survival. In *Kindred*, this is what she attempts to depict, the efforts to survive in a world of servitude and systematic degradation.

Butler’s desire to confront the painful history of slavery, segregation and racism gave her impetus for writing *Kindred*. During her college years, a young man expressed his anger towards the older generation and his comments further stimulated this desire to help her readers confront this part of history: “He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, ‘I’d like to kill all these old people who had been holding us back for so long. But I can’t because I’d have to start with my own parents’” (Rowell 51). With *Kindred*, Butler documents the efforts to survive within the slave community and tells her black readers what their ancestors had to go through and survive. In her reading of *Kindred*, Marisa Parham argues that “by

creating a space where one can say yes, such encounters teach us how many have made the transition from victim to survivor” (1321). *Kindred* represents a history that was marginalized within historical documents, and by reconstructing life in a slave community, Butler attempts to alleviate the pain of shame that future generations had to carry with them. *Kindred* familiarizes the readers with the versatile nature of slaves, who depended on their resistance and survival skills and developed a culture that counteracted their systematic debasement, but explores the price they had to pay for their opposition as well. Butler’s novel can also be seen as a project of revising myths of black female womanhood, as Butler tackles the prominent stereotypical images of the Mammy and Jezebel figures; just like Angela Davis, she acknowledges the integral role of the female slave in slave resistance and the integrity of the slave family and community.

Butler frames her novel around Dana who, despite being transported from a future time, adopts an insurgent position within the slave community. K. Denea Stewart-Shaheed argues that “by disrupting time, African American authors may introduce themes of agency, resistance, and spiritual liberation” (235). Butler creates a novel about resistance and female agency, and by making her protagonist and readers revisit the slave community – the actual space where resistance is born – she attempts to mitigate the haunting past. At her first visit back in time, Dana is worried about what might come after: “Maybe I’m just like a victim of robbery or rape or something – a victim who survives, but who doesn’t feel safe anymore” (*K* 17). She defines herself as a victim but when she is thrown into the hard reality of slavery, Dana engages in a role-playing performance, and though she ultimately gives in and has limited power, she tries to resist her degradation. When her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin, calls her nigger, she corrects him: “I’m a black woman, Rufe. If you have to call me something other than my name, that’s it” (25).

Dana herself becomes an emblem of survival and symbolizes female slaves and their efforts to endure racial and sexual oppression. In her interview with Charles Rowell, Butler explains why she created a female protagonist instead of a male one. She explains that a male protagonist “wouldn’t even have time to learn the rules of submission,” but “the female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn’t be killed and that’s the way I wrote it. She was beaten and abused, but she was not killed” (51). Butler creates such a female character and thus reflects on the traumatized experiences of bondswomen, but also on their remarkable strength of character.

Dana in fact shows remarkable resilience during her visits to the Weylin plantation and despite the hardships she learns to be a survivor. As Barbara Lewis argues, “Butler crafts a character with dual status, one that steps in and out of the box. Dana is ordered around, made to say master, sent to the fields, whipped, and faces down a gun, twice, but she can read and write, she can nurse and heal the sick, she doesn’t age, and, on death’s doorstep, she can flee to another time” (302). Dana resists and mocks death, and at the same time embodies the strength of her female ancestors. She endures hardships and adopts different roles in her effort to survive in an oppressive system. Dana needs to learn to adapt to the new standards of her life, and that implies following the slave role ascribed to her. When she is back in Maryland with her husband Kevin after their trip together back in time, she explains to him that they need to acclimatize to their new life condition: “We’re going to have to fit in as best we can with the people here for as long as we have to stay. That means we’re going to have to play the roles you [Kevin] gave us” (65). Faced with this dilemma, Dana needs to perform a master-slave relationship, with her being the slave and Kevin being the white master to whom she belongs. Despite this role, she openly defies the odds and attempts to survive, using as a tool her literacy skills, her education and her independent character. In her effort to hinder

Rufus's transformation into a replica of his cruel father, she tries to instill some understanding into his mind for her own and the slave community's sake: "I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come" (68). Equipped with her future skills, Dana thus attempts to ameliorate the conditions of her surrogate family and she hopes that the ideas of respect she could possibly plant in Rufus's mind would result in a better treatment of the whole community.

Yet, this attempt forces her to confront the violence and the dehumanization that her ancestors had to endure. Dana performs an act of resistance, as she attempts to teach reading to the young slave boy, Nigel. When Rufus father, Tom Weylin, discovers that Dana uses books from his library for this purpose, Butler proceeds into one of the most graphic descriptions of violence in the novel:

Weylin dragged me a few feet, then pushed me hard. I fell, knocked myself breathless. I never saw where the whip came from, never even saw the first blow coming. But it came – like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin...I screamed, convulsed. Weylin struck again and again, until I couldn't have gotten up at gunpoint [...] By then, I almost wanted to die. Anything to stop the pain. (107)

The pain that overwhelms her whole body and her senses make her vomit and return to the present time. Dana starts considering pain as her friend: "Pain had never been a friend to me before, but now it kept me still. It forced reality on me and kept me sane" (113). Pain helps her survive and her wounded body provides her with certainty about the reality and the true nature of the slave institution. Dana realizes that history happened and her scars and pain attest to that realization.

The realization of the oppression and the difficulty of resistance forces her to find a refuge in the slave community – the black family and her black female spiritual and surrogate sisters. When Dana first meets her great-grandmother Alice, she admits that the Weylin plantation could be her “refuge” (37). Angela Davis argues that “if resistance was an organic ingredient of slave life, it had to be directly nurtured by the social organization that the slaves themselves improvised” (204). By making Dana revisit the slave community, Butler exposes a space of both racial and sexual oppression and resistance. Dana engages in the daily lives of her spiritual sisters and the slave community becomes a surrogate family and her refuge from slavery’s hardships. In a desperate moment, Dana remarks:

Sarah and Carrie were alone when I went in, and I was glad of that. Sometimes old people and children lounged there, or house servants or even field hands stealing a few moments of leisure. I liked to listen to them talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive. But now I wanted only Sarah and Carrie. I could say what I felt around them, and it wouldn’t get back to either of the Weylins (*K* 94).

Resistance is enacted in the space of the slave quarters and Dana finds solace in the black family among bondswomen. Her daily contact with the slave community provides her with the necessary tools for survival and resistance. Witnessing life in the slave quarters as if through a telescope, Butler thereby points to the collectivity that framed the slave community and the values of resistance that arose within the quarters.

As *Kindred* progresses, a spiritual relationship develops between Dana and her ancestor, Alice. Alice is a victim of whippings and sexual abuse precisely because Rufus Weylin is in love with her. Dana comments on the paradox of this love and explains that

“there was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one” (124). After Alice tries to escape with her husband, Isaac, Rufus captures and brings Alice home on a wagon while she is “bloody, filthy, and barely alive” as she was attacked by dogs (146). Because Alice is unable to cope with her enslavement, Dana becomes a surrogate mother for her and the latter even calls her “Mama” (153). However, their relationship undergoes a series of peaks and troughs. Dana’s status within the community is contested because of her peculiar friendship with master Rufus. Alice considers her more white than black and tells her: “You always try to act so white. White nigger, turning against your own people” (165). Alice’s accusation is unfair; as Sarah Wood argues, “Dana does not meekly accept the position prescribed for her by slavery” (89). Rather than adopting a white identity, she tries to employ her future knowledge for the slave community’s sake. Alice herself realizes that she is being unfair to Dana and admits that Dana has done everything she could to save her (168). Their female bonding becomes stronger when Alice reveals to Dana that Rufus hasn’t sent Dana’s letters to her husband Kevin, who was stuck in the past when Dana returned to the present time without him (170). Even Sarah explains to Dana, when she is back in Maryland and learns that Alice killed herself, that they were like sisters: “You sure fought like sisters, [...] Always fussin’ at each other, stompin’ away from each other, comin’back. Right after you left, she knocked the devil out of a field who was runnin’ you down” (250). *Kindred* underscores the importance of female cooperation within the slave community and through Dana and Alice’s spiritual bonds, Butler suggests that female agency is a survival mechanism.

The centrality of female solidarity is further highlighted when Dana is betrayed by Lisa, another slave woman. When Lisa reveals Dana’s escape, Alice, Tess and Carrie punish her to support their surrogate sister. However, Butler here comments on the internal divisions within the slave communities. As Missy Kubitschek argues, “*Kindred* does not romanticize the solidarity of the slave community” (qtd. in Steinberg 470). In her book *Ar’n’t I a*

Woman?, Deborah White also points out that “female-to-female conflict was not uncommon,” though in general slave women’s experience was primarily framed around female bonding and cooperation (133). While *Kindred* centers on raising an awareness of slave suffering, Butler does not idealize life in the slave quarters. Alice has to endure the contempt her fellow slaves show due to her relationship with Rufus, and Dana also experiences hostility because she adopts a docile attitude:

I went into the cookhouse and the young man who had his mouth open to speak closed it quickly, looking at me with open hostility. The old man simply turned his back. I’d seen slaves do that to Alice. I hadn’t noticed them doing it to me before. Suddenly, the cookhouse was no more comfortable than Alice’s cabin had been. It might have been different if Sarah or Carrie had been there, but they weren’t. I left the cookhouse and went back toward the main house, feeling lonely. (K 220)

Instead of presenting an ideal image of the slave community, Butler in *Kindred* shows the complexity of the dynamics of the community, with solidarity and internal divisions occurring side by side. The community punishes both Alice and Dana for their relationship with master Rufus and they experience ostracism. In the face of racial oppression and inhumane treatment, the community is not in a position to understand why Dana cooperates with Rufus and thus she becomes a scapegoat, who is unfairly accused of being docile.

Although Butler acknowledges internal divisions, she centers her narrative on female bonding, which is illustrated by Dana’s relationship with Carrie, Sarah’s mute daughter. Stewart-Shaheed argues that “in her deformity, Carrie is simultaneously marginal and possessed of agency. [...] Ultimately, what Carrie brings to Dana’s slave experience is an awareness of blackness” (246). When Dana feels alienated from the other slaves due to the

accusations of her behaving as a white person, Carrie despite her silence seems to understand her pain:

She came over to me and wiped one side of my face with her fingers – wiped hard. I drew back, and she held her fingers in front of me, showed me both sides. But for once, I didn't understand.

Frustrated, she took me by the hand and led me out to where Nigel was chopping firewood. There, before him, she repeated the face-rubbing gesture, and he nodded.

“She means it doesn't come off, Dana,” he said quietly. “The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you're.”

I hugged her and got away from her quickly so that she wouldn't see that I was close to tears. (*K* 224)

While Dana has experienced the internal divisions of the slave community and the subsequent alienation, she also learns that the female bonding she has developed with her surrogate sisters Alice, Sarah, Tess and Carrie help her survive racial oppression.

The female characters in *Kindred* contest the prominent stereotypical images of the Mammy and Jezebel figures. In her reading of *Kindred*, Barbara Lewis comments on the female images that dominate Butler's narrative: “These slave women did not wage bloodletting rebellions to express outrage at the saddling of their bodies, the theft of their pleasure, or the harnessing of their reproductive organs, but they do what they can to resist on a smaller scale, hitting slavery where it lived and lusted” (300). The female figures in Butler's novel in fact adopt a versatile stance, developing strategies to cope with slavery. By assuming such a resilient attitude, Butler's characters resist the mythologies framing slave women. Sarah, the cookhouse slave of the Weylin plantation, has to endure Tom Weylin's sexual abuses and the loss of all her children, who are sold by Margaret out of her jealousy and spite, except for Carrie. On the one hand, Sarah can be seen as a “Mammy” figure. Dana comments that “she has 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” (*K* 145). However, Sarah is a fighter and survives despite the odds and the hardships of slavery.

As Sarah Wood points out, “Sarah’s creation and maintenance of a relatively safe space for the slave community attests to the complex strategies conceived to resist slavery” (92). Sarah in fact is like a surrogate mother for the whole slave community and she tries to transform the cookhouse into a refuge where the rest of the slaves can find solace: “Sarah ran the house – and the house servants. She spread the work fairly and managed the house [...] without much of the tension and strife Margaret generated” (*K* 144). Sarah takes the responsibility of orchestrating the duties of the rest of the enslaved in her effort to prevent their mistreatment. When she finds Dana talking about her dangerous plan of running away, she warns her about the repercussions that this might have not only for Dana herself but also for the rest of the community. Butler here takes a nuanced position and suggests that resistance is not always positive and may actually harm others.

Through Alice, Butler also tries to counter the stereotype of the Jezebel figure that portrayed slave women as promiscuous figures and temptresses of white masters. Unable to escape her enslavement, Alice realizes that she has become Rufus’s possession and that she has no right over her life and her body. At this point, Dana’s moral position is perhaps compromised, as in her effort to ensure her existence, she seems to collide with the system and forces Alice into her exploitation. Dana claims that she “had helped [Alice] to heal. Now [she] had to help Rufus tear her wounds open again” (165). Dana attempts to make Alice accept Rufus’s orders in order to avoid being whipped; Alice responds back and points to the possession of her body: “Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn’t he?” (*K* 167). Alice has to endure the continual sexual assaults upon her body and she gradually becomes “a quieter more subdued person” (169). Yet, she fights back and attempts to escape as she explains to Dana that this is the only way to get free because Rufus would never let her go (235). Unable to deal with Rufus’s violation of her body, Alice decides to run away from him with her children. However, when Rufus learns about the escape plan, he sells Alice’s children to

punish her for this act of disobedience. Being desperate, Alice eventually kills herself; according to Wood, this is in the end “her only possible path of resistance and rebellion” (94). Through the character of Alice, Butler acknowledges the harsh reality of sexual abuse that though widespread, was rarely mentioned in official historical archives and debunks the Jezebel mythology that surrounded bondswomen. However, through the figure of Alice, Butler also balances Davis’ militancy and makes her readers aware of the costs of resistance to the slavery regime.

The interconnection between Alice and Dana is illustrated towards the end of the novel. When one day Rufus comes into the slave quarters and cannot find either of them, he tells Dana that she and Alice are two halves of the same woman: “Behold the woman, [...] You really are only one woman. Did you know that?” (228). After Alice’s death, Dana being seen as her other half, becomes the object of Rufus’s desire. In his attempt to rape her, Dana stabs him with her knife and resists her debasement. However, this act of resistance results in her losing her arm when she comes back to the present time. When Butler was asked in an interview by Randal Kenan why she decided to mutilate her protagonist, she explains: “I couldn’t really let her come all the way back. I couldn’t let her return to what she was, I couldn’t let her come back whole and that, I think, really symbolizes her not coming back whole. Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole” (498). Her loss of her arm symbolizes the price she has to pay for rebelling and claiming a position for herself as a subject rather than an object. Her mutilated body becomes a reminder of a story that cannot be lost in oblivion. As Ashraf Rusdy argues “what Dana’s physical losses signify is that to flesh out the past means to leave part of one’s being there” (139). Clearly, Dana cannot come back unchanged and her scarred body will always be a reminder of her ancestor’s forgotten history. The loss of the arm shows her paramount psychological and physical scars. In that sense,

Dana comes to represent the post-slavery generation for whom slavery is a continuing cultural trauma.

In *Kindred*, Butler attests to female solidarity and the values of resistance that thrived within the slave community but also their limitations. By reconstructing the past and the space where resistance rose, she acknowledges the dynamics of the community, yet she does not romanticize the plantation quarters and also shows the internal divisions such as jealousy and conflict in the face of racial and sexual oppression. Both male and female characters in *Kindred* resist and rebel, but Butler also shows the high price they have to pay for their vehement resistance. Davis points to the role of the female slave as a “woman transcending, refusing, fighting back, asserting herself over and against terrifying obstacles” (214). Dana, Sarah, Carrie and Tess are fighters and survivors within a system that dehumanized people; except for Alice, who, despite her initial efforts to survive, she gives up in the end and commits suicide. As Thelma Shinn points out, “Dana is not a victim” (211). Neither are her spiritual sisters who provide for the safety of the community and cultivate an insurrectionary female presence, if sometimes at great cost. While historical archives negated the black female figure and marginalized their voices, Butler with *Kindred*, just like Toni Morrison in *Beloved*, comes to compensate for that and creates a text that is framed around female figures who directly or indirectly resist racial and sexual oppression. The female protagonists in both novels find a place to escape to, and despite its divisions the slave community becomes a source of sustenance and solace for themselves and their families.

Chapter 3

Beloved: Rethinking the Community as a Locus of Resistance and Spiritual Liberation

My tendency is to focus on neighborhoods and communities. And the community, the black community – I don't like to use that term because it came to mean something much different in the sixties and seventies, as though we had to forge one – but it had seemed to me that it was always there, only we called it “neighborhood.” And there was this life-giving, very, very strong sustenance that people got from the neighborhood. One lives, really, not so much in your house as you do outside of it, within the “compounds,” within the village, or whatever it is.

“Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison”

—— Toni Morrison

In her 1976 interview with Robert Stepto, Toni Morrison acknowledges African-American communities and neighborhoods as sites of remembrance and mutual solidarity and collectivity. The theme of community features prominently in Morrison's fiction. In the face of racial and sexual oppression, Morrison probes into the interlocking relationship between community and solidarity as a counter-story to the legacy of slavery. The characters in her fiction come to negotiate their individual identities and the collective community functions as a healing site against the trauma of experiencing the dehumanizing nature of slavery. In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, we learn about Sethe's escape into freedom and her effort to claim

a life for herself and her family through a series of flashbacks. Morrison juxtaposes life in the slave community in the 1850s with life in a post-slavery community in Ohio in 1873. In doing so, she underscores the importance of collective solidarity as a mechanism of resistance, and by exposing the community's internal divisions, she aims at developing a model of an African-American community that could transcend external racism and the divisions within the community itself. Thus, in *Beloved* Morrison envisions the community as a locus of escape from racial and sexual bondage, creating characters that find sustenance and solace in the relationships they develop with other members of the community.

Just like Octavia Butler, Morrison in her fiction attempts to give a voice to all black people, in particular black women, whose bodies were violated and whose lives were excluded from the historical archives. In her fiction, she aims at transcending this marginalization of black people and provides a corrective to traditional slave narratives, which, according to her, were to some extent self-censored. As she puts it in her essay "Site of Memory": "In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe" (110). In *Beloved*, she in fact provides a counter-story to this silence, seeing it as "[her] job to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate'" (110). *Beloved* is dedicated to the "sixty million and more" who died as a result of the slave trade and the dehumanizing nature of the institution of slavery. Thus, in her fiction she bears witness to this painful aspect of American history and attempts to rectify the forgotten history.

Writing, for Morrison, becomes an act of remembering and most importantly of unveiling the immoral nature of slavery and recognizing the importance of the "interior life" of her ancestry, which she claims is neglected in the historical slave narratives (110). She takes the responsibility of revisiting the interior lives of her enslaved ancestors, and thus the

slave community and the daily lives of her ancestors become the sites of remembrance. In this act of visitation, “memories and recollections won’t give total access to the unwritten interior life of these people” (111). For this purpose, imagination becomes the vehicle for accessing the African-American community, as “imagination is bound up with memory” (119). *Beloved* is based on the true story of a fugitive slave mother, Margaret Garner, who was arrested for killing one of her children in her attempt to prevent them from being enslaved (*Beloved* xi). Morrison relied more on her imagination than on historical facts to explore what drove an enslaved mother to kill her child. When Marsha Darling asked her in an interview about the research she had to do before start writing *Beloved*, Morrison explained: “I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than the obvious stuff, because I wanted to invent her life. [...] Recording [Garner’s] life as lived would not interest me, and would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent” (248). Therefore, Morrison imagines Garner’s life, and her protagonist’s struggle to gain freedom becomes an emblem of survival and resistance. Yet, *Beloved* is not a story only about Sethe, but about all the slaves of the Sweet Home plantation and the post-slavery community in Cincinnati, where Sethe finds a refuge after her escape from the plantation, consisting of Baby Suggs, Paul D Garner, Stamp Paid and Ella.

In reclaiming the repressed history of slavery, Morrison is particularly concerned with enslaved women. Apart from Sethe, the reader has access to the voices of Sethe’s surrogate mothers, Nan and Baby Suggs, her daughters, Denver and Beloved, and the women of the Cincinnati community. *Beloved* thus becomes a project where Morrison presents bondswomen both as figures exposed to constant brutalization, but also as figures representing empowerment and daily resistance to slavery. By reconstructing the gruesome reality of slavery, Morrison, like Butler in *Kindred*, attempts to create a healing narrative about a painful aspect of history that almost no one wanted to remember. In Morrison’s

words, there is a “national amnesia” surrounding slavery (*Conversations* 257). *Beloved* thus becomes a healing narrative where bondswomen adopt an insurrectionary position and the African-American slave and post-slavery communities emerge as sites of racial solidarity and redemption. Yet, Morrison acknowledges the limitations of the black community and issues of isolation and jealousy among the members of the community are equally presented under white oppression.

In *Beloved*, Morrison unveils the historical struggle of the black family for survival against the cruel reality of slavery: separation of families, loss of children, sexual exploitation of the black female and male body, racism and infanticide. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief,” Sethe’s mother-in-law tells her. “You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. [...] I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil” (*Beloved* 6). After escaping from the Sweet Home plantation, Sethe finds a refuge in Cincinnati where her mother-in-law has been waiting for her and her son, Halle Suggs. When Mr. Garner, the owner of the plantation, dies, Mrs. Garner invites her husband’s brother, named schoolteacher by the enslaved, to the plantation. After schoolteacher’s arrival, Sweet Home is transformed into a place of torture and degradation, and as Paul D argues, “It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t home” (*B* 16). The theme of searching for a home is a central one in *Beloved*, and through Sethe and Paul D, Morrison dramatizes the agony of the search for “a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire” (*B* 191).

During their stay at the Sweet Home plantation, Sethe and all the Sweet Home men tried to render their lives more tolerable and create a space of sustenance through the affectionate ties they develop with each other. When Paul D tells Sethe that the plantation

wasn't a home for them, Sethe explains that at least "it's where we were [...] all together" (16). Before Sethe's arrival at the plantation, the Sweet Home men had developed a male community of sustenance that counteracted racial oppression. Paul D remembers that "Sweet Home had more pretty trees than any other farm around" (25). Added to the beauty of the place, all the men created a community that was defined by their daily activities and bolstered a sense of belonging. Sixo was responsible for cooking potatoes for the rest of the community and though they were never cooked properly, all the Sweet Home men ate the potatoes "laughing, spitting and giving him advice" (25). Despite their efforts to create a place they could call home within institutionalized slavery, they could not own a place for themselves. Sethe recalls that "she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her" (27). They could not define themselves beyond Sweet Home and Morrison here suggests the difficulty of constructing a space of sustenance within a dehumanizing system. Paul D recalls that when schoolteacher arrived at Sweet Home, "one step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race" (148).

As the text unfolds with the narratives of Sethe and Paul D, the harsh and traumatizing reality that prevailed in Sweet Home after schoolteacher's arrival is unveiled. Beloved acts as a catalyst in forcing both Sethe and Paul D remember their painful memories through storytelling. When Beloved asks Sethe about her lost diamonds, she finds herself being eager to tell the story: "Every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. [...] But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it" (*B* 69). Schoolteacher did whatever possible to dehumanize all of the Sweet Home men and Sethe and show them that the "definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined" (*B* 225). He deprived all the men of their guns and as Sethe explains, he kept a notebook where he recorded all his scientific observations. According to Sethe, "Schoolteacher was teaching us

things we couldn't learn. I didn't care nothing about the measuring string [...] Schoolteacher'd wrap that string all over my head, 'cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth. I thought he was a fool" (*B* 226).² Sethe gradually comes to realize that her status is limited to that of a chattel and her existence is not defined beyond that. When she overhears the discussion schoolteacher has with his nephews, she learns that he denies her humanity by explaining to them how "to put her human characteristics on the left; her animals on the right" (*B* 228). After overhearing that statement, Sethe starts walking backward. Arlene Keizer argues that "Sethe's response is one of complete negation" (107). Her reaction testifies to her denial of being characterized as an animal, and she is unable to accept the denial of her status as a mother. Her body resists this degradation and becomes a site of resistance. Following this incident, Sethe and Halle, together with the other men of the plantation, work on an escape plan. Running away is the only possible means of avoiding the fragmentation of her family and their search for a place that could be called home.

However, their plan to escape fails and when Sethe returns to the plantation to look for Halle after sending her children off with abolitionists, her body becomes the site of violation. Schoolteacher's nephews rape her body by stealing her breast milk and afterwards they whip her, imprinting on her back a scar that looks like a "chokecherry tree" (*B* 18). Despite the violation she experiences, Sethe's prerogative is to bring her milk to her youngest child, who is sent ahead to Baby Suggs. Being whipped and robbed of her milk, she finds the strength to travel to Ohio and find the rest of her family despite her advanced pregnancy. On her way to freedom, she meets Amy Denver, a fugitive white girl, who helps her give birth to her fourth child that she later names after her, Denver. When Amy sees Sethe's flogged back she

² During the nineteenth century, there was a rise in race theories and various experiments were conducted on different populations. These theories attempted to explain innate humane differences and the "origins of scientific 'racism' were connected with the use of race" (Jahoda 1). The rise of "craniology" and "phrenology" was reinforced by those experiments and these ideas persisted in the nineteenth century. See in Gustav's Jahoda "Intra-European Racism in Nineteenth-Century Anthropology."

remarks that it is “a chokecherry tree [...] in bloom” (B 93). The scars on her back would forever be a reminder of her painful stay in Sweet Home and the price she had to pay for resisting: “I took one journey and I paid for the ticket [...] it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much” Sethe tells Paul D about their plan to run away (18). However, her maternal instincts drive her route to freedom and her escape becomes an emblematic moment of resistance to degradation. She explains to Paul D that this was the first time that she took complete control of her life and her family: “I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. [...] I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, *Go on*, and *Now*. Me having to look out. Me using my own head” (B 190). Her stance defies schoolteacher’s categorization of her as an object, as being less human and she claims her humanity. Her escape moment is a crucial one in defining herself and resisting the system of slavery.

However, her twenty-eight days of freedom in Ohio are disrupted by the arrival of schoolteacher, who comes to claim back his property – Sethe and her children. Unable to accept her children’s return to Sweet Home and the dehumanization they will be subjected to there, Sethe kills her “already-crawling baby,” who later haunts 124 – the house where Sethe starts living with Baby Suggs after her escape from the plantation. Killing her child is for Sethe the ultimate act of resistance to slavery. She later explains that whites “dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. [...] She could never let it happen to her own [children]. The best thing she was, was her children. [...] And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (B 296). Deprived of her own identity, Sethe believes that the only thing left on this earth that could give her a sense of purpose is her children. When asked about the act of infanticide, Morrison argues that “it was the right thing

to do, but she had no right to do it” (*Conversations* 272). For this purpose, Morrison introduces into the narrative the character of Beloved, who is the incarnation of Sethe’s dead child. As she explains, the only person who could ask Sethe about this action is her own daughter and for this purpose Beloved comes into the narrative, being as old as Sethe’s daughter if she was still alive (272).

Though subjugated by the system of slavery, Sethe and all the Sweet Home men prove to be remarkably resilient despite their categorization as non-persons. Morrison juxtaposes Sethe’s remembrance of her traumatic experiences with instances at the plantation quarters that attest to the slaves’ resistance and their strategies of finding meaning in their African origins. In his article “American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice,” Ira Berlin argues that despite the dehumanizing nature of slavery, black slaves created means of resisting their brutalization:

If slavery was violence and imposition, if it was death, slavery was also life. Slaves did not surrender to the imposition, physical and psychological. They refused to be dehumanized by dehumanizing treatment. On the narrowest of grounds and in the most difficult of circumstances, they created and sustained life in the form of families, churches, and associations of all kinds. These organizations – often clandestine and fugitive, fragile and unrecognized by the larger society – became the sites of new languages, aesthetics, and philosophies as expressed in story, music, dance, and cuisine, worlds that were sacred and worlds that were profane. (1264)

Sethe remembers that when her African-born mother was hanged because of her rebellious stance, her mother’s friend and later her surrogate mother, Nan, gave her an understanding of her African origins. Her surrogate mother tried to connect Sethe with the community of her ancestors and transmit to her a sense of belonging. Sethe remembers that “Nan was the one

she knew best, who was around all day, who nursed babies, cooked, had one good arm and half of another. And who used different words” (B 74). Through her words, Sethe comes to know about the African language Nan and her mother used – their African language – and learns about her mother’s story:

“Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe,” and she [Nan] did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe.” (B 74)

Morrison acknowledges the trauma of the middle passage experience and by giving voice to Nan, she here bears witness to that part of American history that was largely exposed to institutional amnesia. Sethe becomes the bearer of that traumatic history, and tormented by feelings of displacement, she tries to compensate for that, and become later a shield for her children against the odds and hardships of slavery.

Sethe also remembers instances of her life before her arrival at the Sweet Home plantation, where the enslaved community found a certain measure of freedom through singing and dancing. This memory is a vivid one that illustrates the creative culture slaves developed – a culture that was defined by African elements and gave them a sense of belonging:

Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding

other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. Just like this one in her stomach.

(*B* 37)

As Arlene Keizer argues, “the dance and Sethe’s memory of it are fragments of a system in which those who are now slaves were valued as human beings” (112). Dancing thus becomes part of this organic relationship between the individual and the slave community, and from a state of purposelessness its members emerge as human beings that find meaning in their cultural heritage. The antelope dance thereby attests to a symbiotic bond among the dancers who liberate themselves from the physical constraints of slavery.

Morrison also depicts these feelings of racial solidarity and belonging in the post-slavery community in Cincinnati. After her escape from Sweet Home, Sethe finds refuge in her mother-in-law’s house. Baby Suggs, just like Nan, becomes a surrogate mother for Sethe and tries to soothe the pain of her scarred body. She nurses her just like her child – she bathed her in sections, wiped Sethe’s wounded feet and softened her raped nipples with lard. Sethe finds a sanctuary in Baby Suggs’s arms. In fact, Baby Suggs becomes a surrogate mother not only for Sethe, but for the whole black community in Cincinnati. Sethe remembers that “124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (*B* 102). Having lost all her own children, Baby Suggs develops a maternal relationship with all the members of the community. She orchestrates a gathering for all of them, trying to lift their self-esteem and help them transcend the status of chattel that has been ascribed to them and their ancestors for centuries. During the Clearing ritual, Baby Suggs aims at clearing their souls from feelings of debasement, a process that symbolizes the transition from social death to spiritual rebirth. Sethe remembers that children, women and men gathered and listened to her mother-in-law preaching:

“In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. [...] Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you. [...] More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (*B* 104).

After the end of her sermon, the community would provide the music and all of them would start dancing. The whole performance seems to imitate the antelope dancing that Sethe remembered happening before Sweet Home. Arlene Keizer argues that this ritual “provides a moment of plenitude in which the people can experience themselves, re-member themselves, as whole and free, in an individual and communal way” (113). Clearly, the ritual and Baby Suggs’s sermon function as healing mechanisms enabling both Sethe and the members of the community to transcend their liminality and learn to love themselves. This performance provides communal feelings of belonging and all the members, regardless of sex, perform a spiritually egalitarian dance that affirms their existence.

Sustained by the black community and her mother-in-law, Sethe had the chance to begin healing herself. The days that followed after her escape from the plantation were “twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother in law, all her children together; of being part of a neighborhood” (*B* 204). Sethe found a surrogate family in all the members of the Cincinnati community and finally had the chance to “claim” herself (*B* 111). She remarks that these days were “days of company” where “one taught her the alphabet; another a stitch. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day” (*B* 111). By immersing herself in a community of women and a broader neighborhood, Sethe had the chance to emancipate herself through the networks of affiliation and kinship.

Morrison, however, also underscores the limitations of the community. While the post-slavery community in Cincinnati is presented as a sanctuary from racial oppression, she insists that the members of the community failed to warn Sethe for the arrival of the schoolteacher, out of their envy and spite for Baby Suggs's "reckless generosity" in hosting a celebration of Sethe's escape and return to her children (*B* 162). Morrison complicates the dynamics of the community by showing that decades of deprivation caused feelings of envy among its members. They got angry at Baby Suggs as "she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess" (*B* 163). Stamp Paid, a free black man and member of the Cincinnati community, later explains to Paul D that the envy, caused by the excess of Baby Suggs's party, "explained why nobody ran on ahead; why nobody sent a fleet-footed son cut 'cross a field soon as they saw the four horses in town hitched for watering while the riders asked questions. Not Ella, not John, not anybody ran down or to Bluestone Road, to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in" (*B* 184). Yet, it is important to recognize that Morrison acknowledges the internal divisions in the post-slavery community as direct consequences of the brutal system to which its members had been imposed. These limitations, however, become an integral element for Morrison in her effort to present a model of an African-American community defined by racial solidarity later in the text.

After schoolteacher's arrival, Sethe, unable to protect her children, attempts to kill all of them. However, Baby Suggs and Sethe are not excluded from the community because of Sethe's act of infanticide (*Kella* 143). The community in fact punishes and ostracizes Sethe because of her pride in killing her child. Sethe seems to have no regrets about killing her small baby: "Holding the living child, Sethe walked past them in their silence and hers. [...] Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably" (*B* 179). Sethe's presumed feelings of pride lead the community, whose members have themselves suffered decades of humiliation, to this act of betrayal and for Sethe "those twenty-eight happy days

were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life” (*B* 204). Stamp Paid contends that Baby Suggs’s death was the outcome of shame: “to belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy” (*B* 209). After Baby Suggs’s death, “nobody, but nobody visited that house” and from a haven, 124 was transformed into a solitary place haunted by the dead child’s spirit – a haunted place carrying the burden of collective trauma.

When Paul D arrives at 124 and attempts to exorcize the spirit of the ghost, the next day the dead babe appears at the yard of the house in the person of a young woman, who names herself Beloved. During her stay at 124, Beloved’s presence is “an unexpected pleasure” as “her thirst for hearing” Sethe’s life story acts as a healing means of recovering repressed memories (*B* 69). However, towards the end of the novel, her demands become obsessive and stop being healing – as they initially were. Beloved ceaselessly demands Sethe’s attention: “Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything” (*B* 282). Only then Denver steps in and starts protecting her mother from Beloved. She realizes that the only solution would be to defy her fear of the world and ask for help from the community: “Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help” (*B* 286). The first person she goes and asks for help is her former teacher, Lady Jones, who functions as a surrogate mother after Sethe’s inability to provide for Denver. Doreen Fowler argues that “Lady Jones is a substitute for the lost mother, but she also provides access to a world of symbolic meanings by teaching Denver to read” (25). After years of isolation, Denver has the chance to reclaim herself and Lady Jones acts as a mediator for her reintegration into the community. Just like Nan who teaches Sethe the African language of her mother, Lady Jones

becomes a surrogate mother and teaches her the language of sociability that will help Denver be grounded again in the community and social existence.

Morrison thus repositions the community as a healing site of racial solidarity and presents collectivity as a corrective to years of marginalization. Doreatha Mbalia contends that “once the enemy is identified, once it is out in the open, the community struggles collectively against that which divides them. And it is only through the collective will and action of the people that Beloved, the enemy, dies” (91). After Denver’s appeal for help, gifts of food start arriving at 124. Eventually Ella persuades the other women of the community to walk over 124 and exorcize the evil spirit of Beloved that gradually “ate up” Sethe’s life (*B* 295). The community overcomes its internal divisions and makes amends for Sethe and her family. The Cincinnati women start singing in order to exorcize Beloved’s spirit, a ritual that reminds one of the Clearing: “Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (*B* 308). Just like the antelope dance and the dancing and singing taking place during the Clearing ritual, the women’s singing asserts the cohesiveness of the community. Sethe and Denver are finally liberated from the haunting presence of Beloved and with this final act of solidarity, Morrison suggests that the community can only work through the collective trauma of racial oppression by creating a site that evokes a notion of collectivity among its members.

In *Beloved*, however, it is not only the female voice that is being heard. Through the narrative of Paul D, Morrison establishes an egalitarian order within the text and the trauma of enslaved men is also addressed. When Paul D arrives at 124 after twenty years of roaming around, he finds with Sethe and Denver a surrogate family. Remembering very few of his family, Paul D carried with him all those years the pain of dislocation due to the absence of

family bonds. While still at the Sweet Home plantation, he found refuge in the predominantly male community and recalls that “he had his brothers, two friends, Baby Suggs in the kitchen, a boss who showed them how to shoot and listened to what they had to say” (*B* 258). However, after schoolteacher’s arrival at Sweet Home, the relatively decent life they were leading because of the “humane” treatment of Mr. Garner transformed into a state of constant dehumanization; as he puts it, “schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men” (*B* 260). However, through the surrogate family he finds at 124, Paul D has the chance to tell about his systematic debasement and confront his past. Sethe helps him narrate his painful experience with the iron bit in his mouth after their attempt to escape from Sweet Home and his witnessing the lynching of his brothers.

Beloved thus addresses the trauma of slavery suffered by both men and women, and through the affective relationships the characters develop, they find a healing place that transcends their previous non-existence. In her book *Yearning*, bell hooks argues that *Beloved* bolsters a “notion of bonding [...] between black women and men, [...] a space of recognition and understanding, where we know one another so well, our histories, that we can take the bits and pieces, the fragments of who we are, and put them back together, re-member them” (214). Both Paul D and Sethe find the strength to narrate to each other their painful memories and support each other. Even though Paul D is alienated by Sethe’s act of infanticide, saying that her “love is too thick” (*B* 193), he returns to 124 after the spirit of *Beloved* is ostracized by the community of women. Just like Baby Suggs, Paul D starts rubbing Sethe’s feet and adopts Baby Suggs’s healing practices. He recalls Sixo’s words about his woman as he realizes that “he wants to put his story next to [Sethe’s]”: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind” (*B* 321). Through their love, but also because of *Beloved*, who symbolically serves as a catalyst for

remembering, both Paul D and Sethe are able to remember their traumas and start working through their painful memories of their lives at Sweet Home by excavating their histories – a past that both of them were trying to keep at bay all those years.

Revisiting the past and in particular the lives of her ancestors, whether it is the site of a slave or a post-slavery community, becomes for Morrison a means of rupturing the institutionalized silence surrounding slavery. The narratives of her characters in *Beloved* echo the haunting presence of the past. In her interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison argued that “Afro-Americans in rushing away from slavery [...] also rushed away from slaves because it was painful to dwell there” (247). *Beloved* thus becomes a project in which Morrison attempts to confront the trauma of slavery and positions the African-American community as a site where this healing can take place. Racial solidarity and human agency are prerequisites for overcoming the limitations that the community presents and serve as a means of rectifying the wrongs of slavery. In the face of racial and sexual oppression, *Beloved* explores the dialectics between the individual and the community, the latter one being the place where African-American people can reclaim a home and counter the psychologically damaging effects of centuries of oppression.

Chapter 4

Surrogate Families and the Lingering Force of Patriarchy in Charles Johnson's *Middle*

Passage

“The black American writer begins his or her career with – and continues to exhibit – a crisis of identity. If anything, black fiction is about the troubled quest for identity and liberty, the agony of social alienation, the longing for a real and at a times a mythical home”

Race and Being — Charles Johnson

In his book *Race and Being* (1988), Charles Johnson is critical of the tendency of contemporary African-American writers to construct characters that debunk the stereotypes imposed by whites; for him contemporary African-American literature has become “a program for black cultural reconstruction” that creates “positive images” (17). A genuine creative work, he believes, cannot be achieved through an ideological or political project, and for this reason he distances himself from historical reconstruction and the promotion of a stable black identity. Unlike Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison who frame their narratives around the historical legacy of slavery and focus on slave families and the communal understanding of black subjectivity, Johnson in his novel *Middle Passage* creates a meta-fictional world rejecting realist narratives about slavery. Instead, he represents two conflicting communities – the community of the crew and that of the enslaved African Allmuseri community on board the slave ship, the *Republic* – allegorically. Drawing on the

phenomenological theme of experience, Johnson is interested in identity as a philosophical concept, and explores the fluid and transcultural nature of his main character's identity, Rutherford Calhoun. The two opposing communities facilitate Rutherford's definition of his selfhood and in fact represent alternative surrogate families that supplement his lack of self. Nevertheless, both surrogate communities conform to patriarchal standards, and despite Johnson's effort to parody and present ironically the characters and their embrace of patriarchy, he only reinforces gender stereotypes in his representation of women.

Johnson promotes an experiential phenomenology aligning his characters with diverse perspectives in order to allow them to undergo transformation. In his novel *Middle Passage* (1990), Johnson is pre-occupied with the exploration of black subjectivity and he approaches this subject from a philosophical perspective. Influenced by philosophers such as Mikel Dufrenne and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Johnson applies a "transcendental phenomenology" to his fiction which he labels "a philosophy of experience" (*Being and Race* ix). As Arlene Keizer argues, Johnson tries "to link black subjectivity, during slavery and in the present, with traditional philosophical discourses on the subject" (49). The quest for personal identity and the process of transformation from object to subject are central philosophical themes in the novel. In an interview with Jonathan Little, Johnson explains that identity is not a "fixed or static" entity, but a constant "process" that undergoes transformation (161). In *Middle Passage*, his fictional character and first-person narrator, Rutherford Calhoun, reflects on the fluid and transcultural dimension of his black subjectivity. By creating a hybrid character and a hybrid text, Johnson differentiates himself from the black feminist approach in African-American literature and literary studies that dominated in the 1970s and 1980s, and provides a counter-text that challenges the ideological construction of a strong black identity.

For Johnson, the slavery experience becomes a site for philosophical contemplation rather than a means of exploring the psychological consequences of centuries of oppression

for black selfhood, which is a central concern in the works of other prominent African-American authors such as Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler. While these authors are pre-occupied with giving voice to marginalized people that were left outside of history, Johnson argues that “[c]haracters are constructs, mental beings, who have more in common with mathematical entities than real people” (Little 170). In many ways, *Middle Passage* promotes an alternative black subjectivity, one that critiques the politics of black identity that Butler and Morrison support. In his fiction, Johnson tries to revise neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* and suggests that they lack universal and “polymorphous characters” (*Being and Race* 16). In his discussion of *Beloved*, Johnson believes that Sethe is not representative of enslaved women and that “Morrison’s fictional universe seems lacking in light and balance” (Little 170; *Being and Race* 103). In the case of Butler’s novels, he believes that science fiction and fantasy “have nowhere to go on the level of original storytelling and invention” and that the scenes in her fiction “consist of dialogue and exposition rather than dramatic exploration of character and plot” (*Being and Race* 117).

In revising the postmodern slave narrative genre, Johnson deploys the experience of the middle passage to reflect on the nature of freedom and human bondage as existential concepts. He draws attention to the diversity of the African-American experience as he believes that slavery has to do more with transculturality than with subjection. Although he does not deny the debilitating effects of the institution of slavery, he contends that transculturation is interrelated with the legacy of slavery. In his own words, America is ultimately a “genetically mongrelized” nation where all lives “are a tissue of cross-cultural influences” (*Being and Race* 43). For this purpose, he creates characters that function as the ‘clay’ which he then molds in order to create a “transcendental” experience. At the end of the novel, his main characters have undergone a transformation and discover aspects of

themselves that they could not have experienced if they had not undergone the dramatic circumstances they are driven into.

Johnson departs from realism and adopts a postmodernist stance in his fiction where he emphasizes the transcultural nature of black identity. *Middle Passage* is highly inter-textual, alluding to different texts, such as diaries and slave narratives, which Johnson uses to reflect on the nature of individual identity and also to parody and dismantle the conventions of traditional slave narratives. Timothy Spaulding argues that “[those] numerous inter-textual references, both implicit and explicit, allow Johnson to re-form the slave narrative as an allegory – one that brackets the text from narrative realism as much as other postmodern slave narratives” (92). Johnson seems to have chosen deliberately a first-person narrator in order to draw attention to the conventional use of a first-person narrator in traditional slave narratives. Following the patterns of historical slave-narratives, Morrison’s *Beloved* includes sections using first-person narration by former slaves, while Butler’s *Kindred* also has a first-person narrator. Through the use of parody and irony, Johnson, however, undercuts the credibility of his protagonist/narrator and equally deconstructs the conventional use of a first-person narrator in historical slave narratives. In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), Linda Hutcheon argues that “postmodern parody is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representation of history” (98). The use of parody and allegory helps Johnson challenge the stable dimension of black identity, and also dismantle the conventional first-person narrator not only in historical slave narratives, but also neo-slave narratives such as Butler and Morrison’s novels.

Johnson uses allegorical strategies to reflect on the two different communities on board the ship. *The Republic* itself functions as a microcosm of a transcultural America and this is filtered through the two communities. The community of white sailors stands for the Western culture and the institution of slavery itself, whereas the Allmuseri tribe could be seen

as an archetype of an enslaved community that rebels against the authority of the white Westerners. The novel's main character, Rutherford Calhoun, stands between these two opposing communities. In his quest for selfhood, the two communities serve as alternative surrogate families. *The Republic* is actually a border space for Calhoun as Johnson locates his character between America and Africa and towards the end of the novel Calhoun comes to realize that his self is "a mosaic of many countries" (MP 161). This confrontation with these communities makes him realize the transculturality of his black identity and the hybrid nature of his selfhood.

Though aiming to explore the philosophical concept of "transcendental" experience in relation to black ontology, Johnson is unable to transcend stereotypical representations of women. Especially the character of Isadora is highly stereotypical, though it is important to emphasize that we see her through the eyes of Rutherford. Patriarchal notions linger within the novel and black male suffering is equated with the fear of castration, impotency, marriage and matriarchal, domineering women. Rather than debunking gender stereotypes, the novel in fact perpetuates them. Though he distances himself from a fiction of black empowerment that Butler and Morrison support and dismantles the ideological concepts of black identity politics that this tendency in African-American literature has created for the black African-American experience, he reiterates ideological concepts of gender. In his book *Race and Being*, he argues that "while ideology may create a fascinating vision of the universe, and also fascinating literary movements, it closes off the free investigation of phenomena" (26). Though attempting to liberate his fiction from ideological constraints, the negative and stereotypical representation of the novel's main female character only adds to the perpetuation of patriarchal ideologies that historically were at the core of America's plantation system, which bolstered the construction of stereotypical images of black enslaved women.

“If the principal novels and stories in my body of work have a central theme,” Johnson explains in his interview with Michael Boccia, “it is the investigation of the nature of the self and personal identity. As a phenomenologist, I cannot help but believe that consciousness is primary for all ‘experience’ – that the nature of *I* is the deepest of mysteries, and that all other questions arise from this primordial one, *What am I?*” (615). *Middle Passage*’s main character Rutherford Calhoun tries to answer that question and experiences his own “middle” passage to transcendence and self-consciousness, being himself a member of the white crew while also identifying with the African Allmuseri tribe. The novel begins with Rutherford’s decision to board the *Republic* so he can avoid marrying Isadora Bailey as he “literally hunger[s] for life in all its shades and hues” (*MP* 5). The novel ironically ends with him finding solace in Isadora again; what he “wanted more after so many adventures was the incandescence, very chaste, of an embrace that would outlast the Atlantic’s bone-chilling cold” (*MP* 206). Hence, the “middle” passage becomes a transformative experience; from a “social parasite” and a “petty thief,” he is transformed into a responsible care-taker at the end of the novel (*MP* 4).

Before boarding the *Republic*, which turns out to be a “slaver,” Rutherford calls himself a thief before being freed by his master (*MP* 32). Stealing becomes a means of ascribing an identity to himself and defying the status of property ascribed to slaves. Stealing was actually a common act of resistance among slaves, as Saidiya Hartman points out in her book *Scenes of Subjection* (1997): “Stealing away was the vehicle for the redemptive figuration of dispossessed individual and community, [...], contravening the object status of chattel, [...] and investing in the body as a site of sensual activity, sociality, and possibility” (66). However, stealing is more than defining himself as a human being; as Ashraf Rushdy argues, “stealing, for Rutherford, is part of a phenomenological tradition” (“Properties” 77). Rutherford has an overwhelming desire to discover the world as for him “life was a

commodity, a thing we could cram into ourselves” (*MP* 39). Stealing not only becomes a means of accumulating experiences and evolving, but it is symbolically a form of rebellion against the system that had turned him into an object.

After entering Captain Falcon’s room, he “felt the change come over [him], a familiar, sensual tingle that came whenever [he] broke into someone’s home, as if [he was] slipping inside another’s soul” (47). Trespassing on others’ properties gives him a sense of selfhood as he takes on someone else’s identity; theft thus becomes “the closest thing [he] knew to transcendence” (47). Drifting from “object to object,” he becomes a subject himself as he engages in a political act of defying the capitalist system of property. As a slave he had “never had enough of anything” and this very fact provoked feelings of frustration:

If you have never been hungry, you cannot know the *either/or* agony created by a single sorghum biscuit – either your brother gets it or you do. And if you do eat it, you know in your bones you have stolen the food straight from his mouth, there being so little for either of you. This was the daily, debilitating side of poverty that no one speaks of, the perpetual scarcity that, at every turn, makes the simplest act a moral dilemma. (48)

This dilemma makes him wonder about his identity: “for was I not, as a Negro in the New World, *born* to be a thief? Or, put less harshly, inheritor of two millennia of things I had not myself made?” (48). Johnson, from the very beginning of the novel, locates his character in this process of defining himself. Johnson places Rutherford in a state where he has to position his identity, and the two different worlds he is thrown into facilitate this process of definition.

The ship itself represents a middle space where two antithetical worlds collide and eventually provide a sense of meaning to Rutherford. The *Republic* could be read as a chronotope, which Mikhail M. Bakhtin defines in *The Dialogic Imagination* as “[p]oints in

the geography of a community where time and space intersect and fuse. [...] Chronotopes thus stand as monuments to the community itself, as symbols of it, as forces operating to shape its members' images of themselves" (84). Paul Gilroy argues in his book *The Black Atlantic* (1996) that the ship is actually "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4). Similarly, the *Republic* represents a microcosm of America where the two opposing communities of the white crew and the Allmuseri tribe collide and the history of slavery is re-written all over again. A strong social hierarchy dominates on the *Republic* where the white crew represents white hegemonic ideologies and the Allmuseri tribe is subjugated to the status of cargo. In *Middle Passage*, the ship appears to be "from stem to stern, a process"; Cringle explains that it would not be the same vessel that left New Orleans at the end of the journey (36). The *Republic* becomes an allegory of a transcultural America and an amalgam of ambivalent communities. Since there is a diversity of people on board together with their own unique ideologies, the ship is a border space where these two communities and surrogate families merge to form a contradictory territory in which Rutherford can forge a new sense of his selfhood. An encounter with such a contradictory space cannot but alter the main character of the novel.

These surrogate families help Rutherford confront his troubled past and emerge as a changed human being. Being abandoned by his father at an early age and raised by his brother, Rutherford experiences the dire consequences of the lack of stable family bonds. Having no paternal model in his life, he faces a crisis in his masculine identity and he considers himself a burden on his brother. He explains that for his brother Jackson, he was "one more child he must see feed and keep from killing itself by climbing trees or playing too close to the well" (*MP* 111). In Squibb, a crew member of the *Republic*, he finds an alternative brother to whom he can unveil his past and his troubled relationship with his brother: "I was his shadow-self, the social parasite, the black picklock and worldling" (112).

While Rutherford is paralyzed by feelings of abandonment, Squib supports Rutherford by listening to him and staying by his side until the end of the middle passage, thus becoming a surrogate brother.

The captain of the *Republic*, Ebenezer Falcon, represents a colonialist ideology that dominates the community of the sailors. Despite Falcon's dwarf stature, Rutherford is impressed by the former's worldview and his power. He describes him as an "empire builder, explorer, and imperialist that sculptors loved to elongate" as his life was a tissue of experiences, a "living history" (31-32). Driven by his desire for money and power, he captures an ancient African tribe and what is described as its god. As Daniel M. Scott argues, Falcon "is the spirit of opposition, dualism, repression, and conflict" (649). When his status is challenged due to the planned revolt on the part of the Allmuseri tribe and the reaction of the crew, Falcon explains his worldview to Rutherford: "For a self to act, it must have something to act on [...] Conflict... is what it means to be conscious. Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind. Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other – these ancient twins are built into mind like the stem-piece of a merchantman" (*MP* 96-97). According to Falcon binary oppositions are an integral part of anyone's identity. Rutherford finds himself trapped between the antithetical worldviews of the communities and when Falcon asks him if he is still thinking of helping the "rebels," he is unable to show any opposition to the Captain (*MP* 97).

Just like his brother Jackson, who defines his selfhood in the surrogate father-son relationship with their master Reverend Chandler, Rutherford develops a peculiar father-son relationship with Falcon. Rutherford explains that Jackson "pondered long on this dilemma: Stay in slavery to serve those closest to you or flee" (*MP* 111). Jackson chooses to serve the people around him and becomes "faithful to Reverend Chandler, laying out his clothes each morning, combing his dry, brittle hair, [...] the model of propriety" (*MP* 112). Just like his

brother, Rutherford adopts an attitude of servitude and obedience when Falcon asks him to become his spy and “keep his eyes open and tell [him] of any signs of trouble” (*MP* 58). Rutherford in fact compares this absurd relationship to a marriage and claims that “the very thing he’d escaped in New Orleans had [...] overtaken [him]” (*MP* 59). Thus Rutherford finds himself trapped within this relationship with Falcon that in fact represents his struggle to internalize his hybrid identity. He is faced with the dilemma of either endorsing Falcon’s binary ideology and the slavery institution itself or rebelling against it. It is significant that Johnson uses the name Calhoun for his character, as John C. Calhoun, the South Carolina statesman, is best remembered for his defense of slavery and his support of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.³ The other name of the protagonist, Rutherford, also alludes to the nineteenth president of the United States, Rutherford B. Hayes, who defended fugitive slaves that were accused under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.⁴ Johnson seems to have chosen these names self-consciously possibly to reflect on his main character’s dilemma of endorsing hegemonic ideologies or rebelling against the institution of slavery.

Tormented by feelings of bewilderment, the Allmuseri community represents the opposite of Falcon’s ideology and resolves Rutherford’s ambivalence. Ashraf Rushdy argues that the Allmuseri phenomenology stands for a “plurality of meanings of intersubjectivity” (“Phenomenology” 376). The Allmuseri tribe represents different and multiple perspectives and an encounter with them can provide an intersubjective experience. The Allmuseri tribe seems to be a “synthesis of several tribes” as they represent the traces of all the different cultures and ideologies with which they have come into contact in Africa (*MP* 61). During the middle passage, Rutherford comes to discover their culture, language and their philosophy. He finds himself desiring to acquire part of their worldview: “As I live, they so shamed me I

³ Senator Calhoun argued that slavery was a “positive good” and the elimination of the system “would lead to consequences unparalleled in history.” See. John L. Thomas et al., *John C. Calhoun: A Profile* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), x.

⁴ See. Rutherford B. Hayes in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

wanted their ageless culture to be my own [...]” (78). He comes to realize, however, that the nature of identity is subject to change and transformation, and that just like the *Republic*, the Allmuseri culture is also in a constant “process”:

Stupidly, I had seen their lives and culture as timeless product, as a finished thing, pure essence or Parmenidean meaning I envied and wanted to embrace, when the truth was they were process and Heraclitean change, like any men, not fixed but evolving and as vulnerable to metamorphosis as the body of the boy we’d thrown overboard. (123).

Like all human beings, the Allmuseri tribe is subjected to metamorphosis, as the unfathomable experience of encountering the Western world irrevocably changes them. As Timothy Spaulding argues, this “process of transculturation” is “the product of the violent and exploitative forces of slavery.... a manifestation of power being exerted by one culture over another” (97). The impact of transculturation irreversibly damages their nature as the Allmuseri people during their revolt against Falcon end up “being as bloodthirsty as himself” (*MP* 139).

In his own encounter with the Allmuseri community and especially the God of the tribe that Falcon took violently from their homeland, Rutherford is transformed, as he comes to accept his past and becomes a changed person. There is a mystery surrounding the deity of the tribe and when Rutherford is asked to feed the God, it takes the form of his father, Riley. This encounter with his father enables Rutherford to begin to work through the childhood trauma of abandonment. In the presence of the God, he learns that his father, after his runaway escape from the plantation, was actually captured and killed. At the end of the vision, he gets a better perspective of his own sense of self and realizes that the only person responsible for his own life is himself: “Suddenly, I knew the God’s name: Rutherford” (169).

Johnson's protagonist reaches that point where he adopts an identity against slavery, and faced with the dilemma of choosing Rutherford or Calhoun, he eventually selects the former name. Clearly, the Allmuseri community is the key to Rutherford's transformation and a means of catharsis, offering a release from the past and forming a vehicle for framing his worldview around his experiences. One indication of his transformation is Baleca, a small Allmuseri girl. Rutherford becomes a surrogate father and caretaker of her. At the end of the novel he explains to Isadora the parental relationship he had developed with her: "Whenever Baleca is out of my sight I am worried. If she bruises herself, I feel bruised. Night and day I pray all will go well for her, even after I am gone" (193). Literally, Rutherford emerges as a changed person and from a state of emptiness and purposelessness he becomes a responsible caretaker, who is willing to "devote himself to the welfare of everyone" (185).

Towards the end of the middle passage and through his encounters with these surrogate families Rutherford realizes the transcultural character of his subjectivity. Stuart Hall, in his article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" theorizes the performativity of cultural identity:

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence... [or] a fixed origin to which we can [return]. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning. (226)

Hall argues that our identity is a product of our time and place. Within the context of *Middle Passage*, the novel's protagonist realizes the fluid nature of his selfhood and that his diasporic identity is an amalgam of different worlds and worldviews. After the revolt on the ship, he points to the hybrid nature of his identity:

In myself I found nothing I could rightly call Rutherford Calhoun, only pieces and fragments of all the people who had touched me, all the places I had seen, all the homes I had broken into. The “I” that I was, was a mosaic of many countries, a patchwork of others and objects stretching backward to perhaps the beginning of time. (160-161)

Johnson demonstrates through Rutherford that America’s society is “mongrelized” and that the collision of different perspectives completes and embraces the intersubjectivity of experience. Towards the end of the novel, Rutherford comes to accept his “mosaic” identity and realizes that his identity is like a palimpsest, consisting of different layers of his past and present and different worldviews that eventually collide and point to the hybridity of his character.

Much of the critical attention so far in this chapter has focused on the importance of Johnson’s philosophical discourse in *Middle Passage* and the Allmuseri tribe’s role in reshaping Rutherford Calhoun’s worldview in his quest for identity. I would now like to turn to the negative depiction of women in his novels which undergirds the novel’s endorsement of patriarchal notions of masculinity. Isadora Bailey, the main female character in the novel, appears only at the beginning and end of the novel. Though Johnson ironically presents all characters as caricatures, Rutherford’s misogynist description of Isadora is excessive. From the very beginning of Rutherford’s narration, she is objectified as he describes her nose as a doorknob and depicts her as a person who does not take care of herself as she lets herself get fat (8). Elizabeth Muthner describes Isadora as a “type of the predatory female who would bind the male protagonist to bourgeois happy endings” (650). She is described as dreaming of a happy family life and aspiring to conventional stereotypes of Hollywood films and even fairytales. As she tells Rutherford at the beginning of the novel, “someday when we are very old, have grandchildren and you look back upon this rickety free-lance life you’ve led from

the advantage of the comfortable home and family we've built together, you will thank me" (17-18). She aspires to education and bourgeois values and desperately tries to trap and confine Rutherford to a conventional life and marriage. Isadora is represented by Rutherford as a stereotypical domineering woman who tries to impose herself and her values upon him and thus emasculates him.

In *Middle Passage*, Rutherford alludes to marriage as a form of enslavement and black liberation is thus equated with an escape from the bondage of marriage and full participation into notions of patriarchy. In his effort to escape marriage with Isadora, Rutherford joins the *Republic* in a desperate act to avoid emasculation. Criticizing the novel's gender politics, Arlene Keizer argues that "if male identity is to be fluid, female identity must be fixed; if the possibility of self-transformation and escape from slavery can be granted to men, it must be denied to women" (65). Since Johnson creates such a female character, he seems to perpetuate gender stereotypes of women as all-domineering and emasculating. She is trying to coerce Rutherford into marriage and she wants to be a mother figure for him: "Half the time I see you, you haven't eaten in two days. Or you're hung over. Or someone is chasing you for money. Or you've been in a fight! You need a family. You're not – not *common!*" (MP11). Female identity, as represented in the novel, appears to be a fixed entity, whereas the male protagonist, Rutherford, emerges as an altered human being after the horrors experienced during his middle passage. In *Middle Passage*, black males can simply choose to free themselves from the past and slavery. Yet, this access to liberation is limited to male characters and Isadora remains until the very end a cultural stereotype.

Calhoun's middle passage is a means of pursuing his manhood on a ship primarily defined as a patriarchal community. The *Republic* stands for the embodiment of male dreams of participating fully in patriarchy and conventional images of masculinity (Muther 653). The

homogeneity of the *Republic* further perpetuates the binary gender roles. Calhoun describes this primarily male-dominated world as follows:

It led to posturing among the crew, a tendency to turn themselves into caricatures of the concept of maleness: to strut, keep their chests stuck out and stomachs sucked in, and talk monosyllabically in surly mumbles or grunts because being good at language was womanly... you had to work to being manly... the crewmen had drinking contests nearly every day. (42)

This particular performance contains a strong element of parody. Yet, the lack of gender heterogeneity adds to an inevitable perpetuation of patriarchy. The male characters of *Middle Passage* find solace in places defined by hegemonic masculinity in their quest for identity. As Muther argues, “Falcon and his crew enforce women’s invisibility in patriarchy” (654). Captain Falcon’s wife, Molly, is also presented in a repulsive way to intensify the fact that “he doesn’t want to return to her” (*MP* 63). The lingering force of patriarchy defines the fictional world of *Middle Passage* and reaches its climax at the end of the novel when Rutherford finds Isadora again. Her loss of weight and her change of looks make Calhoun visualize her as a sign of his victory in the conflict with the ruthless black slave owner Zeringue; the “new” Isadora, he writes, was “an Isadora I could not believe [...] her beauty was heart-stabbing. Added to that, she had lost about fifty pounds” (190). As Isadora is thus presented as a trophy won in male competitions, the black female body remains a space for commodification and objectification.

In *Middle Passage*, community and family play a constructive role in helping Rutherford accept his hybrid identity, a by-product of the collision of conflicting communities and ideologies. The surrogate families compensate for feelings of displacement and enable Rutherford to re-construct his sense of manhood. Nevertheless, the white crew and the

Allmuseri tribe are both primarily defined by patriarchal notions. The female presence, for example in the case of the Allmuseri slave women, Baleca, is rather limited in the novel. Framed around patriarchal communities, Johnson's fictional world perpetuates traditional gender roles within the community instead of invalidating them – the dichotomy between prescribed notions of gender performativity is preserved and gender hierarchy remains intact. In an interview with Charles Rowell, Johnson himself has said that he is opposed to any “explanatory model” to a literary work such as a nationalist or a feminist model because it “conceal[s] rather than reveal[s] the work” (547). Although he parodies both the male and the female characters, the male-dominated perspective within the communities complicates even more gender roles, and fails to offer a “revolutionary vision of black liberation, one that emerges from a feminist standpoint,” that Butler and Morrison advocate (hooks 64). Following such a standpoint, the plight of black people can be approached both from male and female perspectives in order to provide a collective understanding of black suffering and the problem of constructing post-slavery identities.

Conclusion

The three post-modern novels I have analyzed revisit and revitalize the historical legacy of slavery. Although these novels take a different approach to the theme of slave families and communities, all draw heavily on historical slave narratives either to revise them, as in the case of *Kindred* and *Beloved*, or to parody them and thus distance their narratives from the overwhelming tendency in African American literature to bolster a strong sense of black identity. In their novels, Butler and Morrison are primarily preoccupied with historical, ethical and political concerns, but also underscore the psychological impact of slavery on the characters' identity and present slave and post-slavery communities as sites of resistance against hegemonic ideologies. bell hooks in *Yearning* argues that "our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" (147). In *Kindred* and *Beloved*, Butler and Morrison engage in this struggle of remembering and reclaiming the past. The African-American community becomes a model of racial solidarity and a healing place that can mitigate the trauma of slavery. Their novels re-document history and constitute counter-narratives to the silence imposed by the official historical archives and even to some extent by traditional slave narratives. They unveil the history of dislocation and dispossession and represent the slave community as a site of black male and female empowerment. Yet, they also represent

interracial relationships and communities. In *Kindred*, Dana is married to a white man, Kevin, and in *Beloved* Sethe gives birth to Denver with the help of Amy Denver, a white fugitive indentured servant, after whom she names the babe. Moreover, in the Cincinnati community, Denver finds a job in the house of its white abolitionist owners, Mr. and Mrs. Bodwin. Even though the African-American community is presented as a site of resistance and racial solidarity, Butler and Morrison address the potential of building interracial communities that defy notions of racial purity and hegemony. The black community, however, is not romanticized as its members are sometimes motivated by jealousy and greed, and racism continues in a post-slavery society. In *Kindred*, for example, Dana and Kevin have to endure racist comments in the narrative present of the 1970s: “Chocolate and vanilla porn!” one of their colleagues comments on their relationship (*Kindred* 56).

On the other hand, in his interview with Jonathan Little, Johnson argues that with his novels he wants to move away from a black nationalist approach and attempts to answer questions that are relevant to all human beings, regardless of race or gender (167). Indeed, *Middle Passage* is a postmodern narrative in which Johnson demonstrates that his fictional world and his protagonist’s identity are palimpsestic: both the *Republic* and Rutherford Calhoun consist of layers of cross-cultural influences and diverse ideologies. In Johnson’s own words, “like a palimpsest, the word is a tissue of interpretations” (*Being and Race* 39). *Middle Passage* is a hybrid text and so is its protagonist. The two competing communities aboard the ship represent different worldviews that collide and eventually contribute to the main character’s cultural hybridity. Johnson locates his protagonist between interracial communities and thus underscores the transcultural nature of post-slavery identity, and the problem of constructing such an identity in the aftermath of slavery’s abolition. Emphasizing the transculturality of black subjectivity, Johnson departs from the ethical and political concerns that underlie the works of Butler and Morrison.

In *Kindred* and *Beloved*, Butler and Morrison persuasively present the viewpoints of enslaved men and women within the community. Although they introduce female protagonists that resist racial and sexual oppression, they also provide the male perspective and debunk stereotypical depictions of both bondsmen and bondswomen. *Middle Passage*, however, only provides the male perspective and reinforces patriarchal constructions of gender. Although Johnson aims to undermine any ideological constraints in fiction, the male-dominated perspective in *Middle Passage* only perpetuates patriarchal ideologies. However, all three novels point to the creation of communities that could dismantle racial bondage. Although it might seem a utopian fantasy, the creation of a community where solidarity across gender and racial differences exists can be realized. Such a “beloved community,” as bell hooks argues in her book *Killing Rage*, “is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live the world” (265). More than ever before in our history in the wake of the recent refugee crisis, the commitment to develop diverse and hybrid communities that bolster collectivity and solidarity is central. *Kindred*, *Beloved* and *Middle Passage* are novels that attest to this commitment and the community, whether they depict a slave, post-slavery black or an interracial community, becomes a site of confrontation and resistance in the face of racial and gender oppression.

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