

**The Power of Words:
Disrupting Genre in the Neo-Slave Narrative**

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Abstract

This thesis will examine the three neo-slave narratives *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed, *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler, and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. The narratives take their inspiration from classic American slave narratives. However, written a century and more after the abolition of slavery, they differ in form, style, and content. The novels are published in the post-civil rights era, and they reflect the rise of the African American need for self-representation developed out of civil rights activism in the '60s. The thesis will explore how the three neo-slave narratives disrupt genre boundaries in the spirit reflected by postmodernism, and as follows these narratives manage to depict slaves and their testimonies in a new way. The thesis will argue that the novels share a common goal. In their shared aim to experiment with genre, Reed, Butler, and Morrison create hybrid forms of novel-writing and story-telling. Consequently, the thesis will examine how the disruption of genre boundaries creates fantastic hybrid novels that weaken conventions of linearity and the distinctions between past and present. Additionally, in the spirit of Lyotard and postmodernism, the authors consider the grand narrative and objective truths to be gone. This creates room for a multitude of subjective voices which stand forth as an intersubjective project that wants to present an alternative slave (hi)story.

Keywords: Genre-disruption, intertextuality, genre-hybridity, fragmentation, historical anachronism, blurring of time and space, meta-fiction, multivocality, (re)memory, trickster characters, ghosts, Neo-HooDooism, relativism of storytelling, genealogy, and the collective community.

Preface

In 1993 I was a student at Mandal Upper Secondary School. I majored in languages, and five times a week I was introduced to English literature and culture through the English lessons. This was before the internet, and we only occasionally watched a film. Mainly we ploned into a text presented in one of our English textbooks. However, we subscribed to an American magazine that arrived once a month, and I still remember what fascinated me the most in these magazines. It was the stories of the native Americans and how they were deprived of their culture and put into reservations. Being young, naïve, and radical, I was immediately drawn to topics that had to do with injustice, and when we then finally got to see a film, it was a film I will never forget. *The Color Purple* captured my attention. It was awful and beautiful at the same time. I was horrified by the injustice but also grew immensely fond of the characters. Even though I was too young and naïve to understand all the aspects of the narrative, the film caught my attention, and I have seen it several times later. Ever since I have been interested in African American history.

Unfortunately, I never had the chance to study African American culture, history, or literature when I went to university in the mid-90s, but my interest in the topic has remained strong, and when I finally decided to take a master's in English literature, it was tempting to start exploring African American literature. I studied Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* in a recent MA course and having matured since the first encounter with the story in 1993, this written narrative made me see even more aspects of black culture that I wanted to understand better. Being a feminist, I was struck by the strength several of the female characters show, and this was also the reason why I had originally planned on analysing works written only by African American women. Discovering that Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 inspired me to get to know more about her. Octavia Butler's *Kindred* was suggested to me by my supervisor, and I quickly fell in love with this book as well. I have to be able to connect to the stories I read to enjoy them. This was more difficult with the third book I have included in my study, *Flight to Canada*. I found it challenging to read, but the more I understood the composition, the allusions, and the double voice it represents, the more interesting it became.

If you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.

Toni Morrison

(qtd. in Williams)

I was attracted to science fiction because it was so wide open. I was able to do anything and there were no walls to hem you in and there was no human condition that you were stopped from examining.

Octavia Butler

(Balagun)

They made their own fiction, just like we make our own. But they can't tell whether our fictions are the real thing or whether they're merely fictional.

Ishmael Reed

(qtd. in Bell 281)

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Introduction and theory

In this thesis, I will investigate three novels: *Flight to Canada* (1976) by Ishmael Reed, *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler, and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. All the novels were published in the 1970s and '80s. They belong to a literary tradition referred to as the neo-slave narrative, and since they are considered to be rewritings of the traditional slave narratives written in the 19th century (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 3), I will start the introduction by giving a short overview of American slave history.

Slavery is a crucial part of American historical and literary history. Nevertheless, literary canons up until the 1960s were strongly coloured by the ideology of a white, Eurocentric ideology (Tyson 345). This canon was represented as “universal”. Hence, it ought to be relevant to the experience of all people. However, as Tyson observes, this canon only accepted forms and contents that supported the European literary tradition (345). Consequently, the literary canon “has been used to maintain white cultural hegemony” (Tyson 345). Within this literary tradition, facts were presented as objective truths, but this “truth” was based on a certain humanism and a worldview that favoured Western civilisation over non-Western civilisations. The greatest of Enlightenment moral philosophers subscribed to racism, and famous philosophers such as Emmanuel Kant, David Hume, and Thomas Jefferson concluded that “blacks were incapable of intelligence” (Morrison, “The Site of Memory” 89). This was the ideology that ruled in the USA when the first slave narratives appeared in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The white American society considered slaves to be an inferior race that was deprived of basic human rights. However, there was a growing consternation about ethics concerning slavery, the fact that people owned other people, and towards the Civil War the abolitionist movement had grown rather powerful, and slave narratives became an important “tool” for the movement.

These slave narratives can be traced back to the 18th century, and *Equiano's Travels* (1789) might be the first to have had an international success. The slave narratives are written in the first person, and they typically tell the story of a slave who obtains freedom from chattel life. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* are examples of such texts. African Americans

wrote these personal stories, but often they were edited by white publishers to serve the abolitionist cause better. Even though the intended white reader did not share any of the “cultural or moral concerns” of the fugitive slave narrator, he or she had to write in a certain way to convince people to contribute to the abolitionist battle against slavery (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave-Narratives* 118). To get the message through to the intended reader, the black storyteller had to consider that he was writing for a white audience through the way in which the story was composed. Consequently, Rushdy’s assertion, that “a black narrator needs a white reader to complete his text” (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 119), becomes meaningful. These narratives would be more efficient by focusing on the institution of slavery at the expense of the slave subject itself. Examples of such narratives include *Equiano’s Travels* and Charles Bell’s *Life and Adventures of a Fugitive Slave*. According to Morrison, both of these works have been praised by critics and editors for their objectivity and refusal to be “inflammatory” (“The Site of Memory” 87-88).

However, there are exceptions to such subject-less slave narratives. Frederick Douglass is especially known for demanding ownership of his own story. He emphasises in his narrative that the reader will not fully be able to understand the slave experience (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 129). Nevertheless, also in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by himself*, there are prefaces and introductions written by white contributors to validate the content of his testimony, and according to Christian Moraru, Ishmael Reed was even of the opinion that “African Americans such as Douglass did not destroy the hegemonic master narrative” (Hogue 258).

Also, white American fiction writers wrote about chattel slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe and her famous *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is one example. In contradiction to the slave narratives written by the former black slaves, this novel depicts a more stereotypical picture of the slaves. Reed, Butler, and Morrison contradict this stereotypical depiction, and Beecher Stowe’s presentation of the slave as docile, naïve, and pious is, in particular, an issue in Reed’s *Flight to Canada*.

Some narratives concerning slavery and the aftermath of slavery were also written throughout the 19th century, but they were fewer, and mainly written for documentary purposes. However, after the Civil Rights movement’s demand for black peoples’ rights in the 1960s, neo-slave narratives were published in the 1970s and ‘80s, and these narratives presented a rather distinct shift in the form from the

classical slave narrative (Gates Jr. & McKay, "Literature since 1975" 2130). After the end of slavery, African Americans experienced almost a century of strict segregation laws (Jim Crow). Only after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and its fight for equality between whites and African Americans, African Americans gradually obtained better opportunities within American society.

However, as far as African Americans experienced the situation, their African history and African American slave history were still presented in a biased and Eurocentric way. Consequently, African Americans became increasingly aware of the need for self-representation, in history as well as in storytelling (Gates Jr. & McKay, "Literature since 1975" 2130/Tyson 347). Through their re-visiting and re-envisioning of the slave narrative Reed, Butler, and Morrison get the possibility to situate themselves in a tradition of African American writing. This is important for them, and they use this possibility as a resource. The writers were mainly pioneering this kind of writing, and due to their experimentation with the first-person point of view offered by slave narrators, they created what was eventually called neo-slave narratives. Within these narratives, they wanted to share subjective stories that would stand forth as collective ones, and within these narratives, there should be room for exploring the tradition of African American writing. Despite depicting antebellum slavery rather differently from the original slave narratives, those were often the inspiration for their writing, and we find traces of them in all the novels I will discuss. This is also the reason why I have described the traditional slave narrative as thoroughly as I have. In my analysis, it feels natural to occasionally refer to the traditional slave narrative to better understand the experimentalism embodied within the neo-slave narratives.

Flight to Canada, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* are all neo-slave narratives. In my thesis, I claim that these neo-slave narratives due to their experimental writing, manage to display a depiction of the African American slave as complete and complex individuals. I want to discuss to which extent the disruption of genre and the experimental playing with form, style and content affect how the reader perceives the African American slave. The text will additionally explore to which extent this type of writing aids in depicting compound slave witnesses with agency and power, and it will be essential for my thesis to investigate to which extent the experimental writing manages to create a relationship between the atrocities of antebellum slavery and contemporary race issues in America.

According to professor and critic Ashraf Rushdy, neo-slave narratives are “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). The term was originally thought to be coined by Bernard Bell in 1987, but the concept has evolved since then. There are neo-slave narratives that were written as early as the 1930s (Newman 4), but mainly they belong to the two decades following the 1960s Civil Rights movement. According to Rushdy, this neo-slave narrative wanted to see history that was made from “the bottom up”, and because of that, there was a new approval of the slave testimony as an important source for validating truth. The slave culture in itself became significant, and there was also a revised view of slave resistance (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4).

The novels I have selected to write about are identifiable as “postmodernist” in one way or another. They are intensely concerned with history, they embrace disruption of genre and genre hybridity, and they are otherwise stylistically and technically innovative in various ways. However, I will stress that even though I consider experimental writing within my selection of neo-slave narratives to be connected to postmodernism, this does not mean that experimental writing does not appear in other literary traditions as well. Many of the postmodern techniques were for example also employed by modernist writers, and as Henry Louis Gates Jr. claims,

[a]ll [writers of the 1970s] were as innovatively experimental as other Black Arts writers in their construction of hybrid genres, mythic landscapes, vernacular styles, and revised genealogies of the Americas, believing that a *sui generis* black energy gifted them with unique vocational and practical obligations as artists. (Gates Jr. & McKay, “The Black Arts Era” 1849)

Literary components within my analysis that would typically be associated with postmodern literature are irony and black humour, fragmentation, fabulation, pastiche (blank parody), historiographic metafiction, magical realism, hyperreality, and involvement of the reader (Vajić 201-202). To this cluster, I want to add hybridization, disruption of linearity, intertextuality, multivocality, and meta-fiction as literary techniques I will explore, which are often associated with postmodern writing.

For all the texts I have close read I find it important to discuss the significance of fragmentation, hybridization, disruption of time and space, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction, magical realism, and multivocality. Additionally, hyperreality, irony/parody, and black humour will be of particular importance in my approach to *Flight to Canada*, whereas the involvement of the reader will have some extra focus in my discussion about *Beloved*. The way in which the author and narrator take part in the story themselves is also prominent in *Flight to Canada* and *Kindred*, and this issue of meta-fiction is indispensable within the discussion of the novels.

One essential type of fragmentation within the analysed novels is connected to pluralism and multivocality. The poststructuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard claimed that the grand narrative was gone, and the objective truth with it. Now it was time for pluralism and multivocality (C. Butler 60). Instead of representing one objective truth, the different novels I discuss expose the readers to a multitude of micro-narratives and subjective truths. Due to the heteroglossia of voices and subjective truths, the readers will be challenged as to which one they should believe in (Raja, "What is Postmodernism" 00:41:28-00:41:36), or if this heteroglossia of voices is what contributes to a more complete narrative of the slave story. This is also an issue that I will explore. As mentioned, Rushdy emphasises the importance of rendering the first-person voice of the antebellum slave in the production of a neo-slave narrative. However, that is not to say that all such narratives have to be consistent in their use of the first-person voice, but that the creators of such stories have a particular focus on this voice. Often this happens in a process where the author undermines the coherent subject of narration by creating a series of other voices that might both supplement and subvert the voice of the "original" narrator (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 231). In my analysis, I will address and investigate the use of these voices. Like many traditional slave narratives, neo-slave narrators have a special focus on the significance of the community inhabited by the slaves, and according to Rushdy, it is the particular play with voices that shows the reader how the neo-slave novelist transforms the individual subject into an intersubjective project (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 231). This experimental way of creating a communal focal point is something I will explore.

Additionally, the multitude of voices within the selected novels is strongly connected to African American traditions of church worship, and African religious

practices, too. These aspects are particularly present in *Flight to Canada* and *Beloved*. In my exploration of *Flight to Canada*, I want to discuss how Ishmael Reed uses ancient African traditions of Vodoun to challenge the monotheistic Christian beliefs and ideology that ruled WASP America in the 19th century. The particular religion Reed supported he coined Neo-HooDooism. Since this is a particular kind of religion, created by Reed himself, I will add some information about the concept.

The term Neo-HooDooism has its origin in African Voodoo. This is a religion which is connected to poor and uneducated people. Often the devotees are illiterate (Lock 67). In Voodoo one believes that loas, spirits that come from diseased deities, come into the contemporary world where they possess a devotee (Lock 68). Helen Lock observes that the religion developed further in Haiti when slaves were sent there. Here it was mixed up with Catholicism, where saints were interpreted as pictures of the loa. The Voodooists used the Catholic icons for their own purpose (Lock 69).

When slaves were brought into the US, Voodoo was turned into HooDoo, and eventually, the author Ishmael Reed coined the term Neo-HooDooism through his exploration of the aesthetic side of Voodoo and his adaption of the Voodoo culture to fit a North American culture. The power of the spirits is connected to literary terms instead of visual art. Reed uses his own deconstructive approach to achieve this by revitalising the independence of the sign. Lock discusses how there is a disruption between the sign and the signified, where the word (sign) is disconnected from the referent (69-70). In such a way “words themselves become instruments of power and control, and control over language becomes control over identity” (Lock 69).

How the writing in itself can be turned into a weapon in the struggle for freedom and identity-making will be important when exploring Reed's work, but the Vodoun aspect will also be relevant in the analysis of *Beloved*. However, in Morrison's work, the analytic focus is on identifying how Morrison is trying to connect African traditions and religions with existing Christian beliefs and practices in the US. I also want to investigate how she draws on the African and African American oral tradition of storytelling and religious worshipping already within African American literary history.

In *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, the authors Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle say that one should not think of postmodernism as a term of periodization. Instead, they focus on how postmodernism challenges us in our

thinking about time, and how it “challenges us to see the present in the past, the future in the present, the present in a kind of no-time” (325). Both Reed, Butler, and Morrison defy traditional narratology, for example, in their unconventional approaches to chronology, and in their concept of time and space. Partly because of this revision of the form of the narrative, it became possible for the neo-slave novelists to demonstrate the sort of identities needed to preserve African American traditions (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 17). All the novels compose unique fantastic hybrid novels that weaken a traditional understanding of linearity and the distinctions between past and present (Anim-Addo & Lima 9), whether it is through a broken chronology caused by flashbacks and historical anachronisms as in *Flight to Canada*, or through a more holistic perception of time and space, like in *Kindred* and *Beloved*. I will try to show how this alternative way of perceiving time and space within the studied novels may give the reader a better understanding of the African American slave history. Additionally, I will try to depict how these novels bridge history with present conditions within the USA. The alternative perception of time and space challenges the traditional realist composition of a chronological story, and the concept of genre hybridity helps create fictional work that can connect the antebellum past with contemporary America.

This concept of creating hybridized narratives is supported by critics who believe in an alternative way of approaching genre theory. One such critic is John Frow, and his approach to the concept of “genre” will be important to this part of the discussion. According to Frow, “genre” has no essence (145). He distances himself from the more classic taxonomic model, often referred to as the Aristotelian model, where “genre” is considered to work as a coherent table of features in which one can organise different texts (Frow 58). He supports the idea that a “genre” works as an accidentally organised and shifting hierarchy (Frow 78), and he finds support for his assertions in the American director Robert Altman who says that “they [genres] may at any time be crossed with any genre that ever existed” (Frow 58).

Frow emphasises the dynamic nature of textuality, and according to Anne Freadman and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, genre classification becomes a way of illustrating the possible purposes any given text may have. The use values of the different texts are essential. Since these are multiple, genre classification will remain unstable and unpredictable (Frow 26). Frow also finds support in Jacques Derrida, Friedrich Schlegel, and Thomas Keenan. Derrida’s “The Law of Genre” stresses the

impossibility of not mixing genres, Schlegel asserts that “every work is its own genre” (Frow 28), and Keenan says that logic has nothing to do with aesthetics, and by being there it would kill the aesthetic expression (Frow 29). However, Frow admits that we always meet a new text based on previous experiences and that every text requires certain kinds of knowledge. This knowledge is mostly what we recognise as cultural (Frow 88). These contemplations made by Frow are areas that will be important in my close reading. The neo-slave narratives were published a century and more after the abolition of slavery. The cultural knowledge has changed enormously since the atrocities occurred. However, the legacy of slavery is still visible in American society through racism and race issues (Gates Jr. & McKay, “Literature since 1975” 2131/Tyson 351). To show this connection from the past with the present I will discuss how different kinds of hybridization within the selected novels support this purpose.

The way Frow talks about genre he considers it to exist as a part of the relationship between the texts and the readers (112). He emphasises how the paratext of a book (the author’s name, title, etc.), makes us read the story in a specific way. Frow refers to such paratext as the story’s frame, and he says that such frames “work to define the text against those things which it is not” (115), and he asserts that we can recognise a genre “because we are at some level aware of other genres that it is not” (135). This knowledge is something Reed, Butler, and Morrison take into consideration in the making of their different novels. For Frow, such genres are created through the activity of reading (150). However, the new genres do not appear from nowhere. According to structuralist Tzvetan Todorov, they came from other genres, and they were created due to the rise of new framing conditions (Frow 151). This will be interesting to relate to my discussion. For example, I will consider how important it is for readers to distinguish the neo-slave narrative from the original slave narrative to make the hybridized novel function according to its purpose. In this discussion, it will be important to remember that in this interposition between social and textual structure, the genres are sustained by different institutions in society. Consequently, as Frow says, “[c]ritical engagement with genre is central to critical examination of our culture and our social world” (167).

Another critic who is aware of these factors is Rushdy. He is particularly concerned with the importance of the white hegemony under which literary works are produced (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 8), and since *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*,

and *Beloved* belong to a completely different socio-political era than did the original slave narrative, it is important to have this in mind when approaching the texts. Whereas the traditional slave narrative had to submit to the appropriation of the white abolitionist reader, post-civil rights writers of the 1970s and 1980s could much more readily “speak” for themselves. In William Cain’s review of the critic Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*, he addresses Gates Jr.’s focus on the importance of a complex inter-textual relationship between texts written within the African American context (Cain 657). According to Rushdy, “[t]o read intertextually is to discern how a given text creatively alludes to and probably rewrites a predecessor text” (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 14). The way of seeing this was through paying attention to the dialogic discourse between the different texts.

The term *intertextuality* was coined by the critic Julia Kristeva, and according to her visions, the idea was supposed to support “an anticolonialist resistance to the concept of hegemonic influence” (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 15). She was particularly concerned about how intertextuality allows the reader to see how social forces state relationships both between and within texts (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 15). What this means is that intertextuality is more than allusions to another specific text. According to Rushdy, such narratives

are engaged in dialogue not only with specific literary texts, but with an ethos; not just with another novel, but with the discursive formation from which another novel emerged. (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 17)

All the texts I have close read for this thesis have strong relations to other narratives, their ethos, and discursive formation. In my analysis of *Flight to Canada*, it will be important to investigate how allusions to other texts and genres enforce Reed’s experimental writing. In all of the texts, it will be important for me to discuss what happens to the different novels when this intertextuality leads to hybridization. All the texts are more or less hybridized, and I will try to show how this conflation of genres gives the stories and their characters extra power, and how this reworking of the text can suit a modern audience.

At school, we all learn about history and the important distinction between fact and fiction when referring to events of the past. However, according to the

postmodern philosopher of history Hayden White and his research about the relativism of history,

historical narratives [...] are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. (82)

White observes how the historian adds sense to the story by presenting it to the reader in a specific form and how this affects the reader's perception and understanding of the story (86). To visualise what he means, White compares the painters Cezanne and Constable and says that we would never expect their representation of landscape to be identical (46). Just as painters will observe nature according to cultural and ideological influences, the way in which people, authors, or historians interpret history is coloured by their social conditions and their personal experiences. As White so nicely puts it in *Tropics of Discourse*: "They [the historians / the storytellers] sought out different kinds of facts because they had different kinds of stories to tell" (85). Such a way of regarding history supports Lyotard's focus on multivocality within the narrative. In contradiction to the grand narrative, where narrative plots would somehow be coloured by a superior ideology, there would now be more room for supporting historical events through personal testimonies, and we are met by a multitude of narrated testimonies within the studied novels.

Within the modernist tradition, fictional texts might be used to condemn injustice fronted by racist Enlightenment ideas, but whereas modernist texts, according to Christopher Butler used to "play fair" in their references to a historically possible world, the postmodernists would have no problems as to blend historical events with pure fiction in their attempts to address the injustice (70). This new way of approaching genre makes it easier for the authors to experiment with form, and it makes it easier for them to consider the borders of what is fact and what is fiction by presenting a hybridized world where the boundaries between events of the real world can appear as a literary device within fictional realities. My discussion will show how Reed, Butler, and Morrison are willing to blend fantasy, science fiction, and the supernatural with realism in their neo-slave narratives.

Other critics who are concerned about the presentation of history within literature are Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. Jameson is highly critical of the

historical situation of the '70s and '80s, and he asserts that the modern man has lost “[his] connection to history” (Felluga 1st paragraph). According to Dino Felluga, Jameson claims that “postmodernity has transformed the historical past into a series of emptied-out stylizations” (1st paragraph). He asserts that one can only connect to the past through making fun of it or through nostalgia. In art, pastiche can show such nostalgia. In his essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, Jameson asserts that

[p]astiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. (1761)

Hutcheon challenges Jameson in this view and argues that postmodern theory opens new ways of presenting history through how she problematises the relationship between the signifier and its signified (*A Poetics* 119). She claims that fiction uses history, but the fictional narratives make us see this history differently since this is history being worked upon (Raja, “What is Postmodernism” 00:15:15-00:15:55), something she refers to as “historiographic metafiction” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 119).

Flight to Canada, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* all use the experimental techniques presented above. Consequently, the form of the novel might be just as important as the plot, and the form adds dimension to the story. The plots are mainly presented according to how the authors choose to compose their literary work. In the neo-slave narratives, the novelists typically invite themselves into the story through the methodology of meta-fiction, or they use their own experiences as a springboard to their story. To get to tell their version of antebellum slavery, they distance themselves from the traditional linear story within the realist tradition. Through historical anachronisms and references to the African circular conception of time, Reed, Butler, and Morrison present fictional slave stories, and within these stories, experimental elements like time travel, ghosts, and Neo-Hoodooism are dominating components. In addition, the novels present an abundance of subjective testimonies, and this heteroglossia of voices represents a multitude of stories and memories that try to present an alternative slave narrative. Mainly, we meet the characters through the

lenses of black African Americans, and the focus on oral storytelling and written storytelling is also an issue.

Of the three novels, *Flight to Canada* was the first to be published, and in the interest of order, I choose to present the analysis of the novels in the same order they were published. Chapters 1,2 and 3 will treat these novels individually. Chapter 4 will offer a comparative analysis.

Chapter 1 A close reading of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976)

1.1 A summary

Flight to Canada is a parodic neo-slave narrative about the fugitive slave, Raven Quickskill who escapes the Swille plantation to run for freedom in Canada. Quickskill is a poet, and due to his artistic qualities, he is able to free himself from slavery, but his writing comes at a cost. In addition to the protagonist, other important characters are the house slaves Uncle Robin and Mammy Barracuda, the runaway slaves Stray Leechfield and 40s, the plantation owner Arthur Swille, his mulatto son Cato, and the native princess Qwaw Qwaw Tralaralara. Apart from the plantation owner, his mulatto son Cato, and Mammy Barracuda, all the characters try to free themselves from oppressive systems caused by a white hegemony, whereas Arthur Swille romanticises the situation through his belief in white man's superiority, and Barracuda supports this Judeo-Christian worldview.

1.2 Using fiction to present another version of history

Traditional slave narratives are written within a tradition that considered Eurocentric humanism and history as objective truths. Such a conviction is challenged in the neo-slave narratives. These novels can be considered open works, as is the case with many texts connected to postmodernism (Harris 459). As mentioned in the introduction, Lyotard considers the grand narrative to be gone, and postmodernism rejects grand objective truths. Additionally, as mentioned in the introduction, White is important to consider in the discussion of the reliability of history. In *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* C. Butler observes how White claims that historians cannot tell us how things were or are because of how historical narratives are “verbal fictions” (33). C. Butler supports White's conviction about how the content of these narratives are as much “invented as found”, and how he considers “the form to have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (C. Butler 33).

In a conversation with Ewa Domanska, White emphasises the difference between fact and event. With the support of Arthur C. Danto, he asserts that a fact is a discursive phenomenon and that facts are events under a description (Domanska 5). Such a way of contemplating history opens new ways of presenting events to people, and according to Bakhtar Sajadi, *Flight to Canada* offers a fabricated history of the American Civil War which presents a counter-history (23). In this narration of history, Reed focuses on the history of African Americans. Just like White challenges the traditional approach to history as meagre and positivistic (Sajadi 23), Reed challenges and plays with the traditional slave narrative. The traditional slave narratives told one truth, but very much in the spirit of the Judeo-Christian abolitionists, whereas Reed presents another story. Maybe it is not truer, but it is a story that is giving the slaves back their identity. According to Barbara Foley, he “molds the interpretations that we commonly accept as truth” (Davis 744), and Matthew Davis states how important such a “revisionary” move is for the reader in understanding the historical and social dynamics of the story (744-745). Through this “parasitisation” of the slave narrative genre, *Flight to Canada* subverts it as any other so-called “master narrative” and through his writing, he brings back to life the silenced voices of the slaves in another way than did the traditional slave narrative. By hearing and acknowledging these silenced voices, *Flight to Canada* contributes to a new narration of identity (Sajadi 29).

For Reed, it is important to create room for the African American slave as an important contributor to American history. Simultaneously, it is important to show how slavery still affects contemporary America. By combining postmodern techniques and the African circular conception of time, Reed nicely blends the past and the present by rupturing the classical chronological plot with the help of historical anachronisms, which is a form of back-timing. By interrupting the linear perception of time, it also becomes easier for Reed to satirise historical persons and happenings. Using the phone before it was invented, Uncle Robin can easily just “hang up” on Stowe’s proposal of writing (stealing), his story (Reed, *Flight* 160). In addition, the suggestion of letting Edgar Allan Poe write the story seems natural, although he was dead at the time of the Civil War. Besides, mixing up Kennedy’s and Lincoln’s deaths by showing it on television, also makes the reader see the link between the antebellum and contemporary times more easily.

In addition to interrupting the linearity of the traditional slave narrative, Glen Harris claims that historical anachronisms also break down any kind of normality (470). The plot is set during and right after the Civil War, and Reed introduces the reader to historical characters and events, but simultaneously the slaves use telephones, travel by jumbo jets, watch TV, and employ current idioms. It is obvious to the reader that such incidents could not really take place. Nevertheless, this play with the conception of existence is effective. Through fiddling with a traditional perception of reality, Reed manages to use the form of the novel to make the reader review his consideration of slavery in contemporary America.

Reed's manipulation of reality is clear, but what is reality, and what is fiction? The postmodern sociologist and philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, explores such questions in his philosophical work "From the Presence of Simulacra". He indicates that we live in a hyperreal world where we are not able to perceive the real thing from its mere copy and that this way of perceiving the world is caused by the innovation of advanced technology, and a heavily media-focused society (Bennet & Royle 330). In *Flight to Canada*, it is in some ways such a world Reed presents to the reader, and on several occasions within the story, the narrator, Raven, or Reed (we can never be sure who is who) reflects upon questions like these. At the very beginning of the novel, Raven considers the reliability of history when he wonders "[w]ho is to say what is fact and what is fiction?" (Reed, *Flight* 6), and when asking why "Edgar Allan Poe [isn't] recognized as the principal biographer of that strange war [the Civil War]" (Reed, *Flight* 9), he continues to reflect upon history by questioning "[w]here does fact begin and fiction leave off?" (Reed, *Flight* 9).

Through a technique of mixing real events with fictional presentations, Reed distances himself and his story from so-called scientific history. According to White, such history, where "there is an ultimate transcendental historical truth outside the realm of language does not exist" (Sajadi 25). Historical meaning is always "invented" or "imagined", and according to Hutcheon, written history will always exist within culturally determined power structures (Sajadi 26). Consequently, the meaning will not be in the event, but in the narrative that transforms past events into historical facts (Hutcheon, "Postmodernism" 122). Reed exaggerates as part of his deconstruction of traditional ways of contemplating antebellum slavery, but at the same time, he manages to present a version of history where power is presented

from “the bottom up”, in contrast to the traditional history conveyed by white hegemony.

1.3 A hybrid genre with hybrid characters that give agency and voice to “the other”

Flight to Canada is often referred to as satire, and what the narrative satirises is the form in which the traditional slave narrative is presented. To construct his reactionary type of neo-slave narrative, Reed borrows several elements from traditional writing. However, his novel’s purpose differs from that of the traditional slave narrative. By playing with the original slave narrative, he tries to convey a complexity and agency within the African American culture that had not formerly been appreciated sufficiently.

Neo-slave authors wrote within a tradition where genre-hybridity became a common way to express a reaction towards the epistemology of the grand narrative and its objective truths. Reed even chooses to include a protagonist inspired by this idea:

He [Raven] was so much against slavery that he had begun to include prose and poetry in the same book so that there would be no arbitrary boundaries between them. (*Flight* 81)

In addition, the novel itself has a blissful mixture of generic elements. There are strong features of Gothic storytelling that strengthen the rather bizarre plot through the power balance the ghosts contribute to the narrative. This postmodern way of mixing genres within the same narrative may express a reaction to the traditional way of perceiving the slave as an inferior human being. According to Frow’s thoughts on genre theory, such hybrid expression appears as the natural form (28). The fluidity between the genres contradicts the traditional Aristotelian taxonomy supported by the Eurocentric humanists, and consequently, it disturbs the traditional attitudes about an objective, monolithic, Christian perception of truth. Opening the novel, the reader is met by the poem “Flight to Canada” (Reed, *Flight* 3). This piece of lyric is presented

as an epigraph. In the traditional slave narrative, the paratext is an important part of the narrative itself. Before the reader starts absorbing the freed slave's personal story, he is presented with an introduction, or a poem, written by some white abolitionist. This is meant to strengthen the former slave's narrative. However, this is not the reason why Reed implements the poem. His poem shows how the slave is in charge of liberating himself through **his own** writing. According to Rushdy, Reed wants to represent slavery "from the other side of the whip" ("Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo" 115). Instead of help offered by white abolitionists, he finds support in HooDoo. Reed's fictive analogen, Raven, thinks of his writing as his loa (spiritual god), and as a result, the story becomes dangerous to people trying to steal it.

Throughout the 19th century, slave narratives were either edited by white abolitionists, or they were written by white people. In their strive for abolition of the slave system, these people did not care too much about the value and agency of the African American slave. Mostly, the slave voice had been silenced or coloured by white abolitionists' impact on the story. It is especially one novel that Reed attacks through his satirical writing. This is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to Rushdy, Raven asserts that Stowe stole this story from the slave Josiah Henson ("Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo" 115). In other words, she had stolen his voice, something the narrator scorns. By imposing magic on the words, it will no longer be possible to commit such theft, and anybody who tries will have to pay: "*Harriet paid. Oh yes, Harriet paid. When you take a man's story, a story that doesn't belong to you, that story will get you*" (Reed, *Flight* 7).

In addition to attacking the slave narrative's absence of the slave voice through all its funny elements, Reed also employs a satirist way of playing with the literary voice. The speaker, here Raven, and his discourse are oriented towards isolated utterances by different, individual persons. These single utterances will then be generalised to represent whole unities of people. Lincoln, for example, refuses to accept the possibility of Uncle Robin stealing the bag of money due to his appearance of being a "[p]oor submissive creature" (Reed, *Flight* 46). Through this exclamation, he conveys a common WASP American perception of the slaves as inferior creatures

Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin refers to such a narrative as "double-voiced", and this kind of narrative suits the Neo-HooDoo tradition perfectly with all its different spirits operating at all odd times. In this double-voiced discourse, the characters and

the author have different intentions through what they say (Bakhtin 324, 355-356). While the character, Lincoln, has a more direct intention, the author and narrator, Reed, and Raven have a more refracted one. Nevertheless, the two voices are dialogically interrelated and subsequently appear as this parodic discourse, where the slaves' experience of the situation stands forth as the more important. The same goes for Raven and Robin. Reed never distinguishes between the two narratives they represent: that of the runaway and that of the submissive servant. However, the double voice they represent together strengthens Reed's message concerning the African American and his right to identity and personal history.

According to Frow, textuality is dynamic, and because of this genre classification will remain unstable (26). Consequently, the characters may inhabit different use values, and in *Flight to Canada*, such use values may be connected to the naming of the different characters. There are many names in the novel. Some of them we know from traditional history, such as Lincoln, Wells Brown, Douglass, and Beecher Stowe. Others, like Quaw Quaw Tralaralara, Leechfield, and 40s, sound more bizarre, and then there are such names as Robin and Judith that the reader finds more familiar. One reason why Reed gives the slaves such different names might be to show us diversity amongst the black community within antebellum slavery. Leechfield, Robin, Raven, 40's, and Pompey all belong to the Swille plantation, but contradictory to white hegemony's perception of the slave being docile, narrowminded, naïve, unintelligent jumbos who only saw their saviour in the Christian God, Reed's characters come in all shapes, and just like people in general, they should be perceived as complex individuals with distinct qualities.

Leechfield uses any opportunity to break the plantation rules when living there, but after fleeing, he ends up selling himself to pornography and sadist customers who want to use him as "[Their] Slave for One Day" (Reed, *Flight* 73). Leechfield thus "ends up making money on making pornographic blackface pictures and using his former experiences as a slave to make money" (Lindland, "A discussion on satire"). According to Christine Levecq, Leechfield represents a pastiche of sadomasochism the novel associates with the South (291). The other runaway, 40's, turns into a black nationalist, defending himself with arms while developing a xenophobic view towards all other races than the black one (Reed, *Flight* 71). He, like the black power movement in the 1960s, has adopted the view of the white oppressor, where some races are superior to others. This is a solution that Reed cannot support. None of

these characters have grasped the important fact of freedom being “a state of mind” (Reed, *Flight* 163). This fact is something both Robin and eventually Raven take seriously. These two characters are again considerably different from Leechfield and 40s. They are both trickster characters. It’s no coincidence that both names begin with an “R”. Raven is hired by Robin to write his story. At the same time Reed, having another name starting with “R”, is writing the book. In the first chapter, it is hard for the reader to see who is actually telling the story. Who is the “I” in “[I]ittle did I know when I wrote the poem [...]” (Reed, *Flight* 6). Is it Reed or is it Raven? Accordingly, the reader might be confused about who is who when Raven is writing Robin’s story. Through these confluences of voices, and who is the writer versus the characters, Reed contributes to showing the reader the importance of multivocality in the representation of history. As well as Frow asserts that “genre” has no essence (145), Reed claims that African Americans are just as diverse as all other people. They all have their strengths and weaknesses.

Both Raven and his poem “Flight to Canada” stand forth as trickster elements. This text became an important tool on his way to freedom, but its literary content also made it possible for the slave catchers to trace him down. According to Bradley John Monsma, “[w]hat he writes figuratively, the slave catchers read literally. Thus, for Quickskill, the relationship between freedom and literacy becomes problematic” (87). As a consequence, Raven starts wondering about the distinction between fact and fiction. He considers whether it is all a question of interpretation: “Little did I know when I wrote the poem “Flight to Canada” that there were so many secrets locked inside its world. It was more of a reading than a writing” (Reed, *Flight* 6).

Just as Raven and his poem stand forth as trickster elements, it is no secret that Uncle Robin is wearing a mask. In Mr. Swille’s and Lincoln’s presence, he plays the role of “the poor submissive soul” (Reed, *Flight* 46), but this smart character demarcates a secure future at the plantation through his cunning behaviour. In the presence of the white hegemony, he simulates to embody the kind of essence given to the slaves by their white owners, but this is all trickery. According to Baudrillard’s reasoning, Robin feigns qualities he does not have, and consequently opens up for questioning what is “true” and what is “false” (Baudrillard 1484), and thus supports Raven’s/Reed’s reflections upon what is fact and what is fiction, or whether it is more a question of interpretation. Another academic who supports this kind of hybrid description of Uncle Robin is Michael A. Chaney. He finds support in Donna

Harraway's theory about cyborgs when characterising Uncle Robin as "an amalgamation of man and computer (265). In the article "Slave Cyborgs and the Black Infection: Ishmael Reed's Cybernetic Aesthetics", Chaney writes the following about Uncle Robin:

Central to Robin's cyborg transformation is the problem of decoding information. Since the master, Arthur Swille, cannot effectually re-organize the code of language, Robin takes over the job for him. In the process, he becomes Swille's "reading and writing" and literally embodies both the master's text and the machinery for processing such a text. (Chaney 266)

In his article, Chaney asserts that both Robin and Raven are portrayed as post-slaves that embody the "material substrate carrying information" (271). They have been transmuted into intelligent machines through information processing and reconfigured as a poem (Raven) and a computer (Robin) respectively. Thus, they "have become the very information that they were meant only to construct" (Chaney 271).

As mentioned, Reed is parodying the traditional slave narrative. Simultaneously, through intertextuality, he refers to two of the most famous contributors within the genre, Frederick Douglass, and William Wells Brown. Of these two authors Reed chooses to give attention to the latter. This might have to do with Douglass's and Brown's different beliefs in Hoodoo. Whereas Wells Brown embraced the tradition, Douglass distanced himself from such superstition. He shows this in his famous book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. When he beats the slavedriver, Mr Convey, he gives more credit to himself and his powers than to the magic root given to him by Sandy Jenkins (Douglass 79).

According to Davis, Wells Brown was more similar to Reed in the appropriation of ancestral religion within storytelling (244). When meeting on the Lake Erie steamer, suitably called *The North America*, Raven admits that his poem "Flight to Canada" was inspired by his writing:

I...well, my poem "Flight to Canada" is going to be published in *Beulahland Review*. It kind of imitates your style, though I'm sure the critics are going to give me some kind of white master. (Reed, *Flight* 112)

According to Davis, both authors give credit to trickster characters, and when Reed introduces the supernatural character, Pompey, into the story, he borrows him from Wells Brown's *My Southern Home*, where the author chooses to refer to his own experiences through the persona, Pompey, a trickster used to cheat a free man into taking a whipping for him (Davis 252). Through signifying, Reed more or less imitates Wells Brown's theme, styles, and characters. Consequently, he manages to show how ancient African traditions are crucial within African American literature, and how African American writing deserves a place in American (literary) history.

Swille is a fictional character, and he represents white hegemony at its worst. He might not be as evil and brutal as many of the slaveowners portrayed in traditional slave narratives, but he strongly believes in his superiority to the slave, "the other", through his white, European ancestry. He even shares his first name with King Arthur. Swille is a strong believer in thoughts presented in the Age of Scientific Racism and its philosophy of slaves' inability of intelligence that Morrison talks about in "The Site of Memory" (89). To show how sadistic and inhuman this character is, Reed borrows themes from the famous Gothic writer, Edgar Allan Poe. *Flight to Canada* is full of references to different works written by him, for example, "Annabel Lee", "Berenice", "Ligeia", "The Fall of the House of Usher", "Premature Burial", "The Masque of the Red Death", and others (Moraru 104). According to Christian Moraru,

all those [literary works] fulfill more than a mere "bookish" function. The particular ways in which Reed "fools around" with Poe's texts bring out from those pieces meanings that have eluded professional historians. (104)

Within *Flight to Canada* Reed asserts that "Poe says more in a few stories than all of the volumes by historians" (Reed, *Flight* 9), and Reed insinuates that Poe's stories have somehow become superior to history as a discourse (Moraru 104). Hence, when Swille is caught in having intimate relations with his dead sister, Vivian, the

story conveys more than initiating an incestuous relationship. Moraru observes how this incident explicitly evokes “Annabell Lee” (109).

The event in itself might be an example of necromancy. This is a practice that has its origins in both Voodoo and Hoodoo:

Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writer lies on the guts of old America, making reading about the future. (qtd. in Davis 745)

Consequently, one can say that the references to Swille and his eccentric and sadist behaviour mirror how the past impacts the future and in such a manner elicit how antebellum slavery affects modern American society. However, we must remember that Raven ties up this more negative view of history with this ancient way of writing as a power given to “the other”, here represented through the African American narrator, Raven.

1.4 Genealogy presented through Neo-Hoodooism

As mentioned, Reed chooses to return to the original slave narrative in his attempt to hand back the historical voice and identity to the African American slaves, but “Reed refused to remain a slave to his own narrative” (qtd. in Davis 743). To avoid this, he breaks with the African American discursive tradition of the linear narrative where the narrator’s purpose is to evoke empathy within the white reader to increase interest in the abolitionist cause. Instead, Reed presents slavery in the form of a Neo-Hoodoo slave narrative filled with historical anachronisms that blur the conception of time. In such narratives the significance of ancestry is notable, and the relationship to ancestral roots is portrayed through the appearance of traditional gods, called loas.

According to Pierre-Damien Mvuyekure, the writing style has its origins in ancient African American oral tradition (203), but the entire tradition can be traced back to Voudon-based religious systems in Africa and Haiti. Rushdy observes how

Reed especially uses this literary mode to satirise and attack all kinds of “monisms” (“Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo” 113). All in all, Neo-HooDooism encompasses Reed’s principles concerning religion, his political motives, and his artistic expression (Rushdy, “Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo” 114).

As mentioned earlier, Reed’s protagonist, Raven, wants to represent slavery from “the other side of the whip” (Rushdy, “Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo” 115). He wants to show us another history than the one we can look up in history books and on the computers, and Quickskill nicely illustrates such thoughts through a heated dispute with Quaw Quaw and Jack on Yankee Jack’s yacht:

’ Revisionists. Quantitative historians. What does a computer know? Can a computer feel? Make love? Can a computer feel passion?’ Quickskill tears off his shirt. ‘Look at those scars. Look at them! All you see is their fruit, but their roots run deep. The roots are in my soul. What does a fucking computer know about that?’ (Reed, Flight 138)

According to Rushdy, Reed offers the reader a parody of the slave narratives as they used to be read, to emphasise how they can be read (“Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo” 115). Reed wants the reader to know how the slaves visualised themselves and their situation during slavery, and how they fought for their freedom and identity. According to Rushdy’s observations, this can only happen if the black African is in control of his own story. He has to possess it (Rushdy, “Ishmael Reed’s Neo-HooDoo” 124), and Lawrence Hogue supports such a view by referring to Joseph Schopp’s statement that “Reed wants to create a space for his excluded/repressed Hoodoo/trickster slave narrative to achieve presence and agency, “to become aware of its power”” (255).

Hogue claims that this is possible by turning to African American and Native American traditions where both Haitian Voodoo, southern conjure, ancient Egyptian mythology, and trickery are of huge importance. Hogue states that these traditions offer different logic, rules, and values than the traditional white American hegemony (255), and he asserts that trickster characters who stay true to the spirits of the Voodoo/HooDoo ancestors can embody wisdom and power which make them able to openly defy their masters and reclaim their history (Hogue 262).

In *Flight to Canada* both Raven, Robin, and Leechfield represent such trickster characters. According to Hogue, only trickster characters who are spiritually and emotionally connected to Voodoo manage to escape the limited power of the traditional slave. They are able to escape the master narrative because they do not embody the docile and servile qualities that did the slaves accepting the Judeo-Christian Enlightenment narrative. Neither will their identity so easily be pinned down since Voodoo has turned them into complex beings (Hogue 264). Amongst these, Uncle Robin might be the trickster who best fools his white master. Uncle Robin never leaves the Swille plantation, but through mimicking the stereotypical, black, narrowminded domestic servant, he manages to play his game well. Like all real tricksters, Robin has “a thirst for pagan ways” (Reed, *Flight* 32). He disregards the monotheistic Christian “cult”, and welcomes the traditional, Vodoun gods. He says to his wife, Aunt Judy:

When we came here, our gods came with us. They'll never go away. No slave master can make them go away. They won't budge from this soil” (Reed, *Flight* 156). [...] I've about had it with this Christian. [...] I'd like to bring the old cults back. (Reed, *Flight* 157)

Unlike Raven, Uncle Robin is confident in the fact that freedom is just “a state of mind” (Reed, *Flight* 163), and that he can just as well find this freedom at the plantation, as in Canada. He uses his skills to dabble with Swille's will after his death (Reed, *Flight* 156), and consequently creates his private new society at the plantation turning the mansion into a retreat home for craftsmen. Instead of breaking physically free from the plantation, he finds freedom within himself. He creates his own freedom, and his own life, and subsequently reestablishes his own identity.

In Reed's “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto”, the author asserts that monotheism has always represented a big threat to all subverted people, African Americans included, and their mental and spiritual liberty (2062) /(Pistelli 00:05:00-00:05:17). In the novel such monotheism is exemplified through the character of Mammy Barracuda. She wears a big diamond crucifix which reminds the reader of how strongly she supports the religion of her master, Mr. Swille. She fights to get rid of the diversity of cults at

the Swille plantation (Reed, *Flight* 49), and she forces Mrs. Swille to sustain her duties as a (Christian) southern Belle (Reed, *Flight* 102). However, the crucifix is heavy. She walks with a stoop, and slaves are also blinded when the sun reflects on her cross (Reed, *Flight* 18). This metaphoric description nicely shows us what Reed thinks of Christianity. It holds people down, instead of letting them show their real selves.

Through a narrative where the HooDoo values embody the different trickster characters, letting them construct the slave narrative, John Pistelli asserts how Reed sees a possibility for the African Americans to recover their lost tradition, and consequently their identity (00:24:36-00:25:04). According to Reed, "HooDoo believes that every man is an artist, and every artist a priest" ("Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" 2963). Slaves following such a conviction no longer have to buy into the inferiority caused by the Judeo-Christian hegemony.

In *Flight to Canada*, one of the main projects is for Raven Quickskill to write Uncle Robin's (slave)story. However, unlike his poem "Flight to Canada", he will make sure to add magic to the words so that they will not leave any traces for the use of slave hunters. As discussed earlier (1.3), this introductory poem made Raven famous, and it also provided him with enough money to leave for Canada and find freedom. Nevertheless, it also made it possible for slave trackers to hunt him down (Reed, *Flight* 11). When Raven distanced himself from the plantation, he might have found a kind of freedom, but he soon understands that race issues are very much present in Canada as well. It is by coming back to the plantation he feels connected to his cultural roots, and HooDooism regains its real power (Lindland, "A discussion on satire"). By letting a former black slave write the story of another freed black slave, nobody will be able to steal it. And since a man's story is his "*gris gris*" (amulet) (Reed, *Flight* 7), by keeping it, he also keeps his identity and history. The narrator emphasises how Raven "[had] been writing since he could remember, [and that] his 'Flight to Canada' was to him what blacks were to old Abe" (Reed, *Flight* 12). The focus has shifted from the concept of slavery to that of giving back agency and value to the slave himself. The slave had converted from being an "eyewitness" to an "I-witness" (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 119).

Rushdy also emphasises how HooDoo, through its destabilising of history opens for a more multicultural society ("Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo" 127), and in contrast to Stowe, Reed for example also invites American natives into the narrative.

According to historical sources, we know that natives and African Americans socialised, and they lived in some of the same areas. While such a fact is never mentioned in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Raven introduces the reader to his lover, the beautiful native woman, Qwaw Qwaw Tralaralara, who is also on a quest for the recognition of **her** people. Quickskill's first name, Raven, is also a native name. In the native Tlingit society, for example, the Raven is perceived as both a trickster and a creator. In addition, he is the central character in the creation of myth (Britannica). The reader can by now easily connect these descriptions to the story's protagonist, and the novel consequently contributes as support to different types of fights towards suppression, not merely the African American one.

As mentioned, Reed chooses to break with the grand European/ American novel with its linear narratology. Jon Ewing claims that in Voodoo "the past is present", and Reed translates Voodoo into an African American art form where narratives can present plots where the past becomes the present, and the present the past (Hogue 261-262). Raven adopts this technique in narrating the story about Uncle Robin. The narrative is full of historical anachronisms which help the reader understand the relation between antebellum slavery and contemporary racism in the US.

African Voodoo is originally an oral tradition, but in Reed's Neo-HooDooism both oral and written contributions are accepted. Consequently, writing becomes Raven's HooDoo. The spiritual tradition is much about being possessed, and the sense of identity is bound to being possessed. Sheila Walker asserts that this possessed person understands his interdependence with other members of society (Rushdy, "Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo" 129). As a result of this discussion, we can see how an individual experience of a possessed person will intersect with a collective experience.

In *Flight to Canada*, it becomes important for Raven to let the writing possess himself, instead of him possessing the writing (Rushdy, "Ishmael Reed's Neo-HooDoo" 130). Raven thinks of his writing as his loa (spiritual god), and as a result, the story becomes dangerous to people trying to steal it. And as Raven exclaims, "[w]hen you take a man's story, a story that doesn't belong to you, that story will get you" (Reed, *Flight* 7). In the novel this is exemplified through the death of Mr. Swille, the plantation owner, but in his peculiar Arthurian behaviour, also working as an allusion to the Judeo-Christian European superiority, he cannot imagine a life without

his slaves, even though slavery is abolished while Raven is seeking freedom up North. Eventually, the story gets back at him when the spirits, in the form of Pompey/Vivian, push him into the fireplace (Reed, *Flight 125*).

Chapter 2 A close reading of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979)

2.1 A summary

African American Dana Franklin lives together with her white husband, Kevin, in Los Angeles. They are both writers. The year is 1976, and they have just moved into a new flat. It does not take long before Dana is called for by her ancestor, Rufus, a white boy living, and later running the Weylin plantation in antebellum Maryland. The time travels between contemporary Los Angeles and 19th century Maryland appear rather mysterious, and they function as some kind of spatio-temporal events. Dana is called to the plantation within a period of approximately twenty years in antebellum time, but back in Los Angeles only a few weeks pass by. When Dana travels to the Weylin plantation, she gets to relate to her slave ancestors. She learns how challenging slave life is, and how the slaves tried to keep their human dignity within their restricted life in bondage.

2.2 How hybridity can modify the reader's perception of the slave

According to Frow, how we read books, and what kinds of values we attach to them, are based on the shared competencies, norms, and values that are inhabited by the society in which we live (161). When the original slave narratives were published in the 19th century, white readers who supported the abolitionist cause, mainly considered the slave to be an exploited person recognised through how he had to suffer. According to Irina Popescu, the black body was only identifiable as a violated body. Thus, it was through the ability to feel pain that slaves gained human qualities, and not through their ability to live and pursue happiness (Popescu 186).

According to Popescu's observations, Butler manages to destabilise such a perception of the antebellum life in *Kindred*. In contrast to Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for example, she offers an empathetic reading that is devoid of pity and pained subjects (Popescu 184). Dana, through her time travel back to 19th century

Maryland, steadily converts from being a historical voyeur to becoming an active participant in history. Historically there would, according to Popescu, exist a precarious and voyeuristic identification between the reader of a book and its character, but Butler uses “a dystopic treatment of empathy in order to redefine the relationship between the violated body, the witness, and the reader” (186). Popescu observes how Butler manages to make the reader understand the difference between the experience of reading about slavery, and the actual exposure to it (187). The way in which we follow Dana on her trips we are invited to encounter slavery together with her, instead of only identifying with the memoirs of an ex-slave second-hand (Popescu 191).

Dana is presented as a well-read, black woman of the 1970s, but she discovers that it is not sufficient to read about slave history to be able to understand what her ancestors experienced at the Weylin plantation. She will need personal memories. By living the life of a slave, instead of just reading about it, Dana changes her perception of history. Consequently, when the reader “experiences” slavery by following Dana’s personal encounter with chattel slavery, we become aware of the lasting effects of slavery in the sociopolitical landscape of the 1970s, and also in the contemporary sociopolitical landscape. This bridging of the past with the present would not have been possible had it not been for this story’s hybridization of the neo-slave narrative with science fiction. The postmodern critic, Jameson, emphasises such a view through his assertions:

Both si-fi and historical fiction create a “violent formal and narrative dislocation” in their modes of representing the future or the past in order to restore “life and feeling to the only intermittently functioning organ that is our capacity to organize and live time historically”. (Rushdy, “Families of Orphans” 136)

In the quote, Rushdy refers to reasoning originally presented by Jameson in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Before he supported mixing the historical novel with sci-fi, he had already claimed that

there no longer [seems] to be any organic relationship between the American history we learn from the schoolbooks and the lived experience of the current multinational, high-rise, stagflated city of the newspapers and of our own everyday life. (Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 22)

Jameson is negative towards the traditional portrayal of history, and he believes that the only way we can connect to it is through parody or pastiche (blank parody), where *Kindred* would best fit the latter. It portrays “an imitation of a peculiar or unique style” (Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 1761), but due to the author’s wish to portray the past through the lenses of both the past and the present, and also the future, Butler somehow needs to bridge the two worlds, and she uses the power of memory to switch between them. This way of approaching history encourages a generic expression that supports the hybridity between the neo-slave novel and sci-fi.

Popescu refers to this hybridization as “narrative superimposition” (196). According to Brian McHale, this condition appears when

two familiar spaces are placed on top of the other, as in a photographic double-exposure, creating through their tense and paradoxical coexistence a third space identifiable with neither of the original two “that in turn leads to“ a disorienting double-vision. (qtd. in Popescu 196)

According to Popescu, this double-vision is then unknotted in the scenes of witnessing. It is here that the past and the present meet, thus forcing a confrontation between the witness, the victim, and the reader (96). The anachronistic element of time travel creates such a dislocation that blends the relationship between the past, the present, and the future, and this is an important trait in the process of coming to terms with how chattel slavery is also of great importance today. As Rushdy says in his study of the novel: “The past is not over yet” (“Families of Orphans” 144).

2.3 Playing with the first-person narrative – to make us feel the (hi)story

As mentioned in the introduction, Rushdy requires that the neo-slave narrative takes the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3). However, it is common for the authors of these neo-slave narratives to “undermine the coherent subject of narration by developing series of other voices that sometimes supplement, and sometimes subvert the voice of the “original” narrator” (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 231). Rushdy stresses how the novelists’ play with voices “alerts us to the fact that each of these novelists is developing an intersubjective model for the construction of subjectivity” (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 231). According to Frow, the strength of first-person narratives is how they inhabit the authenticity of direct vision. They become eyewitnesses (Frow 103). In the original slave narratives, this first-person point of view had to be supported by the paratext such as introductions written by white authors, etc., but in the neo-slave narratives in the post-civil rights era of the 1970s and ‘80s, the African American witness was included as an important element of the story’s credibility.

In Frow's introductory book to the understanding of “genre”, he is concerned about how the first-person narratives, in general, lack the comprehensive view of the detached observer, and in traditional narratology, eye-witnessing is often referred to as raw material being part of the fabula (103). Mahood Raja asserts how this raw material needs arrangement to work properly (“What is Narratology? (Part 5): Text, Story and Fabula - What is Narrative Theory?” 00:06:08-00:07:40). In novels such arrangements will include some kind of mediation because of the narrator who refers the story. By not telling the story traditionally, but instead inviting the reader to experience and feel it with her, the narrator, Dana, shows how she is not constrained by mediation. How the narrator contributes to a break in a system of pre-established rules by rearranging the fabula, Dana creates what is called defamiliarization (Raja, “What is Narratology? (Part 5): Text, Story and Fabula - What is Narrative Theory?” 00:07:46-00:08:20). This narrative feature contributes to a new ethics of reading where the slave is given a stronger agency than in the original slave narrative, often inspired by the sentimental tradition. According to Popescu, she appears as “an embodiment of a mediating figure who holds power of trespassing time, atrocity, and history” (194).

Anachronisms, temporal displacements, and sensorial excess are components that Butler implements in her novel to halt a plain presentation of the body in pain. For example, we can see how the narrator sometimes refuses to use the present tense typical for the slave narrator. When Dana on her first trip to antebellum America witnesses how Alice's father is being harassed and tortured by the patrollers, she says "I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath [...] I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope [...]" (O. Butler 33). According to Popescu, Butler avoids the present "smells" and the past "smelled", and Dana comes forth as an uneasy witness by using the conditional form of the verb "could smell/see" (195). Linguistically speaking, the conditional form reveals a future potential, occurring out of time. Much like Dana's own body, the situation occurs out of time, and according to Popescu, the linguistic construction of the passage reflects Dana's body as an out of place, out of time entity (194). The change of mode emphasises an uncertainty about how to present her story. Additionally, Popescu claims that the linguistic construction of the passage gives an impression of Dana not really participating in the event, despite witnessing the violation first-hand. Unlike the reader, Dana is experiencing violence directly, and it is hard for her to deal with it. She feels uneasy about the situation and has problems describing the scene she witnesses.

Popescu claims that this way of writing contributes to a susceptible divide between the victim, the witness, and the reader. She observes how *Kindred* refuses the representation of a body in pain to operate as a vehicle of identification for slaves. So, instead of letting the reader regard the whipping, Butler lets the reader watch Dana watch the whipping. By letting us only read her reaction to the pain, we are kept at a distance (Popescu 195). In slave narratives like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, central ideas were borrowed from the sentimental tradition (Popescu 184). In such slave narratives, the reader was supposed to identify with the protagonists and pity them because of the suffering and pain they experienced due to the institution of slavery. This concept of identification is subordinate in *Kindred*, and Butler manages to create such a distance to a more traditional, voyeuristic witnessing by not allowing the reader to see the victim firsthand (Popescu 195). When Dana witnesses the beating of Alice's father, she does not describe the victim's pain in any sensorial detail, and as a consequence, Butler avoids an objectification of the object in pain. Unlike former slave narratives, Butler lets the narrator focus on the perpetrator, the

patroller, in the place of the violated victim. Additionally, by comparing the patroller to the Ku Klux Klan, she simultaneously links antebellum America to a future representation of WASP society's treatment of African Americans (Popescu 196).

I want to add that this part of the discussion of playing with the first-person narrative is not meant to weaken my discussion of the effect Dana has as a first-person witness. How she manages to bring the reader closer to antebellum life by letting us follow her every step, is important. When Dana witnesses the whipping, she feels physically unwell (O. Butler 33), and later on, she is the one to be whipped, but what Popescue wants the reader to acknowledge is how Dana embodies the pain without giving much of a sensorial description (195). Popescu stresses how we should "read the suffering body without falling into the trap of vicarious objectification" (195). Through Dana's observation of the whipping, Butler manages to get the reader to feel disgust against the brutal perpetrator, instead of pitying the subdued slave. By her play with the tense of the verbs, she supports a shift in focus from the original slave narrative to the neo-slave narrative. This discussion must not be misread as some kind of mitigating circumstance to the atrocities committed against the slaves. I do not see that as the novel's intention, but it can help the reader realise how the slave is more than a victim who sometimes managed to escape such dehumanizing behaviour only to write personal testimonies about it in the cause of the abolitionist fight.

According to Frow, "[genre] exists as a part of the relationship between texts and readers, and it has a systemic existence" (112). The guesses we make are created through deductions we make from signs that both surround the text, but which are also part of the text. The readers of a text will often inhabit split competencies such as shared norms and values. These will govern the way in which persons within any complex society will understand literary texts (Frow 115,161). The way in which American society felt about slaves and slavery differed immensely from the 19th century and the late 20th century, especially after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. The way in which Butler creates value and agency for the slave, through Dana's experimental way of embodying the pain of the victim, instead of trying to awaken such an affective register within the reader, may support the contemporary readers in recognising the antebellum slave as more than a victim.

2.4 Genealogy and the importance of the community

When we meet Dana, she is a 26-year-old woman, living in Los Angeles with her white husband, Kevin. She has no siblings, and she lost her parents to an accident as a child. Maybe being black, orphaned, and married to a white man within a society that is still rather racist, makes her especially vulnerable to the rupture in time and space, which the fantastical element of science fiction allows.

Dana has an old family Bible where “grandmother” Hagar has made a kind of genealogic map. This family tree functions as a fragmented story for Dana, and it triggers the progression of the plot. In “The Trouble: Family, Genre, and Hybridity in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*”, Kimber Wiggs observes how Dana, not long after having settled in a new apartment, experiences unnatural events when confronted with a spatio-temporal kidnapping from 1976 (130), and is brought back to antebellum Maryland, where her ancestors originated. She soon realises that it is her white ancestor who “calls” her to him when he is in some kind of life-threatening situation. Something he often is. In addition to finally experiencing first-hand the life of being a slave, Dana also makes it her project to get to know and understand her ancestors. She travels back to antebellum Maryland on several occasions, and according to Rushdy, this eventually complicates Dana’s relationship to both “home” and “kin” (“Families of Orphans” 136).

One cannot choose one’s own family, and being of slave descent, it is tough for Dana to recognise how her “grandmother” Hagar, was the result of Rufus’s sexual exploitation of Alice. Once she was a free, black childhood friend of Rufus, but who could not prevent becoming part of his property as long as he wanted to.

According to Madhu Dubey, Butler’s experimental writing in *Kindred* presents a kind of reverse to the more classical “up from slavery” narrative. Dana is a “freewoman” who is pulled back from the post-civil rights era to antebellum ideology (Dubey 347). Because of this, she inhabits quite a lot of knowledge that she thinks she can use to her advantage. For example, she is for a long time convinced that she will be able to change Rufus’s attitude towards slaves and slavery, and maybe contribute to giving them agency and value. Still, she will eventually realise the strength of ideology within a set society, and how it shapes people within it.

In addition to realising under which conditions the slaves lived, she was now in a position to understand how slaves accepted the repression they met every day. When Dana comes to the Weylin plantation, she recognises herself as a kind of tourist, or observer, who does not take part in what is going on: “We weren’t really in. We were observers watching a show” (O. Butler 104). Dubey asserts how she soon has to adapt to the rules counting for every other slave, and she more or less accepts her situation to be able to survive. From playing a slave, she steadily becomes one (Dubey 350). To be able to survive, she makes the best out of her situation of being able to relate both to white slavers, through her education, and to the coloured community, due to her “race”. She becomes a kind of hybrid character to be able to survive, and according to Wiggs, the novel’s hybrid genre supports this kind of hybridity (131). She asserts how Dana’s self-identification, through her relatives, is shaped both by blackness and whiteness and that she ends up as a multiracial character. Wiggs observes how important this is for the protagonist’s agency since a male protagonist would have had difficulties surviving the narrative (132).

The relationship Dana has with Rufus is ambivalent. Despite his cruelty, she feels attached to him. Maybe this is because she, through her bloodline, is both black and white. According to the proverb “blood is thicker than water”, and even though one may not like what persons within one’s family do, one cannot choose family members. They are kin.

The title of the novel is “Kindred”. According to Wiggs, this title could easily be read as “Kin/dread” (139). The connotation emphasises a fear of one’s own family, one’s kin. Due to the shared bloodline, Dana is afraid that she will be like Rufus. However, eventually, she turns out to dread her white ancestor. Simultaneously, according to *Dictionary.com*, the adjective “kindred” is referred to as being “associated by origin, nature, etc.”, and the same dictionary also refers to the adjective as “having the same belief, attitude, or feeling”. Butler refers to her white husband as “a kindred spirit” (O. Butler 5). Despite not being related, not being kin through their bloodline, they can understand each other in a way Rufus and Dana could not. This kind of mutual understanding she was also able to find within the black community at the Weylin plantation. Despite experiencing diffidence from it due to her “whiteness”, she is also accepted by it. Alice, for example, shows this through the symbolic act of sewing Dana a dress like the ones other slaves wore (O. Butler 182). Additionally, a field woman gives her friendly advice while working in the corn

field (O. Butler 236), and when Liza lets the Weylins know about Dana running off, the slave community makes sure Liza is punished: "She fell and hurt herself. Liza was bruised and battered. She lost some teeth. She was black and blue all over" (O. Butler 196). She never revealed who beat her up. She understood that she had the community against her. On the other side, Dana felt she was part of it. They were also part of her kin.

In addition to the mentioned connotations triggered by the title, it might also be discerned as a reference to the metafictional aspect of the text. *Kindred* could be interpreted as "kin(d)red", "reading about kin"/ "reading about one's kind". Dana reads a lot about African American history and about her ancestors. She tries to understand events that happened to her ancestors by looking up information about them. She wants to understand her kin's past. Additionally, she is an author who wants to give the audience/readers a new version to read. This version includes her subjective experience of the historical events, and Dana's comments on her writing process support a postmodern approach to the relativism of all storytelling.

Traveling back and forth from the 1970s Los Angeles and antebellum Maryland becomes rather fatiguing for Dana. She wants to go home, but at one point she is no longer certain about where this is. Is it in Los Angeles, where she strives to write about what is happening to her, or is it at the Weylin plantation? On one of her trips back to Maryland, trying to get help for an injured Rufus, Dana catches herself saying "[h]ome at last" (O. Butler 137), when glimpsing the Weylin mansion. She has to remind herself that she "was in a hostile place" (O. Butler 137). However, this is the society in which she is reconnected to her past. It is here that her African American history is completed. Not through reading about it, but through living it. According to the author Ralph Ellison, this way of experiencing antebellum America, where there is no distance between Dana and the alien time, is important for African American subjects, as long as this part of history is unwritten (Rushdy, "Families of Orphans" 138). The novel emphasises this when Kevin and Dana travel to modern Maryland to find out about what happened to her relatives after the fire. No complete records were found of the slaves, only of the Weylins (O. Butler 293-294).

Popescu finds support in David Harvey when she asserts that Dana's physical and mental travel from a present/past to a future/present may reveal a break in historical continuity. Popescu observes how Butler employs the postmodern technique of "plundering" with history through the way in which she reconstitutes

history both inside the protagonist's 1976 present, and also in its nineteenth-century terms (196). According to philosopher Terry Eagleton, the manipulation of the sci-fi genre thus manages to show how postmodernism refuses History and not history. He asserts how postmodernism wants a history that may "redraw its contours" (Popescu 196), and not a History that represents "a cemented version of the past as an objective truth" (Popescu 196). It seems as though Butler borrows such ideas for her novel.

2.5 The importance of memory

One reason why Butler wrote *Kindred*, was because she felt uneasy by the shame and anger the militants of the 1960s directed at earlier generations. According to Dubey, these combatants felt that their ancestors did not risk enough to gain freedom (348). These militants supported violence presented through rebels like Nat Turner, and they despised humble and docile slaves like Uncle Tom. Butler wants to depict a more balanced portrayal of the slave society and the agency of the slaves. For this, she uses Dana's fragmented memories of her ancestors to start this journey.

The fantastical element of time travel is a sci-fi device, but it remains a mystery how it works in the novel. However, this seems to be of little importance for Butler, but the fact that the discourse allows Dana to travel back and forth becomes important. A child has a naïve attitude to the world of everything being possible. When we first get acquainted with Rufus, he is such a little child, and even though his parents would not accept that his saviour, Dana, is from another "dimension", he fully accepts this. Accordingly, Dana is a fictional writer, and as Gregory Hampton observes, one of her most important skills is to imagine whatever she sets her mind to (115). Using such an explanation as a backdrop, and Hampton's supplementary idea that the body is only bounded by the human imagination (115), it might not seem so strange that Dana can use her imagination as fuel for her spatio-temporal travel back to antebellum Maryland.

According to psychoanalysis, working through one's memory may have a strong healing effect. According to Rushdy, "Dana's memory works as a framing device for constructing the story of her relationship with her ancestors" ("Families of

Orphans” 137). Neither through reading, which only gives her second-hand information nor through writing, which is too much an isolated activity to understand the past, is she able to fully understand history. The readers are invited to remember together with Dana and being more or less from the same time as her, we are able to understand the way in which she acts to survive as a slave. We would probably have made the same choices that she did. We can understand how her body is reduced to the property of a man, and that slaves did what it took of compromise to survive.

This is why Dana relies on her advantages as a slave with white power, and this may also be the reason why she tries to convince Alice to get a more comfortable life by giving in to Rufus’s demand of being his mistress (O. Butler 182-183). This way of using one’s body as a tool for a better life is not unfamiliar to the traditional slave narrative. For example, it was a main topic for Harriet Jacobs’ protagonist, Linda Brent, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She hoped that the father of the children would free them. Despite not having the agency to start an uprising like Nat Turner or Gabriel Prosser (*Black Thunder*), slaves did what was in their power to ameliorate the situation for themselves and their descendants within the constraints of the slave society in which they lived.

Dana starts on her journey of re-memory, from now on referred to as rememory, embodied mostly with academic knowledge. This does not make her understand her surroundings properly. For example, she judges Sara for accepting the life of slavery because of fear (O. Butler 101,159). Still, through living as a slave, she is formed by a more effective learning which makes her, together with the reader, better understand the slave history and the way in which the slave acted. At one point she talks to the field slave, Sam James, who has taken an interest in Dana, but to whom Dana cannot relate for fear of being punished. She tells him how “[s]lavery is a condition of compromising everything in order to stay alive and whole” (qtd. in Rushdy, “Families of Orphans” 152):

‘Some folks say...’

‘Hold on.’ I was suddenly angry. ‘I don’t want to hear what “some folks” say. “Some folks” let Fowler drive them into the fields every day and work them like mules.’

‘Let him...?’

'Let him! They do it to keep the skin on their backs and breath in their bodies. Well, they're not the only ones who have to do things they don't like to stay alive and whole. Now you tell me why that should be so hard for "some folks" to understand?' (O. Butler 265)

This dialogue with Sam becomes an important symbol since it shows how Dana eventually lets go of her 20th-century knowledge. After starting out as a tourist, more or less observing from the outside of a story, there is eventually no distance between herself and the past, and this is important in the process of fronting Dana as a historical agent. Instead of relying on written information about antebellum slavery, she is living it. However, coming this far is a process, and the experiences and knowledge she embodies from starting her slave journey as a tourist, are important for how she deals with slavery and shows agency.

According to Hampton, Dana contributes to the African American oral tradition of creating memories through telling stories (106). He asserts that it is the unwritten memories that give the most accurate account of history (Hampton 106), and through Dana's dialogue with Sam, she invites us to understand how ideological forces were at work at the plantation, and how they affected the agency of the slaves (Rushdy, "Families of Orphans" 152).

Dana may gain a more complete understanding of her ancestors and American slave history, but it comes at a cost. The very first line of the novel reveals this: "I lost an arm on my last trip home" (O. Butler 1). We later learn that somehow the arm was stuck in antebellum Maryland when Dana was transported back to 1976. She has just killed Rufus. Despite her non-violent nature, her lived experiences as a slave at the Weylin plantation have made her capable of killing her master when he tried to rape her. This stands in contrast to her reactions to the patroller who tried to rape her on her first trip to Maryland. Then she was paralysed. Had not her horror brought her back to Kevin in Los Angeles, she would have been raped then (O. Butler 40).

In addition to the loss of an arm, Dana also loses two teeth, and she is heavily scarred after the whipping she experienced. According to Rushdy, she loses parts of her body to the past. This bodily deconstruction then helps in the process of connecting the past with the present (Rushdy, "Family of Orphans" 139). The fantastical spatio-temporal travels already work as a bridging between the past and

the present, and having one arm stuck in one world, traveling back to the other, becomes a strong symbol of how history affects contemporary life. According to Barbara Christian, the process of memorising is challenging since it demands people to recollect both parts that they want to remember, and parts they want to forget (Rushdy, "Families of Orphans" 139). Since Butler lets Dana experience her memory through participating in the slave life at the Weylin plantation, she lets her expose herself to possible mutilation (Rushdy, "Families of Orphans" 139). Even though Dana's body is heavily marked through her experiences, we get the impression we leave her as partly recovered. Rufus is dead, and because of that the couple can continue their life together, but they will always be marked by what they have been through. Whereas the start of the book starts with the first-person narrator inviting the reader to experience her story with her, the novel ends with a dialogue between her and Kevin:

'If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane.'

'We are', he said. 'And now that the boy is dead, we have some chance of staying that way.' (O. Butler 295)

According to Bakhtin, meaning can only be grasped dialogically, and within any discourse, the speaker introduces into the other's words his intentions and highlights the context of those words in his way (354). Thus, the dialogue between Dana and her husband is important. It shows how they can process their experiences back in antebellum Maryland. Through this conversation between kin, they are eventually able to go back to modern American society with a shared understanding of how the past affects the society in which they live. Together with Dana and Kevin, the readers are invited back to the present time, and we are also supposed to see how the past affects the present through these black-and-white characters.

Chapter 3 A close reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

3.1 A summary

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is constructed around the runaway slave, Sethe, and her family. Sethe manages to escape the slave plantation, Sweet Home, in Kentucky, cross the Ohio River, and start a life as a freewoman together with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and her four children in Cincinnati, Ohio. Nevertheless, discovered by the overseer, called schoolteacher, she chooses to kill one of her girls to prevent her from experiencing a life in bondage. She considers death to be the better alternative. The murdered child keeps haunting the house, 124 Bluestone Road, and after Paul D, also a former slave from Sweet Home, drives the baby spirit from the house, it returns to the property in the shape of a young woman calling herself Beloved.

3.2 A historical novel blending with the Gothic

According to Carl Malmgren, *Beloved* can be read as a historical novel, a love story, a neo-slave narrative, and a ghost story (96), but it is also easy to combine these. As mentioned, Frow supports Derrida's assertions which stress the impossibility of not mixing genres (28) and that they may at any time be crossed with any genre that has existed (58). As a consequence of this mixing, the use value of the different texts will be affected (Frow 26).

In my exploration of *Beloved*, I have noticed how Morrison brings elements of horror into the neo-slave narrative by alluding to the Gothic novel. These references to the Gothic, in addition to the blurring of genre frames, manage to present an alternative perception of the African American slave where (s)he gains additional agency. The postmodern technique of confounding genre boundaries contributes to the portrayal of round and complex characters within this neo-slave narrative, and the hybridization helps in bridging the horrors of the antebellum slavery of the past with contemporary racism in American society.

“Otherness is a central concern of Gothic literature in general” (Khair 4), and according to Maisha Wester, *Beloved* is the African American novel that best illustrates a reworking of the Gothic novel (8). Traditionally, Gothic authors picture “the other” as a menace. This “other” typically refers to social and cultural challenges within society. Such potential threats can for example be people of other races. Wester observes how the fear caused by these people often is a result of xenophobia (2). In antebellum America, “the other” was anyone perceived as a threat to white hegemony. Enlightenment’s ideas about humanity supported a worldview where white people of European descent were considered superior to all other races, and supported by such an ideology, people presenting other cultures and skin colour would be considered a threat to existing values and “proper Englishness” (Wester 2). In literature, this xenophobia was illustrated through the representations of the monstrous “other”, and some of the known Gothic novels, for example, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, would end with a final termination of the monster. However, Morrison has chosen to alter this focus in her reworking of the Gothic novel, *Beloved*.

Wester emphasises how Morrison chooses to employ the Gothic in *Beloved* to express the particular complexity and horror of being black in America (7). She stresses the fact that the baby ghost in itself is not alarming. It has made the two brothers, Bulgar and Howard, run away from home, so it must be frightening, but both Sethe and Baby Suggs accept the fact that they have a ghost living with them. There is no use running away from it since “[n]ot a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby” (Morrison, *Beloved* 6). However, the memories that the ghost revives remind Sethe, and through her the reader, of the horrors of the past, and it is these horrifying memories of unspeakable sexual and violent abuse that the ghost brings back to life. This trauma affects Sethe enormously, but she finds it hard to talk about: “This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison, *Beloved* 350).

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma theory and literature have a precious bond since what traumatised people need is “a kind of speech that does not simply communicate that which is understandable but also that which cannot be understood” (Bond & Craps 59). Whereas the traumatic experiences that Sethe and Paul D go through at Sweet Home are too dreadful to speak about, the indirectness of literature’s figurative language with its linguistic particularities, etc. make it possible for such a hybrid text as *Beloved* to pass on a story that otherwise would be

unspeakable. It is through the baby ghost, and later the devil child in the shape of the young teenager, Beloved, that Sethe is forced to confront and deal with her past. She has to deal with her crime of killing her daughter to save her from slavery, but an even bigger malefaction that must be dealt with is the crime committed through institutionalised slavery. Sethe has been severely sexually abused by white men at Sweet Home when "they took [her] milk" (Morrison, *Beloved* 21), and Paul D, her old friend from the plantation, who now becomes her lover, has also experienced both sexual and corporal abuse. The way in which the white plantation owners exploited, abused, and harassed the slaves for their own self-esteem and economic benefit, is what needs to be brought into light, and according to Kate Rose, *Beloved* represents "the haunted conscience of the USA" (51).

In most Gothic stories the horror is at its most intense when the monster intervenes, and in *Beloved* there is a crucial turning point when the exorcised ghost returns in the reincarnation of the young teenager. She affects every important character in the novel. She is fragile and powerful at the same time, and even though she tempts Paul D into having sex with her, and although she in a vampiric manner sucks the life out of Sethe through the dyadic mother-daughter relationship they develop, and at the same instant leaves Denver out of their tight alliance, she also somehow ignites their subconsciousness to deal with the past.

According to trauma theory, it is normal for people to have a belated reaction to traumatic experiences (Bond & Craps 56). Probably *Beloved* herself is created due to Sethe's and Paul D's traumatic past, and maybe it is the fact that Paul D turns up at 124 Bluestone Road that works as a triggering cause. On the other side, she is also the one who enables the two grownups, who have experienced chattel slavery, to be able to confront their experiences. Thus, enabling them to deal with their past. Denver, who is mainly traumatised as the result of living in this home so densely connected to the horrors of the past, also regains her voice, and consequently her power due to the ghost's appearance. According to Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question*, this ghost "embodied the idea of the persistence of traumatic memory, the anachronic intrusion of the past into the present" (93). *Beloved* helps the inhabitants of 124 there and then, but this ghost symbolises so much more than personal trauma. A ghost does not care about conventional conceptions of time, and in section II where the voices of the three female residents of 124, Sethe, Denver, and *Beloved*, get mixed up, *Beloved* tells the story of how she comes from a kind of undersea

world. She refers to the Middle Passage, and being more than Sethe's daughter, she also represents one of all the slaves that had to suffer due to slavery.

According to Chuen-Shin Tai, the embodied spirit represents a supernatural world that can neither work as a signified nor as a signifier (228), and in both cases, the inclusion of a resurrected devil child invites the reader to consider this creature as a link between the past and the present. I-Tseng Tu asserts that "[t]he incarnation of the Gothic opens up a space, beyond chronological time, convention of moving back and forth between past and present, between facts and ideas" (129), and such a blurring of time and space is equally supported by a traditional African circular conception of time. This alternative way of defying the "natural" order of events, *Beloved* manages to work as some kind of visualised trauma that forces Sethe to deal with her past, and simultaneously Sethe enables the reader to have a better understanding of the inner life of the African American slave. Additionally, just as the acceptance of blurring genre boundaries creates room for alternative ways of portraying the slave narrative, it also contributes to blurring historical boundaries (Tu 129). As a result, it becomes easier to understand the relationship between the slaves' experiences that Morrison depicts and the current racial issues in the USA.

One may say that *Beloved* comes from the past to confront the present so that the future might be changed. For there is hope, and Morrison leaves room for it. During her stay at 124, *Beloved* gets bigger and bigger due to her pregnancy. Not only does the reincarnated baby ghost bridge the past with the present, but the pregnant belly symbolises that there is also a future for the African American people. *Beloved* is not killed in the end, and Luckhurst finds support in Rushdy when he claims that because of what this ghost embodies, she cannot be laid to rest like she would have been in more conventional ghost stories (Luckhurst 94). However, *Beloved* does not haunt anybody anymore. She disappears, but traces are left:

Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody ever walked there. (Morrison, *Beloved* 350-351)

People in the area tried to forget her: “So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep” (Morrison, *Beloved* 350), but she, like the testimony she embodies, is never quite gone:

Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do. (Morrison, *Beloved* 350)

Wester asserts that “the Gothic in *Beloved* becomes a way of both mystifying and symbolising the living nightmare of racial oppression”(9) in chattel slavery. Additionally, the reworking of the Gothic tradition, which has kept “the other” gone, but alive, shows the reader how contemporary America still has to cope with the repercussions of slavery, and how African Americans, according to Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, repeatedly are defined as ““other” by mainstream culture” (qtd. in Tu 130). In Lois Tyson’s *Critical Theory Today*, Tyson also asserts how important it is for African American race theory to emphasise how common “everyday racism” is for people of colour in the United States (352).

3.3 A multitude of (oral) stories that should be shared and listened to

According to the poststructuralist critic Lyotard, the grand narrative is dead. This allows the neo-slave narrators to support a more subjective approach to the interpretation of historical events, and it opens for narratives concerned with the need to create new and open-ended worlds (C. Butler 16). In the neo-slave narrative, one way of showing this subjective approach is by letting the reader get to know the characters through a multitude of subjective voices.

According to C. Butler, postmodernism supports a rewriting of history where the science of history only represents one out of several acceptable narratives (32). White also supports such a view. In *Tropics of Discourse*, he asserts that history is open for interpretation and that the form in which history is presented influences how the reader understands historical events (White 70). As mentioned several times already, he claims that historical narratives are nothing but “verbal fictions, the content of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences” (White 82). Supported by such an approach to history, I notice how literary narratives can contribute to how we comprehend historical events. Accordingly, the fictional voices of *Beloved* may well describe how antebellum slaves experienced slavery and its reverberations.

In traditional slave narratives, the author created a kind of veil covering the parts of the narrative that were not suitable to be handed over to the white, abolitionist reader. To Morrison, it was important to present the interior life of the anonymous slaves, and therefore she considered it essential for her to rip down the veil that had been drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate” (“The Site of Memory” 91). In this process, it was important to give anonymous slaves a voice, and in *Beloved* both the living and the dead get their voices back. According to Maggie Sale, the slave’s voice in the traditional slave narrative, was typically presented by an escaped slave who had gained his or her freedom partly because of their ability to write (43). Both Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown were literate, and this ability to write was highlighted in the titles of their books through the subtitles of being “written by himself or herself”. According to Sale, Morrison wanted to share the story of the more average antebellum slave. This slave would often be illiterate (Sale 43). Nevertheless, they had a strong African heritage of storytelling, and on behalf of that, their stories could be passed on from generation to generation.

It is this African American tradition of oral storytelling that inspires how the plot is presented in *Beloved*. Additionally, in the post-civil rights era in which *Beloved* was written, historians opened up for more subjective interpretations of historical events, something which made it possible for literature to complement scientific history (C. Butler 70). According to Sale, Morrison is inspired by this possible way of portraying the world through subjective voices. *Beloved* is full of oral storytelling. According to Sale “[w]ho is saying (or writing) what to whom, and how they’re saying (or writing) it,

is of the utmost importance to the meaning of what gets said (written)" (46), and the oral storytelling suits Morrison's intentions of writing "about, for, and out of black culture" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 154).

The narrative starts by presenting to the reader a house "full of a baby's venom" (Morrison, *Beloved* 3). We immediately understand that 124 Bluestone Road is haunted by a ghost, and the ghost's voice represents both a slave child's lamenting of being killed by her mother, but simultaneously, and maybe more importantly, it represents a testimony of the "Sixty Million and more" (Morrison, *Beloved* epigraph) slaves that got their lives destroyed or taken due to slavery. Additionally, her testimony and the testimonies of other central characters in the narrative will also help us understand how past events contribute to explaining the different behaviours of the characters. Hopefully, these different testimonies will elicit some of the contemporary challenges that African American citizens experience.

When Sethe chooses to cut her daughter's throat, she cuts off the child's possibility to tell her story. However, Sethe kills the child out of love, and not as a result of meanness. This story is an allusion to the true story of Margaret Garner killing her baby girl to prevent her from a life in bondage. According to Sale, it is important to notice that Morrison does not imply that this is the same story, but that the novel presents several counter versions of the story (42):

The teller is implicated in her or his particular version of the (hi)story and each version, or (hi)story, is as "true" as the teller (writer) can make it, where that 'truth' depends upon an alliance and agreement between teller and listener.
(Sale 42)

As mentioned in the introduction, Frow reveals the importance of how genres are created through the activity of reading (150). He asserts how they are fabricated in an interposition between social and textual structure. Consequently, genres are sustained through how the reader is affected by the ruling ideology of a society, and Frow emphasises how "[c]ritical engagement with genre is central to critical examination of our culture and our social world" (167). In this process of reading, the audience participates in filling in the gaps using social and cultural experience. In the

essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”, Morrison claims that what is not said is just as important as what is uttered, and that she must create these places and spaces for the reader to contribute to the process of participating in the text-making (Morrison, “Rootedness” 341).

What the storyteller tells or calls out requires a response from the reader, and concerning Sethe’s infanticide, all the listeners to the story, both within the narrative itself and amongst the readers of the novel, are challenged as to how they respond to this story. Her story is also presented through different voices. In addition to Sethe telling it, we are also confronted with Baby Suggs’ version, Paid Stamp’s version, schoolteacher’s version, and the version told through the newspaper clip. They all try to tell what “really” happened the day after the grand party at 124 when schoolteacher came to claim his property (Sethe and her children). According to Sale, the last person to tell her version of the story is Sethe, and her version differs from all the other ones (47). She tries to make Paul D understand the act by connecting it to the history of slavery. According to Sale, this is a project of getting the listener/reader to understand her choice (47). This does not mean that what she did was right, but by telling her story she, representing the evil of slavery, seeks a communal understanding. Her crime has to be understood in light of the institutionalised slavery and the despair entailed by it.

Even though Sethe kills her baby, it comes back to haunt 124 Bluestone Road. Somehow, she claims her place in the world. Both the boys, Howard and Buglar, leave the house because of it, but the women react differently. They all more or less accept the presence of the baby ghost. This might be because of how Morrison chooses to include African mythology in the narrative. In *Toni Morrison’s Spiritual Vision*, Nadra Nittle observes how Morrison grew up in a family where spiritual forces were accepted as a mundane presence (32). In growing up she frequented relatives “who didn’t distinguish between the dream world and the waking world, openly discussed paranormal experiences, and used their intuition to make both urgent and everyday decisions” (Nittle 33). Thus, including African spiritism within her novel, seems reasonable. According to African tradition, baby spirits are considered natural. They are referred to as “Abiku”, and according to the myth, such babies are predestined to die from their families and then return as spirits. They are often evil (Nittle 133).

However, Paul D does not support such an invasion of the past, and he chases the baby ghost out of the house. Despite this action, she returns as a beautiful, but immature, young woman, Beloved. This girl has difficulty talking, being a baby ghost embodied in a grown woman's body, but as she gets accustomed to her new situation, she develops a demanding nature and asks lots of questions. She calls out her questions, and she requires responses. She wants to know, and Sethe finally wants to tell. Beloved has a parasitic grip on her mother, Sethe, and the mother wants nothing more than to make atonement for the crime she committed against her own child 18 years ago. Consequently, she answers the devil child's questions the best she can. To start with, Beloved shows "a profound satisfaction" (Morrison, *Beloved* 75) from Sethe's storytelling, but as time goes by the devil child grows more and more demanding:

[...] the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children [...] None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being kind to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left her? And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to. (Morrison, *Beloved* 306)

Beloved represents the voice of a murdered child, but simultaneously her voice constitutes history. In part II of the book, Stamp Paid comes to 124 Bluestone Road. He hears a multitude of voices out of which he cannot make sense "but he believed he knew who spoke them. The people of the broken necks, of fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (Morrison, *Beloved* 231). The voices do not make sense to him, neither do the horrific incidents that the voices refer to. According to Tu, what Stamp Paid recognises is the "ghost of dead black folks in lynchings" (129). Just like the reader of the novel, Stamp Paid listens to an incomprehensible story that he must try to understand to go on with his life. The voices stand forth as uncanny, and Tu observes how this Gothic element offers a space beyond chronological order. Just like the voices take Stamp Paid on a journey

between the past and the present, and between facts and ideas, they are also able to take contemporary readers on the same journey (Tu 129).

Following Stamp Paid's experience by the door of 124, Morrison entrusts the reader with different chapters where the women of the stories hold a first-person point-of-view narrative. Tai notes how these chapters depict the way in which the different female voices blend into one, and that together they represent a collective memory of the living (the present), the dead (the past), and the unborn (the future) (227). These voices and stories have become one, but Morrison lets the different women be in charge of different chapters. In the one where Beloved is the one expressing her feelings, she brings us back to the Middle Passage, and it becomes obvious that what Beloved's voice represents, is not only the murdered child but the story of the "Sixty Million and more" (Morrison, *Beloved* epigraph) slaves that suffered due to the institution of slavery. She gives a horrid description of how the conditions were on the ships crossing the Atlantic Ocean:

All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked

some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none at night I cannot see the dead man on my face [...] small rats do not wait for us to sleep

(Morrison, *Beloved* 269)

Beloved is telling her story, not writing it, and the quoted passage shows how Morrison entrusts the reader with an oral narrative, rather than a written one. This is symbolised through a more fragmented text with a lack of punctuation and capital letters. Not only is the story presented from "the bottom up", but also through an oral tradition that bridges this African American story with the African cultural heritage. Morrison has herself asserted how important such oral stories are in the African American culture, since the tradition of oral history passed on from generation to

generation is gone in contemporary USA (Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g)" 587). The quote from *Beloved's* storytelling is obviously written, since we have just read it, but the vernacular style contributes to a more oral style. The text elements function more or less like a transcribed oral story, and this vernacular manner of presenting the narrative catches the core of storytelling.

According to Deborah Sitter, Sixo is another character who to a large extent refers to African traditions through his speech. Already in his name, we can see that he works as a reference to the "60 million and more" (Sitter 23). Despite living on a plantation where the first master, Mr. Garner, is of the milder type who considers his slaves to be men, Sixo chooses not to speak English, because he sees no future in it (Morrison, *Beloved* 33/ Sitter 23). He also represents African culture by the way in which he behaves. He used to dance at night to keep his bloodlines open, and when he cannot find his twenty-mile woman, he asks the wind for help (Morrison, *Beloved* 32/ Sitter 23), and he is heard. It is easy to see how important it is for Sixo to live in harmony with nature, and this is a message Morrison wants to pass on to the reader. However, his resistance to white hegemony also causes his death. In "The Making of Man: Dialogic Meaning in *Beloved*", Sitter observes how Sixo's belief in himself being just as worthy as anybody else, gets him shot and burned by schoolteacher. In contrast to Mr. Garner, schoolteacher considers slaves to be more or less like animals, and they are treated like stock. We learn of this attitude towards slaves through schoolteacher and his natural science lesson where he corrects his students when describing Sethe: "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (Morrison, *Beloved* 247). He is also the only character who judges Sethe when telling his version of the infanticide committed by her. He concludes by saying that her actions are simply "testimony to the results of a little so-called freedom imposed on people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred" (Morrison, *Beloved* 194). Schoolteacher represents the white, ethnocentric ideology reigning in the time of antebellum slavery, and his conviction of the inferiority of the black race explains his disgust against them. This white overseer does not see the point of understanding Sethe's version of the story, since he is only acquainted with the Eurocentric side of history, which, at the time, only considered slaves to be property and not human beings containing a heart and a soul.

Just like Paid Stamp, Paul D has difficulties understanding the codes of the language the women of 124 share between them: "Hearing the three of them laughing at something he wasn't in on. The code they used among themselves that he could not break" (Morrison, *Beloved* 169). Paul D is a man who has shut his past in a rusted tobacco tin, and for a long time, he is not ready for the past to enter his life. Instead, he tries to function as some kind of hero, fighting challenges as a man who takes pride in loving "just a little bit" (Morrison, *Beloved* 59). On the other side, he also represents his African (American) heritage, through the songs he sings together with his chain gang. Songs that only these men understood: "They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings" (Morrison, *Beloved* 139). Had it not been for this collective communication of calls and responses within this community of prisoners, they would not have managed to escape the shacks, when flooded. It is due to a communal voice that he starts on his journey to become a freeman. How stories are shared within the community is an important feature in Morrison's novel, and even though Sethe is almost annihilated by her obsession with Beloved and the past, it is also through sharing her (Sethe's) story with Beloved that creates some kind of hope for the family.

Beloved represents a destructive factor at 124 Bluestone Road, but she is also the one who eventually makes Sethe deal with her traumatic past. Because of the questions Beloved asks her "she remembers something she had forgotten she knew" (Morrison, *Beloved* 80). For example, she recollects Nan, her grandmother. She recollects how she had revealed to Sethe that also Sethe's mother had sacrificed the mulatto babies she had born. They were the result of her master's sexual exploitation of her, and she could not manage to take care of these babies. She also recollects how Nan used to speak in another tongue, probably an African language. Sethe cannot remember the meaning of this language, but the memory of these long-gone voices reconnects her to her African ancestors.

Sethe recollects such important memories, but Beloved's presence is too vehement for her to find her way back to the community by herself. However, Denver, the other daughter, who has lately been left more or less to herself, has taken advantage of listening to the voices of 124. She used to deal with her mum's story by withdrawing from the community. For example, she quit school when Nelson Lord asked her about her mum's crime (Morrison, *Beloved* 131), later stopped talking for

two years, and has hardly interacted with people for a decade. However, Rushdy observes how Denver understands that she has to approach the community to save her mother (Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g)" 581). By listening to the conversations between Sethe and Beloved, she has gotten a better understanding of Sethe, and Denver sees that she has to use her own voice in attributing to a future for her and her mum. Due to her visit to her former teacher, Mrs. Lady Jones, the relationship between the family of 124 and the rest of the "village", is restored. This is a society that condemned Sethe for her actions 18 years ago, but they also have room for absolution. So, when the female neighbourhood understands that the family is starving, they commence bringing food to them:

Every now and then, all through the spring, names appeared near or in gifts of food. Obviously for the return of the pan or plate or basket; but also to let the girl know, if she cared to, who the donor was, because some of the parcels were wrapped in paper, and though there was nothing to return, the name was nevertheless there. (Morrison, *Beloved* 316)

Later on, when Denver goes to the Bodwin siblings to look for work, she succeeds since she allows herself to reveal how bad her situation is: "Nobody was going to help her unless she told it - told all of it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 322). By using her voice, she becomes part of the community and consequently is empowered by this. Towards the end of the story, it is the community that contributes to getting rid of the devil child. When Denver is waiting for Mr. Bodwin to pick her up at 124 Bluestone Road, a congregation of women, led by Ella, come down towards the property chanting and praying to exorcise the ghost. Ella thought that "[w]hatever Sethe had done, [she] didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (Morrison, *Beloved* 326), and through this gesture, it becomes clear that as long as Sethe allows herself to become a part of the community, there will be hope for her. The family, through Denver, called out for help, and the community responded.

Another character who needs help from the community is Paul D. It is first when he is able to understand Sethe's actions, that there will be a future for them.

According to Sitter, the news clipping about Sethe's crime does not give him that understanding. This written "voice" makes him compare Sethe to an animal by stating "[y]ou got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Morrison, *Beloved* 212)/Sitter 25). This written story, put down on paper by white people, is not complete enough to make Paul D take in Sethe's experience. Still, through listening to Stamp Paid's oral version of the latest escapades of Sethe, trying to attack Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick, there is some kind of communal cleansing between the men:

They laughed then. A rusty chuckle at first and then more, louder and louder until Stamp took out his pocket handkerchief and wiped his eyes while Paul D pressed the heel of his hand in his own. As the scene neither one had witnessed took shape before them, its seriousness and its embarrassment made them shake with laughter. (Sitter 25/ Morrison, *Beloved* 338)

This incident makes Paul D regain a belief in a common future for him and Sethe. Instead of keeping his trauma locked in this rusted tobacco box, he opens it and "wants to put down his story next to hers [Sethe's]" (Morrison, *Beloved* 248). According to Sitter, it is by implying the preposition "next to" that Morrison conveys how essential it is to consider both stories to be of equal importance. Only by accepting each other's brutal history can they manage to create a common future (Sitter 26).

In the process of giving the African Americans their voice back, Morrison deliberately employs narrative crossings, and together the different individual stories present a version of the African American history that has to be passed on to future generations. These stories are all subjective versions of different slave experiences, but together they create a more complex portrayal of the slaves than any earlier ethnocentric version. According to Rafael Pérez-Torres, this use of multiple narratives turns the novel into a postmodern "pastiche of discourses intimately tied to forms of power" (706). Pérez-Torres does not support Jameson's conviction of pastiche being some kind of blank parody but chooses to follow David Antin's assertions that pastiche has to do with the liberating technique which frees the

signifier from a fixed frame of reference (Pérez-Torres 703). Consequently, there is a higher degree of unreliability of interpretation.

Another important postmodernist critic who supports such a deconstruction of the sign is Hutcheon. She coined the term “historiographic metafiction”. According to her reasoning, historiographic metafiction problematises the relationship between the signifier and its signified, but she claims that language still communicates. What she emphasises is the importance of realising that

[t]here is not so much “a loss of belief in a significant external reality” [...] as there is a loss of faith in our ability to (unproblematically) *know* that reality, and therefore to be able to represent it in language. (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 119)

She also highlights how postmodern fiction asks new questions when it comes to reference. She emphasises the importance of “to which discursive context could this language belong?” and “to which prior textualization must we refer?” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 119). She stresses how historiographic metafiction underlines the importance of how the “referent is always already inscribed in the discourses of our culture”, and how “this is the text’s major link with the “world”, one that acknowledges its identity as construct, rather than as simulacrum of some “real” outside” (Hutcheon, *A Poetics* 119). Thus, in postmodern terms, Morrison narrates a story based on events coloured by revisualising and reviving the black slave through ‘playing’ with storytelling and memories of a premodern African culture of passing stories on from generation to generation.

The novel’s ending can easily work as an allegory. Only by putting the African American version of the story next to the traditional Euro-American version of history, will there be hope for a common future for the American people. In addition, there should be room for all the other voices that have not been taken into consideration so far, for example, the voices of other minorities and native tribes. The singular subjective voices have been displaced by this chorus and in such a manner adds power and agency to the African American.

3.4 The importance of (re)memory

All the individual stories I discussed in the last section represent fragmented voices of different characters. Together they stand forth as some kind of communal and historical African American voice. Simultaneously, the stories constitute different memories and rememories. According to psychological criticism, there is an important difference between a plain memory and a rememory, where the former represents whichever recollection from the past, whereas the latter has uncanny aspects attached. In his essay “the “Uncanny””, Sigmund Freud is especially concerned about the fact that “everything is *unheimlich* (uncanny) that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (802). It is this extradimensional rememory that becomes extra important in Sethe’s strive for recovery. However, in Morrison’s writing process, ordinary memory is important for her in her search to create a complete story with characters that fulfil her requirements as a writer of African American narration.

As mentioned multiple times, White emphasises how he thinks that all history is just as much “*invented as found*” (82). According to White, different people will pick different facts for their narrative because they have different kinds of stories to tell (85), and just as every historian must work with the facts that he has available, and simultaneously “reconstruct” what happened by filling in the gaps of missing information (51), Morrison presents a version of the African American history where she uses images and memory to fill in the missing gaps in her fictive portrayal of historical events.

Morrison asserts in “The Site of Memory” that in the process of creating fiction, she always starts with an image. Such images help her in the process of recollecting events and reconstructing worlds where she can explore the interior life of the characters (Morrison, “The Site of Memory” 92,95). Morrison creates her texts by letting an image, a picture, make her recollect what the memory may be about (95). Using the image as a point of departure, she tries to find and create an interior truth within those slaves who did not tell their stories despite owning them. In other words, she is trying to “fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left” (Morrison, “The Site of Memory” 93-94). In this process, memory or rememory is of significant importance. The rememory differs from ordinary memory in its ability to function as a form of

counter-memory. This kind of rememory can blend the past, the present, and the future (Tai 228).

In known trauma theory, experts accentuate the importance of photography in therapeutic work. According to critic Marianne Hirsch, photography can work “as a primary medium of transgenerational transmission of trauma” (103) when the generation of postmemory tries to deal with trauma experienced by their predecessor(s). What this means is that the photo is a good source of memory for people who came after (an atrocious event), and even though her article “The Generation of Postmemory” is mainly connected to the atrocities caused by the Holocaust, I think these ideas are just as valid for descendants of African American slaves.

Just like Morrison uses images to inspire herself in the creation of text production, she lets her characters use both real artifacts and more fantastical encounters as fuel to their rememories. Such a blending of both realistic and paranormal triggers appears natural to the reader. This is partly because of how the reader is acquainted with Morrison’s attitude towards the magical world and through how her writing blurs against the Gothic.

Morrison converted to Catholicism at the age of twelve, and according to Nittle, this may be explained by how the young girl was fascinated by the mysticism offered by this branch of Christianity. Catholicism emphasises the importance of both rituals and remembrance of the deceased (Nittle 52). When African Americans were afflicted by the Eurocentric Christianity, inflicted upon the slaves by their slave masters, the slaves often chose to mix this Western belief system with African religion and spirits.

In the novel, there is a rather uncanny moment when Beloved asks her mother about her earrings. It’s uncanny because Beloved could not have known about the jewellery without having seen them back before the infanticide. In addition to the uncanny atmosphere Beloved’s interrogation about them creates, this incident also generates a moment of rememory, and this rememory blends the borders of African and Eurocentric culture. The earrings came in the shape of a circled cross. The cross will probably make white listeners/readers think about Christianity and as a consequence they would represent a Eurocentric dominion. Such a view may be supported by the fact that they remind Sethe of the slave mark her mother bore (Morrison, *Beloved* 79). However, according to Nittle, this circled cross has its origin

in Kongo (134), and for Sethe it works as an ancestral perspective signifying her African heritage. In addition, the circled cross makes Sethe think about the slap she received from her mother when wishing for a mark herself (Morrison, *Beloved* 79). Consequently, the cross both reminds Sethe of her African heritage and also of the trauma experienced by her people (Nittle 135).

As explained in the introduction, African spirits have their origins in diseased deities, and they come into the contemporary world where they possess devotees (Lock 68). The parallel to Catholic saints is rather apparent, and even though saints do not take possession in the same way as loas, they are considered to have extraordinary powers that can protect their worshippers in their everyday lives. African American Catholics are quite rare with approximately 3 million in the US today (Nittle 58), but the hybridization of African mythology and Catholic Christianity is a common phenomenon in the world and in the Americas. For example, it is customary in South America among Hispanics, and the tradition of American Hoodoo has its origin in this kind of hybridized religion in Haiti, an important French slave state until the great slave revolt between 1791-1804 (Ogen 1).

Through a mixture of African rituals and Christian prayers, the thirty neighbouring women of *Beloved* show up to offer support to Sethe, and to get rid of the destroying evil force that has taken possession of 124 Bluestone Road:

Some brought what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks, lying in the space between their breasts. Others brought Christian faith - as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. (Morrison, *Beloved* 327)

This excerpt from the third part of the novel shows us how the Africanized type of Christianity worked as a powerful unifying factor within the community. Performing the exorcism also revived memories these women had forgotten about. By approaching, and taking in the sight of 124 Bluestone Road, fragmented memories from the women's childhood appeared to them in some kind of vision. Memories of dead relatives and days gone by are revitalised through the women's interaction with

this property being the source of so many memories which are both good and horrible.

124 Bluestone Road was a house given to Baby Suggs by the Bowdens after her son, Halle, had bought her freedom. She used to be an important person in the neighbourhood, and her house was earlier the gathering point for the local community. Additionally, she functioned as an unchurched preacher out at the Clearing in the middle of the woods, and her congregation respected her deeply. When Sethe and Beloved stand in the door opening, listening to the communicants of women chanting and praying, Sethe suddenly gets this feeling that Baby Suggs' beautiful sermons about believing in one's heart were right there with her:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. 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. (Morrison, *Beloved* 333)

Through this memory of her mother-in-law, Morrison shows us how memories bring back the dead, and also how important diseased people are for African Americans. This is not the only time Baby Suggs manages to break through to the mind of the living. When Denver starts fearing that Beloved's parasitic behaviour will destroy and maybe kill Sethe, Baby Suggs' voice appears on the porch when Denver has a hard time finding the courage to pay her first visit in ten years to Mrs. Lady Jones (Morrison, *Beloved* 310). She encourages Denver to meet the world despite there being "no defense" (Morrison, *Beloved* 310) out there. She pushes Denver to go out into the community and "know it" (Morrison, *Beloved* 310). According to Rushdy, "know" is to understand the historical knowledge, and how this can give Denver integrity, and by following her grandmother's advice, and leaving the yard, she enables herself to understand the world around her and the forces of slavery (Rushdy, "Daughters Signifyin(g)" 582).

Sethe never wanted her baby dead. She only wanted her to be safe, and only death could save her. If not, schoolteacher would take her. By memorising *Beloved*, Sethe not only pays tribute to her own child but also to all other Africans and African Americans who suffered due to slavery. By remembering them, they do not die. It is not a coincidence that Morrison chooses to base her novel on the true story of Margaret Garner (b. 1833) who actually killed her own girl to free her from a life in bondage. Garner was not judged for murder, however, but for causing property damage (Nittle 128). This judicial treatment of Margaret Garner shows an extreme degradation of the female slave, and it reminds us of the importance of keeping such memories alive. Morrison repeatedly states that “[t]his is not a story to pass on” (*Beloved* 350). By this, she does not mean that one should not know the story which is told, because one certainly should. As a result of knowing about the atrocities of the past, such cruelty should be avoided in the future. That is a type of human degradation that should not be repeated. Hence, by remembering the dead, one remembers the ancestors and how important they are for who you become. The different voices and memories of the story have a healing effect, and eventually, they create a wholeness within the community. Thus, by juxtaposing personal memories with collective ones, Morrison manages to create a collective African American story that is important to know of, but which was partly omitted by the white historians.

Chapter 4 A comparison of the three novels

In this part of the thesis, I want to explore further some of the elements I have discussed in the main analysis of *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved*. I will do this through comparison. The three neo-slave narratives are inspired by a postmodern approach to writing texts where the concept of genre is considered to have no essence. Such ideas support a weakening of the boundaries between different genres, and this blurring creates hybrid texts that will allow the past, the present, and the future to interrelate. I have considered all the novels to be hybrids, but Reed, Butler, and Morrison choose different techniques as to how they bridge different types of genres to create their unique novels. In the following subchapters, I will start by exploring further this matter of hybridization within the three novels. This comparison will then be followed by an exploration of how the novels play with the first-person narrative voice, and how individual subjective voices end up as an intersubjective project. The different characters are more or less dependent on memories and rememories in the process of finding their identity and voice. Hence, this will be the third aspect I will investigate. Last, but not least, I want to explore and compare how the three authors depict the importance of community in their respective novels.

4.1 Hybrid compositions with a variety of bridging and metafiction

To start my comparison between the three neo-slave narratives I find it natural to begin with the experimental concept of hybridization inherited in both *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved*. One of the main critics on which I build my discussion is John Frow and his approach to “genre” as having no essence (145). He supports the idea that “genre” obtains its meaning from the situation it relates to (Frow 11). The range of attainable uses is always open-ended. Hence, genre classification is as a direct consequence unstable and unpredictable (Frow 26), and as a result, it is impossible not to mix genres (Frow 28). Additionally, Frow stresses how background information is important when reading a text since all texts will

require specific kinds of knowledge (87-88). Supported by Frow's thoughts about genre theory, I have approached the different neo-slave narratives exploring the possibilities entailed by such a weakening of genre boundaries.

All the discussed novels belong to the tradition of the neo-slave narrative, where the bridging of the past, the present, and the future is a major element. Still, despite their shared focus on antebellum slavery and its connection to the contemporary USA, they have their unique hybrid expression. Whereas Reed experiments by playing with the original slave narrative, and turning it into a Menippean satire, Butler sends her protagonist off on a trip back to antebellum slavery through the help of sci-fi, while Morrison creates her bridging of African American ancestry and contemporary US by presenting a mixture of the historical novel with the Gothic.

Whereas Butler and Morrison create different types of hybrid stories that invite the reader into an imagined reality of antebellum life, Reed differs from the female writers by not focusing much on the specific conditions under which the slaves strived. This novel is the more metafictional of the three, and Reed's main goal seems predominantly to be the importance of owning one's own story through the ability to write. Similarly to the traditional slave narratives, he emphasises the importance of literacy, but to make this literacy work, it has to be connected to the African tradition of Vodoun. The ordinary white way of being literate was not enough, and Reed implements Neo-Hoodooism into the writing process for it to work. In addition to focusing on this particular type of writing, he bridges the past with the present through a strong implementation of historical anachronisms. The reader might be confused by the absence of linearity within the narrative, but simultaneously this anachronistic approach, where events and artifacts of the past, the present, and the future are blended, also supports Reed's effort to connect the past slave narrative with the contemporary social conditions in the USA.

Butler presents a plot which brings the reader back to antebellum slavery by letting us follow the contemporary character, Dana, on her genealogical travel back to Maryland to learn about her slave ancestry. By letting the reader follow a modern and independent black woman from 1976, Butler creates a novel in which contemporary readers may identify more easily than they can with Reed's complex trickster characters. In traditional slave narratives, we normally follow an escaped slave. Readers might have problems understanding this slave fully, because they do not understand the antebellum ideology. As an alternative to this presentation of the

slave, Butler manages to bring the reader along with Dana into the past through the implementation of this sci-fi spatio-temporal kidnapping or travel. This narrative might appear more fantastic, but at the same time more understandable for the audience, since the readers can somehow identify with Dana and her meeting with antebellum America.

Similarly to Reed, Butler also uses a writer as the novel's protagonist, but unlike Raven, Dana is not that interested in the writing process itself. Like Raven, she is concerned with the fact that what she writes must be her African American story, but she does not bring magic into her writing in the same way as Raven. However, she needs the magic of sci-fi to get the inspiration needed to write. What she reads about the past, does not satisfy her. She needs to understand her ancestors better than any book can tell her, and this understanding is achieved during her different stays at the plantation. Additionally, her literacy skills also become important in her experience at the plantation. They are used to bring Dana close to her ancestor, Rufus, through her reading to him, and they are important in her strive to bring Kevin back to Maryland when stuck elsewhere in 19th-century America. Her skills give her agency to fight the slave system by teaching other slaves to read. However, when it comes to literacy, I would claim that it is Dana's intellect which is of the greater importance concerning literary abilities. To see how this 20th-century woman, who is both educated and well-read, deals with the challenges of chattel slavery, makes the connection between the past, the present, and the future understandable to a modern reader. To connect this modern woman's experiences to antebellum America, however, she needed spatio-temporal travel as bridging.

Morrison chooses a blending between the historical slave novel and the Gothic. In contradiction to Reed and Butler, she does not set any part of her novel in modern America. However, focusing heavily on the Gothic, the ghost functions as the bridging between the past, the present, and the future. Morrison depicts highly superstitious characters. For the main characters, this connection with the past through the child ghost is presented as a rather mundane event. This reaction is supported by Morrison's implementation of African American traditions in which contact with the dead is common. However, to make the novel come forth as a neo-slave narrative, it needs a deeper dimension than that of the relationship between a murdered child and her mother, and through a dream-like conversation between the female residents of 124 Bluestone Road, it becomes clear that *Beloved* represents

the “Sixty Million and more” (Morrison, *Beloved* epigraph) slaves that were brought from Africa to work as slaves for white Americans. Many died during the crossing. Morrison presents an alternative Gothic story by letting the ghost survive. The “other” is not a threat as such. According to her depiction of the African American people, they are people who should also have their share in American history. Through this visualisation of how the past may come back and haunt us, she manages to bridge the historical past of antebellum America with contemporary race issues in the states.

Both Reed and Morrison are fascinated by the superstitious, and they both refer to a Gothic strongly affected by African spirituality. Both authors show a strong belief in the power of supernatural elements, but whereas Morrison chooses a more traditional ghost, Reed presents a story where Neo-HooDooism brings magic into the plot. The two writers also choose different ways of including the superstitious phenomena. In *Beloved* we make acquaintance with a ghost that to a certain extent is presented as a member of the household, despite causing a lot of trouble there. Reed’s spirits are more diffuse. They take residence in Raven’s writing but may also appear in mysterious characters such as Pompey. The effect of the Gothic is also different in the two stories. Whereas Reed adds another layer to his satire by mixing Gothic elements into the historical period of Reconstruction, but where slaves have PhDs and sleep in waterbeds, Morrison depicts a Gothic scenery where the “other” is a depiction of an American historical disgrace which has to be dealt with and given space within the American society (Rose 51). However, both novels feature ghostly or otherwise supernatural characters who disturb and discombobulate the “real” characters.

In contradiction to Reed and Butler, Morrison presents a novel which pays homage to oral culture and oral traditions of storytelling. There is no literate poet or writer in her story, but there are several storytellers. Morrison had a particular interest in presenting stories that traditionally would not have been written down since the stories’ owners did not know how to write (“The Site of Memory” 91), but who had just as important, and maybe even worse, stories to tell. The characters living at 124 Bluestone Road are more or less illiterate, but they can talk and through the ghost’s demanding questioning, the household manages to deal with a traumatic past. Through different dialogues between the females, and also between other characters, Morrison makes these characters invite the reader to participate in

another kind of slave story than the ones written by literate escaped slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.

Just as the stories are hybridized through their mixing and blending with different types of texts, also the characters appear to be hybridized. Let us look at Raven first. He used to be a slave, but the way he is depicted, he seldom refers to atrocities committed towards him. He is, however, extremely concerned about how the slaves' stories are presented to society, and he finds himself to be suited to this job through his connections to African Vodoun loas. Consequently, it is as a trickster character that he regains power. Additionally, we have the feeling that this trickster character is more than one person. Are Raven and Robin actually two different characters, or are they two versions of the same character, and is Raven the literary reflection of Reed? What is sure, is that Raven is a trickster character who embodies supernatural characteristics that help him stand up against the institution of slavery. Our conviction, that Raven is not embodying any of that essence traditionally given to the African American slave by the white hegemony, becomes clear through the different masks he is wearing, that of the humble and naïve slave (Uncle Robin), the literate slave (Quickskill) or the trickster (Raven).

Dana is also depicted as a hybrid character. At first, she keeps her 1976 attitude and behaviour when transported back to antebellum Maryland, but she soon realises that she will not survive this way. Slowly, she is transformed into a kind of hybrid slave. She always keeps her academic knowledge, but slowly she adapts to the rules at the Weylin plantation.

Dana reminds us of colonised people that Homi Bhabha and Edward Said describe in their postcolonial work:

Bhabha is especially concerned with the system of mimicry. The colonized had to mimic the language, the gestures, to some degree the customs, and even the dress of the colonizers (Bennett & Royle, 2016, p 293). This was something the rulers wanted, but it was also agonizing, because there was the threat that the colonized would become stronger than the colonizers. Whereas Said looks upon the relationship between the two as a binary (Saussure), where there is a clear distinction between the superior and the inferior, Bhabha does not support this thought. He believes in a kind of hybridity where

“the Other” accepted submission to authority, but with a difference. This means that they through their adaption to the colonizers’ discourse also added their own values. Despite emphasizing how the cultural encounters encouraged copying the Western culture, Bhabha also admits that this destroyed people’s identity (Fry,2009). (Lindland, “Postcolonialism”)

In contrast to Bhabha’s and Said’s postcolonial theorisation, Dana is a fictional character. However, according to White’s theory on history, such fictional voices can give us valid historical information. The way in which Dana uses her modern skills and knowledge gives her an advantage over the other slaves. Still, this also challenges her attitude as to what is right and wrong. On her first visits to the plantation, she would never have been capable of killing Rufus, but eventually, she does. There is a limit to what treatment the modern Dana can accept from Rufus, and she will not accept rape. How Dana balances her modern identity with the antebellum identity is only possible through the hybrid construction of the novel. It is only through going back to the 19th century that she could have been challenged in this specific way. Butler challenges Dana’s attitude and perception about antebellum slavery by giving her this chance to travel through time, and maybe this way of presenting chattel slavery can contribute to a better understanding of the American slave history.

Unlike Dana and Raven, Sethe appears to be less of a hybrid character, but more likely a character who is enormously affected by her past. She is forced to deal with her trauma through the confrontations made by the devil child, and after a tough struggle, she chooses to live on. She and Paul D might share a future since they have finally been able to confront their past and put their stories next to each other. However, I have the feeling that we leave her as a rather broken woman. It has been hard for her to deal with all this trauma. Like Sethe, Dana has gone through much turmoil, both psychologically and physically. She left one arm in Maryland escaping Rufus’ attempt of raping her. Physically, the wound heals, but she will always be affected by the agitation she experienced back in antebellum Maryland. Kevin can somehow relate to what Dana is going through since he joined her on one of her travels back to Maryland, and it is important how they choose to communicate through dialogue to process the trauma. They will go on with their lives, marked by it, but they will cope. The way these characters deal with traumatic experiences can be

perceived as a depiction of how contemporary African Americans somehow will be marked by the trauma experienced by their ancestors.

Reed, Butler, and Morrison have chosen rather different approaches to how they construct their neo-slave narratives. Nevertheless, they all experiment with genres, and this experimentation helps the audience understand chattel slavery better. As mentioned, Frow supports the idea that genre obtains its meaning from the situation it relates to (11). *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* were published in the post-civil rights era, and all the neo-slave narratives relate to modern readers. This audience has no personal experience with chattel slavery. However, many of them embody academic knowledge through their schooling and further studies. Additionally, the African American portion of the readers would share their ancestors' trauma as secondary witnesses. Frow emphasises how important background information is when reading a text (87), and that any text "presupposes certain kinds of knowledge" (88). Since "genre" is considered to inhabit an open-ended range of attainable uses, it ends up being unstable and unpredictable (Frow 26). Depending on the situation it relates to, it will change, and this change may well cause destabilised borders between what is traditionally considered to represent genres. In this process, every individual text will adjust to the reading audience. Thus, every text will have a unique expression, and according to Schlegel "[e]very work is its own genre" (Frow 29).

When Reed, Butler, and Morrison created their novels, they chose to take advantage of such a way of regarding the concept of genre, and through effacing Aristotelian genre borders, and the traditional linear perception of time and space, they manage to create literature which is able to communicate slave history to modern American citizens. Besides, the experimental way in which these neo-slave novels are written may also make the readers understand their own past better, particularly the African American part of it.

4.2 From individual voices to an intersubjective project

One of the main projects in Reed's, Butler's, and Morrison's neo-slave novels was to give the African American former slaves back their voices. This was to be done from

“the bottom up” (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4), and the presentation of the slave as an independent and credible eyewitness was an essential element within their novels.

Earlier slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* had already in the 19th century presented narratives which included genuine slave narratives treating the actual experiences of the first-person speakers. Still, as discussed, white editors/sponsors typically wielded tight control over publishing decisions. *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* are written and published in the post-civil rights era, and the authors are more at liberty in the way they choose to present the antebellum slave. There is no longer a white hegemony that controls the content of the different testimonies that are presented. Reed, Butler, and Morrison write in a time when subjective voices have replaced objective universal truths, and consequently, it is possible for the authors to present novels where slave testimonies are considered important and credible sources for validating truth (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 4). Of course, earlier eyewitness stories are also very important in visualising slave experiences in antebellum America. However, I would say that the neo-slave narratives, through this multitude of first-person narratives, present an alternative and to some extent a more complete portrayal of slavery in America.

The author who distances herself most from the original slave narratives when it comes to whose voices are depicted, is Morrison. She presents a multitude of witnessing voices from characters who neither know how to read nor write. Morrison wanted room for these more anonymous (subaltern) slave testimonies within the (African) American history. They had not been revolved around earlier, despite being extremely important in depicting a trustworthy testimony of antebellum slave life. Additionally, *Beloved* incorporates a heteroglossia of voices where there is just as much room for the dead as for the living. The resurrected ghost, Beloved, works as a link to the past. Baby Beloved is killed by her mother, Sethe, as a consequence of slavery, and Beloved’s subjective voice represents the voices of all the slaves who died as a result of slavery. It is the Gothic elements that make it possible to connect Beloved’s voice to those of the Middle Passage, and this fabulation is also present in the part where Morrison depicts the conflating voices of Beloved, Sethe, and Denver so that they become one. By presenting such a simultaneous blend of voices by characters who represent both the past (Beloved), the present (Sethe), and the future

(Denver) (Tai 228), Morrison beautifully manages to present a history that connects the present with the past, and the future with the present.

Both Reed and Butler present novels where the main voice is displayed through a literate character, more like in the original slave narratives. Still, like Morrison, they depict narratives embodying a multitude of voices. Reed, like Morrison, creates a conflating veil covering the specific identity of the voice(s) we hear. Raven is presented as the protagonist poet and writer, who is supposed to write Robin's story. Simultaneously, the reader can never be sure who is who of the two, and additionally, the reader is never sure how much of the author's voice (Reed's) is entangled in the story. In contrast to Morrison, who created the conflation through her Gothic approach, Reed creates confusion by presenting characters who have names beginning with the same letter. Robin and Raven both represent victims of antebellum slavery, but whereas Raven fled to Canada to physically escape slavery, Robin freed himself mentally by believing in the dogma that freedom is "a state of mind" (Reed, *Flight* 3). Reed adds complexity to this depiction by somehow representing contemporary America himself through his own voice as the author, and this way he bridges these experiences of the past with present American ideology. He wrote the novel towards the end of the 1970s, and I feel that the author, Reed, blends these two alternative thoughts of Raven and Robin as to how contemporary African Americans can choose to meet present challenges in American society concerning race issues.

Butler never conflates voices in the same way as Morrison and Reed, but by physically moving the protagonist, Dana, from the contemporary USA back to antebellum Maryland, she more directly mixes conventions and ideology presented within the two societies. By letting the modern and educated Dana meet and communicate with her ancestors, both white plantation owners and African American slaves, who are all formed by a very different ideology from Dana, the reader becomes aware of how complicated it is for contemporary people to fully understand slave history. In addition to spatio-temporal journeys, Dana's understanding of antebellum slavery also requires a mental reorganisation. Through her multiple journeys back to the Weylin plantation, Dana transforms from being a historical voyeur to an active participant (Popescu 185), and this affects her subjective voice and how she perceives her antebellum surroundings. Through Dana's experiences, Butler shows the reader how important it is to understand the past, and by letting the

reader follow Dana's spatio-temporal journeys, Butler as a fiction writer might help the audience with this.

In addition to presenting African American voices of antebellum America, we are also invited to hear "testimonies" made by white people. First of all, Dana is married to a white man, Kevin. This mixed couple finds a shared understanding through dialogue, and it is in him that Dana finds her kindred spirit. However, we see how difficult it is for Dana to create a relationship with Rufus, because of the ideology he was formed by in the 19th century. Additionally, Butler also presents a contemporary reluctance of reconciliation between white Americans and African Americans in the presentation of the couple's respective families. None of them accepted the alliance between Dana and Kevin, and it is all about racism, both ways.

In contradiction to Morrison and Butler, Reed sees no future in white people. In his novel *Flight to Canada*, they are portrayed through the voices of Arthur Swille, the nostalgic slave master who fully believes in a society where slaves are considered to belong to and serve the white man. He saw no other way. His mulatto kid, Cato, is also contaminated by this white blood and is sent off with Mammy Barracuda, the black servant who had "betrayed" her race by adopting the white man's religion. Other white people we hear about are the slave catchers, Leechfield's exploitive Russian agent, and Yankee Jack, Quaw Qwaw Tralaralara's pirate husband. None of these white characters are in any way sympathetic, and there will not be room for them in Uncle Robin's newly established home for retired artists. In his, and maybe also Raven's and Reed's future (since we can never be sure who is who), there is only room for African American slaves, and maybe other American native artists such as Quaw Qwaw Tralaralara and her people. In contrast to all the male voices, this female native voice stands forth as a somewhat more compromising voice concerning people and race: " 'Race,' Quaw Quaw said. ' Always race. You and Quicksill always boxing yourself in. What does race have to do with it? People are people' " (Reed, *Flight* 137). Thus, also in *Flight to Canada*, there is room for consolidation, and like in *Kindred* and *Beloved*, this compromising voice is fronted by a woman.

Through the three novels, we meet a heteroglossia of voices. By letting these voices present different individual stories and then fronting them as an intersubjective project, the authors manage to give a diverse and complex portrayal of what antebellum slavery was all about. Despite representing this multitude of subjective

stories, we still just listen to a fraction of all the stories that could have been told. However, through presenting various experiences of what slavery was, *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* manage to portray stories in which the slaves as a group inhabit agency and a will to resist as the norm.

4.3 A patchwork of (re)memories

All the protagonists I have studied try to deal with the atrocities of the antebellum period in the USA in different ways, and one way of portraying the different voices is through memory and rememory. As mentioned in the main discussion there is a difference between the two (3.4), and whereas memory only refers to any recollection one might have, the rememory additionally embodies an uncanny element.

It is mainly the female writers who choose to implement this element of rememory within their work. One of the main issues both the protagonists confront is how memorising is challenging, since, as Christian observes, the process of memorising requires people to recollect both parts that they want to remember and parts they want to forget (Rushdy, "Families of Orphans" 139). Whereas Butler makes fragmented memories from an old family Bible trigger the modern and intellectual protagonist, Dana, in joining a spatio-temporal journey back to her roots in antebellum Maryland, Morrison continually lets her characters connect experiences to images. For example, when Sethe encounters the devil child in the shape of a young woman and has a closer look at her face, she has this immediate urge to go to the toilet, and when she does not reach it and has to go just outside the outhouse, she gets these images from giving birth to Denver (Morrison, *Beloved* 66). What kind of encounters or images that create which memory is not always obvious to the reader, but what they have in common is that they are important in Sethe's way of dealing with her past traumatic experiences, and we can see how Morrison uses the images to elicit the interior truth of the anonymous slaves whereas she simultaneously tries to fill in the gaps that the original slave narrative left out ("The Site of Memory" 94)

For Dana it is different. In her 1976 life, she lives more or less a harmonious life despite the racist attitude she is confronted with in American society. Her memorial voyage is of a different kind, where other modern readers are invited to join

her experiences in antebellum America, first as a tourist, watching from a distance, and later as a proper slave (Popescu 185). Despite their different approaches to how memory and rememory are important for the characters, they both have to come to terms with both good and bad recollections. On one occasion Sethe for example abruptly stops combing Denver's hair and starts folding sheets that are not yet dry, because "she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew" (Morrison, *Beloved* 80). Dana also has some tough experiences down her memory lane. One example is her ancestor Rufus's condescending and exploitative behaviour, and how her several times great grandmother, Alice, chose to commit suicide because of it. Additionally, Dana was physically traumatised during her stay, and despite being able to continue her contemporary life with Kevin, due to the death of Rufus, the experiences created back at the Weylin plantation will probably continue to affect the couple for the rest of their lives.

Family does not hold a privileged place for Reed, the way it does for Morrison and Butler, and in mainstream American culture. It does not function as the conduit through which Americans are connected to the past, and through which Americans find their places in the tapestry of American history. Reed is a truly countercultural figure. For Raven, it is as though his friends are more or less his family, and what he seeks through his writing is more of a connection to the common roots of all African Americans, and not his roots in particular. Nevertheless, like the characters in *Kindred* and *Beloved*, he is affected and formed by the experiences he goes through. Like many escaped slaves, he tries to make a better life in the North but eventually realises that he belongs together with Uncle Robin and the rest of the African American people down South. His story is more or less a huge flashback. Raven is already back at the Swille plantation when he invites the reader into his journey to physical freedom in Canada and back to mental freedom surrounded by his chosen kin. This flashback also works as a patchwork of memories, but in a different manner than in the two other novels. Nevertheless, as Christian claims, they all share more pleasant and more frightening encounters as part of their recollection (Rushdy, "Families of Orphans" 139).

Additionally, through his historical anachronisms, Reed creates lots of strange images that challenge the reader's knowledge and memory. Just as we discover Dana's memories along with her, Reed invites the reader to recollect history in an

alternative way, one that connects the past with the present and the future with the past through historical anachronisms.

4.4 The portrayal of the community

All the novels studied for this thesis are different kinds of hybrid texts. They mix literary devices from different genre traditions to make their message come true to the reader. In some ways, one could claim that the form is more important than the plot, and that major themes are more a result of the form and style than the plots. *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* have rather different compositions, but despite the different forms and styles, the focus on the importance of an African American community is inherent in all of them.

Raven is never looking for a community, but he finally realises that slavery does not end just by fleeing North. According to Hogue, “Reed in particular wants to liberate African American writing” (258), and when Raven fully realises that freedom is a “state of mind” (Reed, *Flight* 163), and “that he will find his freedom through writing” (Lindland, “A discussion on satire”), he sees that this will work best back with his African American “kin” down South. His former slave companions, Leechfield and 40s, are also examples of what kind of personal decay would happen to the slaves if they went too far away from their African American brotherhood and their relation to their Hoodoo ancestors and spirits (Hogue 271). Reed chooses a rather indirect way of showing the reader the importance of the community, whereas both Butler and Morrison choose a more distinct approach.

Because of Dana’s rather complicated relation to the ancestors at the Weylin plantation, it becomes the slave community that is of greater importance to her. Just like in *Flight to Canada*, there is some kind of diffidence between house slaves and field hands, but unlike Raven, who more or less gives up having a relationship with the two other runaway slaves, Leechfield and 40’s, Dana little by little manages to become a part of the slave community at the plantation, and as discussed previously (2.4), she finds support there when she is snatched on. Of the three novels I have studied, *Kindred* is the one which has the most dynamic plot. Because of the implementation of sci-fi devices, Butler manages to give the reader a rather action-

filled story. It is also through direct action we get to see how Dana develops her relationship with the slave society at the plantation.

Beloved is a more dream-like novel. The strong Gothic element in this hybrid narrative brings the reader into a world of ghosts and mysticism. The ghost becomes a trope in itself, functioning as a metaphor for African American respect for their ancestors. Simultaneously, the devil child gains too much power, and Sethe's neighbours, her community, decide that they have to save Sethe from being destroyed by this creature, the neighbours recon must be evil spirits coming back from the past to make her pay for her mischiefs (a phenomenon also depicted in *Flight to Canada*). Simultaneously it is important to keep in mind how the ghost also comes forth as the redeeming factor concerning Sethe's confrontation with the past, and this is probably why she is not killed in the end. She has to stay alive to make contemporary people aware of the atrocities committed during slavery. However, eventually *Beloved* becomes too powerful and Sethe needs help to neutralise her, despite not admitting that herself. Through Sethe's oral storytelling, the reader has already learned how important the community used to be within the household. When her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, delivered her sermons she used to chant to her congregation, and they responded to her chanting by laughing, singing, and crying (Morrison, *Beloved* 112). These are happy recollections for Sethe, and they somehow indicate what it takes for Sethe to live a full life, namely a community. Similar to Dana's case, family is crucial. Denver and Paul D are important to her, but she also needs to be part of something bigger, a community that takes care of each other. The visual proof of Sethe slowly starting to be accepted back into this society is through how the neighbours bring food to 124 when the residents desperately need it, and how they eventually rally against the devil child and make her disappear from the household.

Conclusion

After having explored and compared *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* through the theoretical frameworks of disrupting genre, I will now, built on the comparison of the previous chapter, encapsulate some final reflections emanating from my analysis.

Summing up

In this master's thesis, I have discussed the neo-slave narratives *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* which were written in the 1970s and '80s. I have shown how these neo-slave novels belong to a tradition of slave narratives in America, but simultaneously the thesis has explored how they differ from earlier slave narratives by experimenting with form, style, and content in the spirit of postmodernist techniques. Being written in the post-civil rights era, African American descendants demanded self-representation, and this was done within fictional frameworks where "genre" was considered to have no essence (Frow 145). The weakening of genre boundaries created room for hybrid narratives where the slave witnesses were given complexity and agency in a way that traditional slave narratives had not fully accomplished due to restrictions imposed by white hegemony.

Sharing the same roots, African Americans are likely to embody an understanding of their slave history as being presented in a biased and Eurocentric way. Both white and African Americans fought for the abolition of slavery, and slave narratives were published in the 19th century both by abolitionists and former slaves. They were all important voices in presenting slave experiences, but it was not until the post-civil rights era that authors were able to create fiction where slaves and their testimonies fully regained the power and agency they deserved through fiction that supported alternative styles of representations of the slave (hi)story.

My discussion has tried to show how this fictional depiction of the slave became possible because of ideological changes within American society. In the post-civil rights era, literature is coloured by the dissociation from the grand narrative and its objective truths, and *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved* all adopt this

assumption. The novels depart from the strictures of classical realism in literature, and Reed, Butler, and Morrison present the readers with a multitude of slave witnesses to present the African American slave (hi)story. In some of the novels, there are many different voices, like in *Beloved*, whereas *Flight to Canada* focuses mainly on the conflation of voices. In contrast, *Kindred* adopts the more traditional first-person point of view that unfolds from Dana's perspective. Some of these witnesses are literate, like Raven and Dana, while others are illiterate, like Sethe and her kin. Nevertheless, they all have important stories to tell. Additionally, all these different subjective voices stand forth as collective ones, and they contribute to (African) American history through a multitude of reliable testimonies, whether they come from illiterate characters, dead characters, or literate ones. These testimonies fill in gaps in scientific history and present a more complete story of slave conditions than had been presented in school curriculums until then.

Both Reed, Butler, and Morrison are inspired by postmodern techniques. As mentioned, they embrace the disruption of genre and the experimental hybridity of postmodern approaches to genre. The genre-blending enables these authors to bridge antebellum America with the contemporary USA by presenting hybrid narratives where the past, the present, and the future interchangeably affect each other. This is possible because of how the slave narratives, due to genre-blending, are connected to the present through Voudon loas, immortal ghosts, and science fiction. Consequently, the neo-slave narratives may enhance the readers' understanding of chattel slavery, and simultaneously they depict narratives that challenge the readers to realise how history repeats itself if people choose not to learn from it.

The different authors choose different approaches to the hybridization of genre, though, and they all present unique hybrid products. Reed presents a neo-slave narrative in the form of a Menippean satire, where historical anachronisms and supernatural features are of great importance. Butler manages to connect the contemporary USA and antebellum slavery through the help of sci-fi, and Morrison mainly uses the Gothic ghost to connect contemporary America to antebellum atrocities through the help of images and rememory.

In the comparison, I focused rather heavily on the importance of memory, rememory, and the difference between the two. What all the novels emphasise is how important it is for people to learn about their roots and their ancestors. This

process of memorising requires people to recollect both parts that they want to remember and parts they want to forget. Morrison might be the one to explore the effect of rememory the furthest. Different images and memories of the past come back to the protagonist through rememories. This is important for her healing, but simultaneously the author pays respect to the dead ancestors through her confrontation with these memories, either through more physical visions, like with the ghost, or through more dreamlike inner visions. Reed also pays tribute to his ancestors through his project of letting loas into his writing, and last, but not least, Butler pays tribute to her ancestors by directly confronting her vague images of a past that she only understands by directly confronting her family's dark history. Additionally, through these rememories, all the characters see how important an accepting community is for them to thrive. In my analysis, I have explored different fictional communities in the novels *Flight to Canada*, *Kindred*, and *Beloved*. However, one must not forget how the novels try to convey the importance of such communities in the real world, and through the disruption of traditional genre theory and a linear approach to time and space, Reed, Butler, and Morrison manage to show the relationship between the fictional neo-slave narratives they have created, and current socio-political conditions in the USA.

Because of their shared history, African Americans embody a trauma that might not be fully understandable for the average American. By adding this kind of literature to the school curriculum, American (slave)history comes forth as less biased than before. These novels invite readers to better understand the complexity of slavery and slave life. If the readers (both black and white) are open to it, the different stories might contribute to giving them a better understanding of how social and racial conditions within the contemporary USA are linked to the country's slave history, and how this will be important to bear in mind for the future they are going to share. If there is one message that stands out in the novels, it is how important it is to understand each other to live meaningful lives. Raven is mostly concerned with the African American community and how they need each other to thrive. On the other hand, Dana and Kevin find their future through dialogue, and in *Beloved* Sethe and Paul D only believe in a shared future after daring to put their stories next to each other. Even though they are all fictional characters living in fictional universes, the message is clear enough.

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