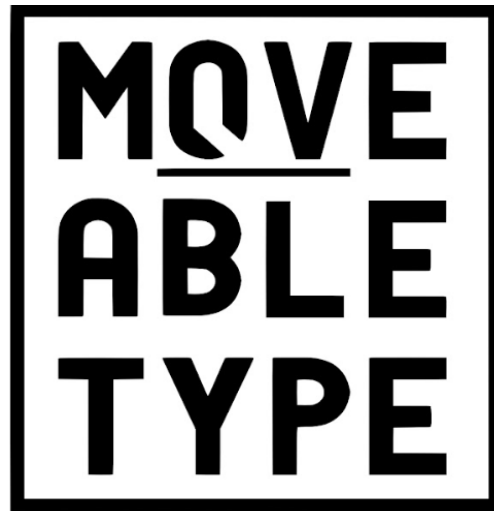




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‘Come on. Come on. Move on.’:
Linear Time as False Promise in African American Literature

KENNEDY MARIE CROWDER

This paper argues that linear progress narratives of human history, influenced by a Newtonian idea of absolute spacetime, fail to accommodate the ongoing racial traumas experienced by African Americans. Informed by Michelle Wright’s *Physics of Blackness*, as well as broader theories from hauntology and Afropessimism, I perform a spatio-temporal analysis of three texts by African American writers: *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* by Saidiya Hartman, and *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. These readings show how writing that foregrounds slavery’s afterlives reveals the ways in which linear time functions as a false promise specifically designed to permanently delay a true reckoning with slavery’s ghost in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Kindred*, Saidiya Hartman, hauntology, spacetime

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019), a blend of archive writing and fictional prose, Saidiya Hartman narrates scenes of quotidian Black life for African American women living in Harlem and Philadelphia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wayward and waywardness, according to Hartman, ‘is the untiring practice of trying to live when you were never meant to survive’. For a population of newly freed African Americans, waywardness comes to describe an ‘experiment’, an entirely new mode of being in space and time that comes in the wake of emancipation and mass migration.¹ This cultural historian seeks to capture through her method of close narration the promise that lured Black people up north and the ways in which life in the city fell short of that pledge:

Most days, the assault of the city eclipses its promise: when the water in the building has stopped running, when even in her best dress she cannot help but wonder if she smells like the toilet or if it is obvious that her bloomers are tattered, when she is so hungry that the aroma of bean soup wafting from the settlement kitchen makes her mouth water, she takes to the streets, as if in search of the real city and not this poor imitation. [...] Each new deprivation raises doubts about when freedom is going to come, if the question pounding inside her head—*Can I live?*—is one to which she could ever give a certain answer, or only repeat in anticipation of something better than this, bear the pain of it and the hope of it, the beauty and the promise.²

Despite the Emancipation Proclamation officially outlawing slavery in the United States in 1865, the consequences of enslavement did not end. A series of social and legal restrictions on how Black people were allowed to move through space and engage with other people replicated the

¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, Adobe Digital Editions (Serpent’s Tail, 2019) p. 228.

² Hartman, p. 18.

organizing logics of the plantation. Jim Crow was alive and well, codified into law by the Supreme Court May 18, 1896 decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* which legalized ‘separate but equal’ segregation of the races.³ There is a commonly held belief that the North was and is less racist against Black people than the South. Black people made up the majority of victims in the gory spectacle of lynching in the South;⁴ the notorious cruelty on southern plantations during slavery cast a long shadow; and the chain gang prison profit system disproportionately affected Black people.⁵ This belief is undermined, however, by the fact that at the beginning of the twentieth century, northern states enforced separate schools, hotels, restaurants, and other public spaces for Black and white people.⁶ And what is more, none of the justices from northern states dissented from *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Hartman’s book thus shows that though African Americans had temporally and spatially moved past the plantation, somehow the ‘promise’ of the city—which in turn represents a greater promise of a free future for Black people with equal rights and autonomy—remains undelivered. This means that for African Americans any idea that time will heal all wounds falls woefully short. This paper argues that linear progress narratives of human history, influenced by a Newtonian idea of absolute spacetime, fail to accommodate the ongoing racial traumas experienced by African Americans. By looking at literary creations by African American writers that foreground slavery’s afterlives, we can come to understand that time itself functions merely as a pacifying false promise specifically designed to delay permanently a true reckoning with slavery’s ghost in contemporary society. This reading joins together concepts from hauntology, physics of blackness, and Afropessimism, to create a multi-framework approach to demonstrate the value of considering the impact of time and space on the Black subject.

Absolute time and space are concepts from Newton’s ‘General Scholium’, an essay included in the *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (commonly known as *Principia*) (1687). The concepts are summarized by philosopher Robert Rynasiewicz as follows:

- Time: Absolute, true, and mathematical time, from its own nature, passes equably without relation to anything external, and thus without reference to any change or way of measuring of time (e.g., the hour, day, month, or year).
- Space: Absolute, true, and mathematical space remains similar and immovable without relation to anything external. [...] Relative spaces are measures of absolute space defined

³ Jim Crow Laws, named after a minstrel show character, were a number of state and local laws enforcing racial segregation. Justice Henry Brown of Michigan delivered the following majority opinion: ‘We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority. If this be so, it is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it [...] The argument also assumes that social prejudice may be overcome by legislation, and that equal rights cannot be secured except by an enforced commingling of the two races [...] If the civil and political rights of both races be equal, one cannot be inferior to the other civilly or politically. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane.’ (*Plessy v. Ferguson*)

⁴ ‘History of Lynching in America’, *NAACP*, <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>.

⁵ Georgia profit prisons made an astonishing \$354,853.55 in 1907 thanks to their unpaid prisoners (i.e., enslaved people): ‘Of 1,011 boys and girls under sixteen, arrested in 1905, 819 were black, but of those given the advantage of the probation system, 50 were white and only 7 colored. In other words, out of 819 arrests of Negro children only 7 enjoyed the benefit of the probation system.’ (Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line: American Negro Citizenship in the Progressive Era* (New York Doubleday Page & Company, 1908), pp. 50-51).

⁶ Baker, pp. 117-129.

with reference to some system of bodies or another, and thus a relative space may, and likely will, be in motion.⁷

Essentially, Newton posits that time and space are both universal or fundamental absolute truths that persist irrespective of relative time, or of how a person or other object may experience time. In this formulation, time is always moving linearly forward and similarly pushes forward absolute space—creating linear spacetime.⁸ To explain my concept of absolute time in this essay, I turn to Michelle Wright’s aptly named study, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond Middle Passage Epistemologies* (2015). She argues that absolute time and absolute space influence how Black Studies and, more broadly, the entirety of ‘Western imagination’ perceives all knowledge as linearly progressive.⁹ What Wright terms ‘Middle Passage Epistemology’ is a narrative which charts the origin of Black history from its forced dislocation from Africa through the ‘Door of No Return’, which then proceeds through the scattering of Black people across the Atlantic, and finally arrives at the development of Black music, art, literature, cultural traditions, academic achievements, and political victories following abolition and post-reconstruction.¹⁰

Wright locates the problem with such a narrative in how Enlightenment era philosophers applied the idea of time and space moving uniformly to their conceptualization of human history, using a linear progressive narrative to assess the development of other civilizations. This is a kind of *narrative* absolute spacetime, distinguished from the mathematical/physical spacetime that Newton and his contemporaries applied in classical science, by the importance of imagination, myths, legends, stories and historicity on shaping the conception of linearity.¹¹ Narrative absolute spacetime uses language and imagination to create a violent force out of time that dehistoricizes and regresses Black life. For example, Hegel’s *The Philosophy of History* (1956) names Africa—yes, the entire continent of Africa—as ‘Unhistorical [...] only as on the threshold of the World’s History.’¹² Temporally, Africa and its people are positioned as outside the progress of human history, and thus a perversion of absolute time. Furthermore, the continent is outside absolute space—which is framed within human history as the world itself—because of its failure to progress linearly as these philosophers perceive Europe to have done. European geography is positioned through narrative absolute spacetime as fundamentally different to Africa in terms of development. Hegel continues, ‘[Africans] exist in a land of childhood [...] and wrapped in the dark mantle of night.’¹³ His term, ‘Childhood’, implies an early stage of life, so that although African culture and Africa’s people have existed for thousands of years, they are reduced to infants in the western imaginary. Furthermore, his metaphorical image, ‘the dark mantle of night’, expresses the phenomenological signifiers of blackness as being associated with spatiotemporal immaturity. In trying to create a narrative of Black linear

⁷ Robert Rynasiewicz, ‘Newton’s Views on Space, Time, and Motion’, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2022 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), p. 2.

⁸ Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), p. 40.

⁹ Wright, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰ Wright, p. 43.

¹¹ I am explicitly referencing ‘The Fact of Blackness’ in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 2008), in which he understands the white gaze as a mode of formulating the Black subject in contrast to whiteness, such that, upon encountering the white gaze for the first time, the Black Man feels himself unmade then remade within the white imaginary and that imaginary projected across his skin: ‘I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors [...] I was battered down by toms-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin’” (p. 112).

¹² G.W.F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 99.

¹³ Hegel, pp. 174-175.

progress, Middle Passage Epistemology replicates the spatiotemporal logics that justify the creation of race, and, consequently, Black enslavement and dehumanization. In doing so, I argue, it unconsciously validates the originating narratives of dehistoricized and spatially marginalized blackness. This is especially unhelpful for Black women because of the dominance of heterosexual masculinity as the drivers of human progress within Western narratives. Mapping narrative absolute spacetime onto the Black experience through Middle Passage Epistemology ‘implicitly forecloses anything but a male source of agency, further suggesting that even for Black women and queers, narratives by and about Black men and modernity are the most universal.’¹⁴ This paradigm replicates the gender disenfranchisement of narrative absolute spacetime, such that Black women—doubly marginalized through race *and* gender—are relegated to the fringes of an already fringed history.

At the heart of *Middle Passage Epistemologies* is a desire to reach some point in time where Black people are perceived as equally human to their white counterparts, that at some point we as a society will ‘get over’ slavery.¹⁵ The problem with such thinking is not its yearning for Black liberation from dehumanization, but rather how framing time this way unconsciously replicates and validates Hegel’s narrative absolute spacetime. This desire to move on is explored in Claudia Rankine’s book-length poem *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). Rankine uses a series of vignettes, artworks, and essays to show connections between the racist abuse hurled at tennis champion Serena Williams, the always growing list of Black men murdered by police, and the racist comments, jokes and passing interactions Rankine herself has fallen victim to. This final category is what she calls ‘invisible racism’—commonly called a microaggression—for its insidiousness and difficulty to pin down. Consumed by paranoia (‘She said what? What did he just do? Did she really just say that? He said what? What did she do? Did I hear what I think I heard?’) and slashed repeatedly by invisible violence, the Black body is for Rankine rendered uninhabitable: ‘Where is the safest place when that place / must be someplace other than in the body? [...] The worst injury is feeling you don’t belong so much / to you.’¹⁶ Rankine fundamentally overturns how contemporary American society has attempted to move on from its violently racist, anti-Black origins through disavowal in the form of colour-blindness. The idea that talking about race opens a wound and thus makes race relations worse rather than better is voiced repeatedly in the text: ‘Feel good. Feel better. Move forward. Let it go. Come on. Come on. Come on’ and ‘This is how you are a citizen. Come on. Let it go. Move on.’¹⁷ Textually juxtaposing these pleas to *move on* with a myriad of stories of anti-Black violence undermines the validity of letting go as a viable method of moving on. Furthermore, ‘This is how you are a citizen’ brings clarity to the text’s subtitle *An American Lyric*—woven deeply into the fabric of American identity is anti-blackness and, therefore, to become an American citizen one must first learn to safe-guard against the persistence of anti-Black violence. For Rankine, this is outright

¹⁴ Wright, pp. 60.

¹⁵ I use ‘get over’ in reference to Calvin Warren’s ‘Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness’: ‘[T]he desire of the exhausted to enter a temporality beyond slavery—to inhabit the present—has structured our discourse about slavery. The phrase “getting over” is yet another index of this intensifying exhaustion—one that figuratively subordinates the Subject of the slave past, holding out the dubious promise that if we can somehow get over this incorrigible subject, the conceptual-historical surplus, then we might achieve something like wellness, success, possessive individualism, power, agency, and so on.’ (see: Calvin Warren ‘3. Black Time: Slavery Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness’, in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies of Expressive American Culture*, ed. by Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson and Aida Levy-Hussen (Ithaca, NY: Rutgers University Press, 2016), pp. 55-68.

¹⁶ Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), pp. 63, 139-46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 151.

destruction of the Black body but also creates silence and stagnation, the kind of violence that kills quietly and repeatedly, forever.

From an Afropessimist perspective, this ongoing violence can be understood as an organizing social principle, a necessary constant to preserve social hierarchy. Frank B. Wilderson III explains that ‘to be Human, one has simply not to be Black [...] There is a structural (which is to say, necessary) antagonism between Blacks and Humans; and this antagonism hinges on violence.’ Blackness, he continues, ‘makes the Human conceptually coherent’ because the ontological position of Human is assured of all its ‘positive attributes’ simply by remembering which ontological position contains none of them.¹⁸ Returning to *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman shows how white people living in northern cities at the beginning of the twentieth century are assured of their humanness through the criminalization of Black autonomy. On the plantation, masters were legally allowed to dictate all their enslaved workers’ movements: when to get up in the morning, when and how long to rest, when and how long to work, if they could travel, who could get married, which plantation to send their kids off to. To continue the Human/Slave antagonism after the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction, there had to be new ways implemented to continue legally policing Black movement. In the first section of *Wayward Lives*, Hartman writes ‘A whole world is jammed into one short block crowded with black folks shut out from almost every opportunity the city affords, but *still intoxicated with freedom*. The air is alive with the possibilities of assembling, gathering, congregating.’¹⁹ Her use of words ‘congregating’, ‘lingering’, and ‘gathering’ are charged in their evocation of Black assembly, an action which was criminalized through Black Codes following the end of reconstruction. Additionally, vagrancy laws made it illegal for Black people to be unemployed, ‘wandering or strolling about in idleness’;²⁰ the laws further banned ‘unlawfully assembling themselves [negroes and mullatoes] together.’²¹ The prospect of Black people not working and grouping up with each other frightened and disturbed white northern city folks. Hartman writes:

If only they could be prevented from flocking to the city, ‘if the metropolis could vomit them back down south, the whole matter would adjust.’ Better for them and for us, the restrictions of the south, than a ‘seeming liberty which blossoms noxiously into license.’ Better the fields and the shotgun houses and the dusty towns and the interminable cycle of credit and debt, better this than black anarchy.²²

This passage, when read through an Afropessimist perspective, clarifies how Black autonomous movement disturbed America’s racialized social order because it signalled the possibility of Black humanness. Therefore, for narrative absolute spacetime to continue progressing for white Americans, African Americans must inhabit a kind of time loop where the possibility of achieving humanness is always just barely out of reach. Without the cyclical nature of Black dehumanization, narrative absolute spacetime would collapse.

¹⁸ Frank B. Wilderson III, ‘Afropessimism and the Ruse of Analogy: Violence, Freedom Struggles, and the Death of Black Desire’, in *Antiblackness*, ed. by Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas (New York: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 37–59, (p. 40).

¹⁹ Hartman, p. 13.

²⁰ Joe M. Richardson, ‘Florida Black Codes’, *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 47.4 (1965), 365–379, (pp. 371–372).

²¹ Gary Stewart, ‘Black Codes and Broken Windows: The Legacy of Racial Hegemony in Anti-Gang Civil Injunctions’, *The Yale Law Journal*, 107.7 (May 1998), pp. 2249–2279, (p. 2261).

²² Hartman, p. 17.

Time functions as a false promise precisely to ensure that there is no substantive critique waged against the persistence of anti-Black social ordering. Instead, as Rankine, Wright, and Hartman all identify, the Black subject is encouraged to *move on*, do better, learn from our history but rest easy in the promise of the city. Time will surely fix it; just wait, we are told. We are inhibited from moving forward, and from legitimately achieving the promised colour-blind society, or free city by disavowing what lingers in our haunted geography. My use of ‘haunted’ is informed by the discipline of hauntology, and specifically by Avery Gordon’s theorizing in *Ghostly Matters* (1997). Horror stories describe the ghost as an undead person that haunts the realm of the living for some unfinished business—revenge, grief, even love. Gordon employs the language of haunting and ghosts to describe how repressed histories of social violence and death committed in the past and disavowed in the present remain as a ‘seething presence’.²³ She writes:

Haunting [...] is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely [...] those singular and yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive [...] it alters the experience of being in time.²⁴

When applied to the lived experiences of Black people, I understand hauntology as a form of what Christina Sharpe terms living in the ‘wake’ of the ‘as yet unresolved unfolding’ of slavery.²⁵ Hauntology as a lens of inquiry affirms that past traumas and silenced histories have ‘affective, historical, and mnemonic structures’ that then shape our social geography.²⁶

Octavia E. Butler’s 1979 historical fantasy novel *Kindred* perhaps most obviously deconstructs the boundaries between past and present when the novel’s main protagonist Dana, an African American woman living in 1976 California, mysteriously travels back in time to a pre-Civil War plantation in Maryland.²⁷ Though Butler never reveals—and is entirely uninterested in—*how* Dana travels back in time, Dana comes to believe that she is called back to the plantation whenever her ancestor, white slave-owner-to-be Rufus, needs her help. Scholars have noted how 1960s Black radical politics influenced Butler’s literary practice. Both Megan Behren and Gerry Canavan make specific reference to her interview with Charles H. Rowell, in which Butler explains how an encounter with a student in the Black Power Movement went on to inform the philosophy that underscores much of her writing.^{28 29} Butler recounts:

I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep

²³ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 8, p. xvi.

²⁴ Ibid, p. xvi.

²⁵ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 13.

²⁶ Gordon, p. 18.

²⁷ Readers often refer to *Kindred* as a science fiction novel, but I defer here to Butler’s own identification with fantasy as stated in an interview with Randall Kenan delivered in 1991: ‘*Kindred* is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. There is no science in *Kindred*[...] Not even the time travel. I don’t use a time machine or anything like that. Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from.’ Kenan, pp. 495-496.

²⁸ Megan Behrent, ‘The Personal is Historical: Slavery, Black Power, and Resistance in Octavia Butler’s *KINDRED*’, *College Literature*, 46.4 (Oct. 1995), pp. 795-828.

²⁹ Gerry Canavan, ‘Chapter 3 To Keep Thee in All Thy Ways (1976-1981)’ in *Octavia E. Butler* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), pp. 55-65.

him alive. 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 have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." [...] That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well.³⁰

This incident instills in Butler an investment in and appreciation for those ancestors who devoted themselves to survival. As Canavan notes, where Butler originally was 'embarrassed' and 'ashamed' of her mother's demeaning service jobs, she grows to understand them as heroic sacrifices, made to secure her survival: 'survival is not necessarily the same thing as defeating your enemy, or even fighting back or standing up for yourself, but simply means that you (and, crucially, your children) have continued into the future.'³¹ I agree with Butler's assessment that this young man fails to understand the difficulty his parents faced in trying to nurture a life for their Black family during Jim Crow segregation. At the same time, I can empathize with his painfully obvious yearning to *move on*. What he resents in his parents is the imagined life for Black people that could have been possible if they had resisted sooner, if his ancestors had burned the plantation down, and if *their* ancestors had jumped into the ocean rather than submitting to the belly of the slave ship. The what-ifs and what-could-have-beens that haunt him and his contemporaries almost drive him to madness: 'I'd like to kill all these old people', he says.

Dana too brings with her into the past a kind of reflexive disdain for some of the enslaved people she encounters on the Maryland plantation. This is seen in her initial assessment of the enslaved woman Sarah,

...the kind of woman who might have been called 'mammy' in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen-sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief head, the female Uncle Tom [...] I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone less courageous than I was. *That comforted me somehow*.³² (emphasis added)

This is at the heart of *Kindred's* politics, the disavowed but terrifying truth haunting 1960s Black radicalism: how courageous would we, as contemporary freed Black people, be if we had to live through the horrors of slavery? How much better would we fare? And has time really progressed us that far from our enslaved ancestors? Dana arrives with contempt and hubris, assured that her twentieth-century knowledge and position in the present as a free woman would prevent her from slipping into the dreaded subjugated position of a Black enslaved woman. Once she and her white husband Kevin have spent enough time in the past, however, she realizes resistance is not as easy as she once believed: 'Time passed. Kevin and I became more a part of the household, familiar, accepted, accepting. That disturbed me too when I thought about it. How easily we seemed to acclimatize.'³³ She is never able to escape, never able to liberate

³⁰ Charles H. Rowell and Octavia E. Butler, 'An Interview With Octavia E. Butler', *Callaloo*, 20.1 (Winter, 1997), pp. 47-66 (p. 51).

³¹ Canavan, pp. 53-54.

³² Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 2003), p. 145.

³³ *Kindred*, p. 97.

in a militant nineteen-sixties fashion the other enslaved workers on the plantation, and is in fact complicit in her ancestor Alice's rape by Rufus in order to ensure the survival of her family tree. Behrent highlights how we as contemporary readers must consider the implications of Dana's decision to help Rufus subdue Alice. Specifically, what it might mean that Dana believes the future of her family tree hinges on Alice's acute suffering. She writes:

An unpublished draft presents an alternate version of *Kindred* set in the Patternist universe, in which Dana and Kevin rescue a young Alice and bring her back to their present to raise as their own child [...] Dana's decision to keep Rufus alive and accept the sexual enslavement of Alice is not the only option—but a choice with repercussions Butler encourages us to consider and question.³⁴

I am in no way trying to argue that Alice's rape is Dana's 'fault'; Butler makes clear that the villain of this story is slavery, represented in the moral decay of Rufus himself, who begins the story as a child with a kind of respect for Dana. As the years pass, however, this youthful kindness and kinship slowly deteriorates as he grows more acclimated to his social position as a white man and an enslaver. The same is true for his relationship with Alice: "When we were little, we were friends," he said softly. "We grew up. She got so she'd rather have a buck nigger than me!"³⁵ He sells her husband to Mississippi when they attempt to run away together and forces Alice into sexual slavery, repeatedly raping and beating her. Then, when Alice commits suicide, he turns his attention to Dana, attempting to rape her to replace the mistress he's lost.

Nevertheless, Dana's complicity reveals something about the contemporary American social landscape that should be self-evident but is instead an uncomfortable, disavowed and silent history: just as the progressive history of America is dependent on the dehumanization of its Black population, African American culture is contingent on the suffering of our ancestors. Just like Alice, Sarah and the other enslaved men and women Dana encounters on the Maryland plantation, she cooperates with Rufus to secure her family's future. Dana, like Sarah, is simply trying to survive. She has a clear advantage over her ancestors in that she lives in that future and never has to question whether freedom is on the horizon. Dana becomes aware of this advantage in a telling exchange with Sarah:

"I'd rather see the others."
"What others?"
"The ones who make it. The ones living in freedom now."
"If any do."
"They do."
"Some say they do. It's like dying, though, and going to heaven. Nobody ever comes back to tell you about it."³⁶

What irony! Here is Dana, somebody who has come back from 'heaven', who could tell Sarah, Alice, and everyone else about the ones living in freedom, but she cannot. For risk of losing that future for herself, she cannot tell them. Here, *Kindred* slips into a ghost story, with Dana

³⁴ Behrent, p. 810. 'The Patternist universe' refers to the Patternmaster series, the first book of which is Butler's debut novel. Butler was only publishing Patternist novels until 1987, making it unsurprising that the original intention was to include *Kindred* in the series.

³⁵ *Kindred*, p. 123.

³⁶ *Kindred*, p. 145.

haunting the past as much as the past haunts her. The so-called progressiveness of time and the idea of a free future corrodes in these character interactions, not only because Dana slips so easily into what should be a wholly unnatural dehumanized existence for a twentieth-century woman who has married across the colour-line, but also because she understands that the privileges she *does* have in that century hinge on historic sexual and racial violence.

What unifies Hartman, Butler, and Rankine's writing is their narrative illustrations of the failure of time's promise to Black people, and how whiteness benefits from perpetuating that promise. For Hartman's archival figures of the twentieth century, the future was in Harlem and Philadelphia at the beginning of the twentieth century. To perform experiments in Black humanity, its inhabitants had to work against legal and social restrictions to their autonomy, which replicated social structures that were supposed to have been in the spatiotemporal 'past'. Butler's fantasy writing literalized the presence of the ghost of enslaved ancestors by forcing a contemporary woman to live on her ancestor's plantation. Her familial history and indeed Black culture broadly, is haunted by enslavement, once again inhibiting an easy linear progress away from the 'past'. Finally, Rankine's account of microaggressions and the ensuing paranoia caused by experiencing quotidian racial violence that can be so easily denied, psychically inhibits a comfortable inhabiting of the promised future of a colour-blind society. Such writing shows us that linear time is not an immutable reality but a violent social function that feeds on disavowal, silence, and grief.

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