

**Copyright**  
**by**  
**William Harold Mosley III**  
**2015**

**The Report Committee for William Harold Mosley III  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Demonic Tendencies of the Grim Fantasy: Writing Black Women in  
Octavia Butler's Kindred and Alexis De Veaux's Yabo**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

---

Matt Richardson, Supervisor

---

Julie A. Minich

**Demonic Tendencies of the Grim Fantasy: Writing Black Women in  
Octavia Butler's Kindred and Alexis De Veaux's Yabo**

**by**

**William Harold Mosley III, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2015

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this report to the strongest women in know: Laura, Mirna, Patsy, and Sylvia. Nothing stopped them from providing me with every opportunity to grow and better myself. Their sacrifices will never be forgotten.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you Dr. Julie A. Minich and Dr. Matt Richardson for getting this project from its infancy to where it is currently. Thank you to Alexis De Veaux for reading the opening lines of your book at a conference we both attended. I also appreciate Dr. Lyndon Gill, Dr. Minkah Makalani and Dr. Jennifer Wilks for their show of support and guidance.

## **Abstract**

### **Demonic Tendencies of the Grim Fantasy: Writing Black Women in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Alexis De Veaux's *Yabo***

William Harold Mosley III, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

Supervisor: Matt Richardson

The grim fantasy genre was once a product of Butler's resistant strategies against women's erasure from science fiction, fantasy, and slave narratives. The baton has been passed to De Veux in this never ending-fight against neoliberal impulses to white wash a horrid history of anti-black torture and the destruction of women's selfhood. Connecting Butler's concept, grim fantasy, with Wynter's concept, demonic grounds, allows for a productive reading of *Kindred* and *Yabo*'s ambiguous and complex conclusions. Exploring the unwritten geographies with literature reveals a lacking in black women subject formation that was a product of systematic onslaught against them.

## Table of Contents

Text .....	1
Bibliography .....	31

*Kindred* by Octavia Butler (1979) and *Yabo* by Alexis De Veaux (2014) put their respective modern-day heroines in a time when slavery was still an American institution. In *Kindred*, Edana (Dana) Franklin is a black woman working as a secretary in 1970s Los Angeles forcibly called into the past by her slave owning ancestor, Rufus Weylin. *Yabo* follows Zen during her doctoral candidacy, and also during her journeys back in time to perform vigilante justice on the encroaching colonial presence in eighteenth century New York. Returning to the past for Dana and Zen means a momentary dissociation from the material conditions of their modern-day lives but their journeys into America's slave past also encourage them to grapple with two competing sides of history, the "facts" they were told and their personal experience of them, even after they return to the present day. Dana and Zen are forever changed by their time-traveling experiences, so much so that by the end of each novel both characters are shown to be articulating for themselves how, despite all odds, they and their respective family survived chattel slavery.

Survival for Dana and Zen is marked by a post-apocalyptic rupture that exposes the fault lines of history. *Kindred* and *Yabo*, I argue, fit a science fiction model just enough to mimic this genre's formal qualities yet their preoccupations are much more devious than they first appear. As her research for *Kindred* involved a close study of slave narratives, their rhetorical strategies and narrative compromises of particular interest to Butler, she instead offered up the idea that this novel was a "grim fantasy."<sup>1</sup> It would seem as though this genre is engineered from a contradiction and yet *Kindred* is a novel unpretentiously unscientific, ending as bizarrely as it starts. In fact, beyond the leitmotif of time travelling, the novel's main influence is quite obviously the slave

---

<sup>1</sup> Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. 1988. pp xii



narrative genre. To this end, it is clear Butler's choice to disidentify her work with such an unsettling phrase points to another contradiction: the survival of black people despite repeated attempts to destroy them. As such, the genre of "grim fantasy" proves useful in explaining how for the heroines in *Kindred* and *Yabo* an irreducible, violent past can exist in tandem with a desire to imagine better versions of history that honor their female ancestry as complicit in their own survival and emancipation. In "After/Word: "Beyond Miranda's Meaning: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" Sylvia Wynter describes the 'demonic' as that which functions outside of empirical metrics which have historically connoted black womanhood as lacking, or as the binary opposite of human (364). Demonic grounds, as Katherine McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* explains,

invites a slightly different conceptual pathway—while retaining its supernatural etymology—and acts to identify a system...that can only unfold and produce an outcome of uncertainty, or (dis)organization, or something supernaturally demonic (*Demonic Grounds* xxiv).

The demonic, then, proves advantageous in discussing Dana and Zen's disposition for embracing the true nature of her chattel slave ancestry because they put their trust in something outside the history they were taught. Formally, the demonic derives from the uncanny combination of rhetorical strategies reserved for fictional settings with the horrors of black slavery. In an interview Butler granted around the time of *Kindred's* publication she made a note of refuting the novel as a work of science fiction. Without any 'real' science involved, *Kindred* would occupy a peculiar place in any genre typically associated with allusions of technology, physics, and chemistry. As such, my discussion

of these novels as grim fantasies is a demonic, womanist one where the confines of mimetic models and binary differences, historically lacking in understandings of black women's subjectivity, are subverted, manipulated, and at times jettisoned for the purposes of identifying "new forms" of writing black women (Wynter 356).

The grim fantasy genre proves useful in countering the hegemony of factual or authenticated accounts of history which have traditionally privileged men's voices over women's without deference to an outlook that is neither perversely nostalgic nor romantically optimistic. During their travels into the past Dana and Zen find themselves in situations that were ethically ambiguous due to the reductive white-washing of black history from bondage to freedom. Their newfound appreciation for the complicated nature of history has Dana and Zen all the more ready to bridge the past with the present and combat the "facts" of history. By coupling perspectives of women with a return to the past, and through the combination of devices from multiple genres, Butler and De Veaux incite readers to view history as over determined and worthy of reevaluation. As such, I argue that the idiosyncratic narrative qualities of this genre form allow for alternative valences for interpreting black women's subjectivity in American literature.

As grim fantasies *Kindred* and *Yabo* position their protagonists in compromising circumstances in which the known history of Dana and Zen's ancestry is directly challenged by their journeys back in time. The lessons learned are not packaged maxims that fit neatly at the end of a novel. Rather, desiring to know how time travels works back rubs off almost immediately, and by each novel's end there is no way to satisfactorily finish the narratives knowing what Dana and Zen know. *Kindred* ends with Dana going

back to the site of the now-burned down plantation in Maryland where Rufus Weylin raped the free black woman Alice, the result of which is the start of Dana's family lineage. At the end of *Yabo* Zen can be found castigating a male bartender for his unsolicited opinion with regards to honoring the dead. "Dead is dead," says the bartender, Porgy (*Yabo* 124). Zen adamantly refutes his retort. While not knowing that she has the power to go between times and become a vigilante crusader against colonial regimes popping up in New York, Zen believes that there is an undeniable connection between history, women, and the present moment. There is an impulse to rearticulate their position on the subject of slavery and survival but one that keeps the tortured past of their ancestors in lockstep with the fact of their lives as *the* legacy. As such, both novels divorce themselves from the typical slave narrative conclusion which often requires the separation of the enslaved past and a free present.<sup>2</sup> When the past is not only informed but also indebted to and responsible for the historical chain of events that allows Dana and Zen's existence, it becomes impossible for either woman to sustain a "dead is dead" attitude and remain truthful to their experiences. The demonic grounds of these novels is precisely where the ungeographic black bodies of these women begin; traveling across time and interacting with the dangerous past of their oppressors is demonic because it defies the logic of Western history as concluded, finite, and law.

---

<sup>2</sup> For examples of this, see *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* by William and Ellen Craft, and *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana* (Auburn NY: Derby and Miller, 1853).

## Not Quite Sci-Fi, Not Quite Slave Narrative: The Grim Patchwork of Octavia Butler's

### *Kindred*

Octavia Butler (1947-2006) was a prolific writer whose legacy within the science fiction genre assisted in the founding of genres such as high fantasy, speculative fiction, and neo-slave narratives. Any attempt at precisely describing this author's oeuvre would largely understate the diversity of her life work. Generally, novels and series typical of the Butler wheelhouse take place in a not-so distant future or dystopia in which the heroine's superhuman powers and perspective are often the focus. Examples of this can be found in the *Parable* and *Patternist* series but it is only within the latter series that Butler maintains a preoccupation with the past. Still, all things considered, Butler's treatment of the past in *Kindred* is unequivocally anomalous in the science fiction genre for its informed position on history and slave narratives.

During her research for *Kindred* Butler became familiar with many slave narratives, taking interest in the rhetorical strategies that were utilized by former slave women and men. Slave narratives were an important part of the abolitionist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, garnering the sympathy and political support of the white middle class for the condition of a people subjected to the cruel condition of slavery and sub-humanism. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) by Frederick Douglass and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs were two widely circulated slave narratives that were successful in no small part due to

the attention to audience and limitations of written words.<sup>3</sup> Butler would have been well aware of this fine line toted by Douglas and Jacobs, the consequences of doing so poorly ending disastrously for both author and kin. Yet Butler was also extremely conscious of the gendered aspect of narratives she used to inform her perspective on the torture and destruction of the slave body.<sup>4</sup> Douglass as well as other ex-slave men authoring their own journeys of freedom would often associate their emancipation with the formation of an identity outside of their bondage. Similarly, *Narrative, Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom* (1860), and *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavo Vassa, a Slave, Written by Himself* (1789) are heroic tales of masculine triumph and Enlightenment-era desires for freedom. Yet this was not the narrative ex-slave women could adopt due to their presumed sexual availability which labeled them as objects of both industrial and sexual desire in the slave economy. This added dimension, a physical domination of another kind, would foreground any conversation on black women's slave narratives and, in a time of Victorian-era propriety, the issue had to be dealt with carefully if the narrative was to claim any success, politically or socially.

As Robert Crossley notes in the introduction to *Kindred* (1988), the use of the first-person narrative "reveals [*Kindred*'s] literary kinship with the memoirs of ex-slaves published in the nineteenth century, for Butler's greatest achievement in the novel is her

---

<sup>3</sup> Deborah E. McDowell, "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition," in *African American Autobiography: A Critical Collection of Essays*, edited by William L. Andrew (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Halls, 1993), 36-58. Also see Henry Louis Gates's introduction to Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), edited by Robert B. Septo (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the interplay of gender and race in slave narratives see *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture* by Vincent Woodard.

collapsing of the genres of fantastic travelogue and the slave narrative” (xxi). Part of the lure to first person narration is its associations with claims of knowledge production, and while slave narratives were still dominated by voices of men, the perspectives of women found similar advantage in its deployment. Ex-slave women took advantage of a first-person narrative strategy in markedly different ways, using it to appeal to sympathies for the problems particular to the enslaved women’s condition. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs maintains an authoritative air that was typically the privilege of men even as she relates sexual traumas specific to black women. The narrator’s preoccupation with the virtue of her sisters still in bondage was an important part of her appeal to her readership and hardly any comparable argument in the slave narratives of men is in existence.<sup>5</sup> *Kindred* and *Incidents* use first person narrative but, without the confines of Victorian ethics that defined Jacobs’ time, black chattel slavery in *Kindred* can be discussed *in situ* more accurately, thus resembling the grim fantasy in these scenes of subjection in *Kindred*.

The neo-slave narrative genre allows for contemporary authors to account for the flattened-out nuances of nineteenth century slave narratives. Butler’s understanding of the sensibilities of Jacobs’s readers was perhaps an impetus for forcing Dana to grapple with her conflicting emotions toward scenes of brutality she was subject to when pulled into the past. Through a scene of torture Butler revisits the question of documenting history and remembering:

---

<sup>5</sup> An elaborated discussion of the implications for reading black women’s negotiations of space and sexual oppression in the story of Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) can be found in Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006). xxvi-xxviii

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn't they stop!  
"Please, Master," the man begged. "For Godsake, Master, please..." (*Kindred* 36)

In this scene Dana is witness to the punishment a male slave caught in bed with his free-born wife without express permission from his master. She notes the "smell," the "ragged breath," and "cut of the whip." Dana's sustained attention to the violence is made all the more apparent by her unfiltered description of the desperate movements of a black body in anguish with nowhere to turn to but god ("For Godsake, Master, please."). Dana continues, "I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit...I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me" (36).

Through moments of sustained meditation on the physicality of such heinous acts Butler elaborates precisely where the slave narrative by women could not. This is not to say *Incidents* does not describe the physicalities of masters, mistresses, and other participants in the narrative. Butler and Jacobs create scenes of extreme physical proximity for their heroines similarly, but it is only in *Kindred* that such descriptions are added for a grittier, more raw portrayal of brutality that sullies Dana's position forever.

The grimness of grim fantasy stems from the horrid yet unavoidable truth of a historical record wrought with physical pain combined with a desire to move forward. With her face "wet with tears" and "reacting very much" like the child not far from her, Dana notices how the white patrolmen of antebellum Maryland she witnesses beat a black man resemble a comparably racist, violent force much closer to her time: the Ku

Klux Klan. “Patrols. Groups of young white men who ostensibly maintained order among the slaves” (37). Grim may connote the somber, the ghastly, even the forbidden; but it also describes a connection to the unrelenting, the unflinching, and fierceness of disposition. It is the indelicate dance of fear and perseverance, the march toward the sublime when neither its greatness nor its power disrupts one’s pace that marks the grim with a sense of ambivalence about human suffering. For Dana this means sustaining unyielding eye contact and forcing down an urge to purge; her grim fantasy manifests when the real history of twentieth-century racism rears its ugly head and Dana’s visceral reaction to it is just as horrid.

The majority of slave narratives present a slave seeking freedom with wit and bravery beyond measure, so the fact that Butler would show her heroine to be cowardly disallows readers to interpret *Kindred* as another iteration of *Incidents* or *Narrative*. In his encounter with the slave breaker Mr. Covey, Frederick Douglass famously articulates his arrival into manhood at the end of a whip:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived with me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to freedom (Douglass 43).

Similarly, in *Incidents* Jacobs admits to extra-marital sexual relations with a man, rationalizing it as the lesser of two evils any woman in her position would have chosen. Jacobs’ actions elide castigation by white women because she articulates a different standard of virtues for slave women. Even so, coming into one’s manhood or



womanhood for Douglass and Jacobs, respectively, involves aligning oneself with dominant notions of propriety, heroism, and wit.

Through the acknowledgment of her own cowardice Dana also respects the side of her humanity, the side of a collective humanity, which gets too often written out of both our personal and collective histories. Dana's response to the violence mentioned above is as unpretentious as it was downright pathetic yet her cowardice does not translate into dejection. After the encounter and once the patrolmen have left the clearing Dana calls to the woman standing there. "'Alice!'" I called softly. She stopped, peered at me through the darkness. She was Alice, then. These people were my relatives, my ancestors. *And this place could be my refuge*" (37, emphasis added). The motivations for calling out to Alice was the hope of refuge, yet a hope that was borne of a drive that is markedly less heroic than the sentiments driving canonical slave narrative hero(ine)s.

When considering the demonic, subversive, and empowering potential of Dana's moment of cowardice, I am reminded of the implications of McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* for the work of explicating black women in social and geographical relationships historically denied them.<sup>6</sup> One person's grim fantasy is another person's informed history. Dana's time traveling experiences mirror a racist America that is uncannily similar to the world she grew up in, thus, unsettling the illusion of history's finality. Still, Butler does not write with a sense of fatalistic nihilism. As I show with

---

<sup>6</sup> "Practices and locations of racial domination (for example, slave ships, racial/sexual violences) and practices of resistance (for example, ship coups, escape routes, imaginary and real respatializations) also importantly locate what Saidiya Hartman calls "a striking contradiction," wherein objectification is coupled with black humanity/personhood...Black geographies and black women's geographies, the, signal alternative patterns that work alongside and across traditional geographies." (McKittrick xiv)

Alexis De Veaux's *Yabo* a similar disidentification is at play where the persistence of violence against black women throughout America's history and present becomes the driving force for working against dehumanization of black women, coupled with a recovery of the bodies of Zen's ancestors.

“Between here and nowhere:” Disrupting Genre and Redefining Womanhood in Alexis  
De Veaux's *Yabo*

*Yabo* by Alexis De Veaux is a composite novel that interweaves boundaries of time and space in order to create a historical record of the two main characters, Jules and Zen. Zen is originally from New York City and Jules is from Shadow, the fictional North Carolina town that is also home for Ezra, Zen's grandmother. During the summer months when Zen visits Shadow, she and Jules lounge by the creek behind Ezra's home, plant flowers, and explore their sexuality with one another. As the story progresses Jules and Zen grow apart both figuratively and literally. Zen eventually gets her PhD from the State University of New York and Jules opens a bar in New York City. In the end the fates of Jules and Zen converge when the two of them start dating. *Yabo* concludes with Jules and Zen as a couple drinking in a bar, trailing off into a conversation about the importance of remembering the past, a topic of immense importance to Zen but not to

Jules.<sup>7</sup> As fortunate and successful they may be, Jules and Zen find themselves in compromising situations due to their identities as black queers in modern day New York. Moreover, their blackness and queerness are defined by personal and ancestral histories of violence against bodies similar to theirs. The qualities of the grim fantasy at play here, I argue, are the similarities between how Jules and Zen's positions in the twenty-first century are influenced by the legacy of violence done to women for generations.

At first glance *Yabo* seems largely disjointed as if its narrative actively resists readability. This stems from several vignettes taking place in earlier historical moments but do not necessarily depicting characters that are different from Jules and Zen. For example, Zen is also Rebel Trickster, a woman involved with a maroon society that utilizes guerilla warfare against the European colonial forces encroaching upon New York. Zen may also very well be related to Oyamimi, one of two enslaved African women transported by Captain Paynewell across the Middle Passage, only to drown when the ship capsizes en route to Britain. On the other hand, Jules is Mary 3 as well, vigilante partner in crime of Trickster. What is more, Jules may also be Gomare, Oyamimi's companion (or *mati*) to during the Middle Passage journey mentioned above, and the other half of Captain Paynewell's erotic fixations.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jules' and Zen's maturation from childhood to womanhood serves as the opening and closing stories for *Yabo*, but also included within *Yabo* is a series of vignettes taking on such interesting subjects such as Grandmother Ezra's love life; her life as a tree during the early years of colonization of New York; and her spirit's posthumous return to the physical world. Both in life and death Ezra's presence is marked by her fascination with flowers and her signature floral scents. As if Ezra's storyline was not enough to complicate *Yabo*, there are a couple of vignettes with a primary focus on Jules's family; the personal life of Jamaican Professor Steeva Braille; the Middle Passage; talking animals and many other ancillary characters spanning the slave trade, colonial America and the contemporary moment.

The movement from Zen to Trickster to Oyamimi and from Jules to Mary 3 to Gomare sets *Yabo* apart from other modernist and speculative literature for its experimental approach to conceptualizing black women's subjectivity. De Veaux's characters all live contemporaneously and could be read as though every iteration of Zen's personages live at the same moment, just in different intersections of the historical record. According to the logic of *Yabo* what happens in Jules' or Zen's other lives could have some kind of influence within every other life. This ability to move in and out of each life takes on even more importance when considering each character's resistance to and survival from violence, not to mention the experience of erotic satisfaction.

Punctuating each depiction of the lives of Jules and Zen, or the frame narratives of Trickster and Mary 3, are references to natural and spiritual forces whose anthropomorphism indicates how central a connection between women, spirit, and earth is for *Yabo*. On the one hand there is a consistent reference to "the Great Water" (Atlantic Ocean), that which Leopard and Eagle gaze upon while sharing stories with one another, the force that consumes Gomare and Oyamimi. I will show how the representation of water in *Yabo*, mainly the Atlantic Ocean though a handful of others are considered, are in the service of Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's line of thinking in "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," while also expanding on her metaphor in interesting directions. Additionally, an attention to spiritual life is of equal importance to the West African religious grounding of *Yabo*, the most grim example of this being the body of the John Flint's baby, Emily, who is not put to rest until Jules and Zen find her skeleton and bury it deep down in the woods: "It vexed [the spirits], more than anything, for it was disrespectful to

the memory of them. And how could they be properly remembered, their living lives properly accounted for...between here and nowhere, without the anchoring rituals of kin and community? How could they take their place in the spirit world” (*Yabo* 101-2)?

*Kindred* and *Yabo* eschew uncomplicated, conclusive endings and by circling back to the present where Dana and Zen grapple with a newfound appreciation for their ancestors, it becomes evident that neither text aligns with Western historiography. As with any narrative in the Western tradition, slave narratives follow an arch filled with characters, problems, and resolution. Alternatively, as a narrative tradition built on non-linear time, where men are not the hero but actually antagonistic to the natural order, West African storytelling allows us to consider the non-Western diaporic interventions in *Yabo* and *Kindred*. As Donna Weir-Soley explains, “[d]espite their strategies to subvert and challenge the cult of true womanhood, black women found that they were perceived by white America, their own public expression, and even their lives were over determined by this ideology” (Weir-Soley 20). Being fully aware of these racialized exclusionary tactics, Zora Neale Hurston’s study of Haitian religious practices was an integral part of the success of her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (40-1). Several authors of the African diaspora have written keeping in mind West African notions of time and oral history.<sup>8</sup> For Butler and De Veaux the value in merging slave narrative, science fiction, and African narrative leitmotifs gives grim fantasy the capacity to subvert

---

<sup>8</sup> Here I am thinking of *Batouala* by Rene Maran (1921), *Cane* by Jean Toomer (1923), and *Banjo* by Claude McKay (1929): black modernist novels of the early twentieth century whom as Houston Baker, Jr. would imagine, participate in a “deformation of mastery” of the western canon, a deforming that is inseparable from each novel’s movement of time, the primitivism of characters, and rocky relationship to middle class black elites of their time.

the Western literary tradition and evoke an African ontology which affords women different opportunities of expressing themselves in narratives.

There are strong ties to the West African art of storytelling in *Yabo* exemplified by its time's circularity, coupled with a relationship between people and nature determined by a non-Western hierarchical structure.<sup>9</sup> *Yabo* evokes these alternative, African practices to the effect of countering the marginality of this tradition wrought by narrative storytelling habits of the West and equally for the purposes of engaging diasporic women in more fluid terms. To this end it becomes important to engage the concept of diaspora as an intellectual and personal practice. Yet black women's subjectivity requires an attention to the feminine which goes beyond the capacity of the concept of diaspora or anti anti-essentialism as made popular by Paul Gilroy, and it because of this lack that Tinsley and the feminist-poet Audre Lorde are brought into the fold of my argument.

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy describes a legacy of black artists, thinkers, and scholars for whom black identity is performed and embodied by a dialectic of difference Gilroy calls anti anti-essentialism. For black artists of the United States, Africa, and Europe, *The Black Atlantic* shared a fundamental trait of displacement: a history of slavery and forced migrations along the Middle Passage changed how darker skin became the global marker for difference. Gilroy is most interested in the moments of a black

---

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophies*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984. Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

intellectual's career that complicated the perceived race politics by introducing a variety of influences from across the diaspora.

### Trust Your *Mati*, Not The Manly: Women Kinship in *Kindred* and *Yabo*

Even though the frame narratives comprising the bulk of *Yabo* take place at distinct periods of a historical record, many are written in the present tense. What is more, at moments of time travel, when, for instance, Jules and Zen return to the contemporary moment after a time as their alter egos Mary 3 and Trickster, what is *present* really depends on which side of history they are standing. Similarly, in *Kindred* when Dana is called to the Weylin plantation two hundred years in the past, she is well aware that the consequences of her actions in the past can determine the future. Time and history is markedly less fixed for her than the “facts” suggest.<sup>10</sup> I will argue that the weaving together of so many lives complicates the notion of individuality buttressing many narrative strategies of the white American-European tradition. What kind of relationships between character and history are possible when the concept of time is more fluid than linear, more cyclic and layered than quotidian? Without a narrative arch punctuated by a division between past and present, Butler and De Veaux take advantage

---

<sup>10</sup> “Mysteriously pulled through space and time to antebellum Maryland, Dana comes face to face with her slave heritage on the Weylin plantation and discovers she must arrange the rape of a free black woman by the slaveowner Rufus Weylin in order to ensure her own birth. Taken as a slave herself, Dana seems torn between two equal—and equally bleak—options: either she submits to Rufus’s—and history’s—demands and thus preserves her family line or she resists these demands and runs the risk of never being born herself.” Yaszek, Lisa. ““A Grim Fantasy”: Remaking American History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*.” *Signs*, University of Chicago Press. Vol. 28, No. 4. pp. 1053-1066.

of this temporal alterity in that their characters are not confined to the Western notion of progress or masculine heroism. The use of a different kind of time marks the grim fantasy as less fixed, blurring the lines between then and now or ancestor and legacy.

The centrality of West African religious practice in *Yabo* is exemplified by references to haunting spirits peopling the entire novel. Spirituality and sexuality as interconnected and inseparable for Zen and in this way resembles the practice of *mati* work of African diasporic women<sup>11</sup>. Uncomfortable with the slave ship used as a metaphor for diaspora in *Black Atlantic* and Gilroy's unapologetically masculinist approach to anti-anti-essentialism points this report in the direction of Tinsley's "Black Atlantic Queer Atlantic," but also Audre Lorde. Centralizing emotion and spiritual energy had been part of Lorde's work for decades. When *The Black Atlantic* was published Lorde had been appointed Poet Laureate of New York, one of many accolades attesting to her work and intellect. Further, where feminism failed black women, poor women, non-white women, and women with limited access to an education, black women's liberation was championed by Audre Lorde, Sylvia Wynter, and others. Lorde's work encourages black and queer women to see emotional energy as a tool toward community building, liberation, and individual empowerment. "[A]nger," Lorde said, "expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification" ("The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," 127). Oppression and surviving it do not exist in a vacuum. The

---

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the legacy of *mati* in the diaspora see Gloria Wekker's *Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2006. For the connection of oral history to *mati* work, pp 5-7.



fact that such a phenomenon is common can be the foundation for community building because Lorde understood the use value and productive potential of collectivized emotional energy. To the end, I argue that Gilroy's call for putting complex images front-and-center in the fight for adequate representations of blackness can produce viable results once paired with Lorde's anger-as-liberatory and Wynter's neo-humanist reevaluation of the binary of differences equating black women with the nonhuman.

The vignettes in *Yabo* corresponding to the narrative of Rebel Trickster and Mary 3 are marked by moments of barrier crossing, of the "Great Water," and of inter-species dialogue. Rebel Trickster and Mary 3 are given instruction from Leopard and Eagle, the masterminds behind the guerilla tactics that lead to the fiery death of John Flint and his family, including baby Emily. Leopard and Eagle are described in a variety of ways making it difficult to be certain what they are as far as species is concerned. They seem animalistic in form but human in their intention and preoccupations. Eagle and Leopard's position as authority figures in this inter-species world makes their frame narrative decisively queer and disruptive to western genres. Zen and Jules, or Trickster and Mary 3, are guided into a mission to help locate Eyabo's body, an African slave woman shot dead for conspiring with a maroon insurgency against the colonizers. Yet the stories do not cease to intertwine there even: the skeletal remains of Eyabo's body are those found by Zen during her archeological digging in New York City's financial district, bringing the narrative full circle. By connecting these three storylines through Eyabo's physical remains, the Jules-Zen, Trickster-Mary 3, and Eagle-Leopard storylines become implicated in one another not just on the level of narrative but also influence each

character's place within the West African cosmology De Veaux invokes throughout the novel.

*Kindred*'s opening scene is also its closing scene. *Yabo*'s begins by falsifying the division between "the past, present, and the future" (11). The effect of returning to the beginning in narratives about time travel evacuates these novel's allegiance to Euro-American approaches to cataloging time. It infers that if history can repeat itself for the one characters then perhaps it can be cyclical for other characters, her ancestors, and future generations. This theme of making time cyclic is carried over into texts such as *Kindred* and *Yabo*.

In the final vignette, Zen explains to Jules that the archeological dig she is working on in the center of New York City's financial district lays on top of hundreds, perhaps even thousands of human remains. Coming over to replace the empty bottle of wine on Zen's table Porgy, the on-call bartender says, "Dead people is dead...I never think about them. Ever" (160). He exchanges glances with Jules. "Knowhatumsayin?" he asks in Jules's direction (160). "Jules nodded, took a big swallow of wine. "No, I don't, Zen piped. What was is. Everything that was ever, is still here" (162). In this exchange it is shown that one of the only male characters present in the book comes out against the idea that the dead should be acknowledged. In his desire to seek camaraderie ("Knowhatumsayin?") he turns to Jules, the only other masculine-of-center person in the room. From Jules he gets a half-hearted nod, which is followed by a "big swallow" of wine, deflecting Porgy's search for affirmation. Zen's hard "No, I don't" in response to Porgy's unsolicited opinion represents the only self-identified woman's opinion on this

matter (162). She comes off very much in favor of the archeological dig, a project that has already uncovered the remains not just of indigenous New Yorkers, but African-descended slaves as well (including Eyabo's). The important work of (literally) digging up the past polarizes the male and female positions within *Yabo*. Samuel, the man charged with the task of burying baby Emily proves this point on a figurative level, as does Captain Paynewell when he sails his ship into a maelstrom, killing the African *mati* Oyamimi and Gomare. Jules' gender fluidity becomes metonymically represented in the ambivalent nod-and-swag motion in response to Porgy's "knowhatumsayin," since it is unclear whether Jules's is in favor of a "dead people is dead" philosophy, or awkwardly avoiding responding against him. There is a similar polarization of genders happening in *Kindred* when Dana realizes that she has been asked to work as an amanuensis to both Rufus and her husband Kevin. As Crossley points out, "Shuttling between the two white men in her like, she is aware not only of the blood link between herself and Rufus but of the double link of gender and race that unites Rufus and Kevin" (*Kindred* 1988, xix). In "Saying 'Yes: Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Marisa Parham suggests this "slippery transversion made possible by the convergence of race, gender and history" unsettles Dana's thoughts about the production of history (1321-23). In *Kindred* and *Yabo* scenes between individuals of differing genders critique masculinist perspectives on matters of black women's role in history-making, bestowing the task of remembering women on women, and women alone. In the end, Dana and Zen cannot allow history to be made for them. As such, Butler and De Veaux take up the task Jacobs took on, building heroines with enslaved ancestry on their own terms and despite masculine

antagonism. Of equal import is the fact that *Kindred* and *Yabo* do the explicit work of gendering the grim fantasy genre by ending Dana and Zen's journeys with contemplations of their relationship to the history they feel connected to, not the history they were taught.

The variety of characters depicted in *Kindred* and *Yabo*, I believe, create realistic and relatable contexts for the reader, but as I have shown, such attention to detail does not necessarily translate into some sort of sympathy for characters, especially if they not have the feminist, queer, anti-racist politics. *Yabo* casts its flag in the camp of radicals, holding in high regard the ability to hold not only one's own interests, but those of community, particularly if that community is comprised of black women. How might a radically queer black feminist novel align its politics with its praxis? What rhetorical moves are at Butler and De Veaux's disposal within the modernist genre and how does she move even more left of that? In what follows, I argue that the alignment with West African religion and culture allows for a radical departure from traditional notions of where time begins or ends. As a leitmotif of grim fantasies time's repetitive quality does not necessarily mean history repeats itself. Rather, it gives black women the chance to become the agents white Euro-American history denies they ever were, "to understand history itself as a process of narrative production" (Yaszek 1058). No revisionism takes place here, and as such the fantasies Butler and De Veaux construct, while they are necessarily grim, are defined as much by white supremacist patriarchy and slavery as resistance to them.

## How to Anthropomorphize History: Deviant Storytelling in Alexi's De Veaux's

### *Yabo*

Within *Yabo* a set of chapters focuses on the characters Eagle, Leopard, Rebel Trickster and Mary 3. Many specific qualities with regards to their physicality are left ambiguous yet there is reference to all four with she/her pronouns. In "Constellations," the "owl-faced" (*Kindred* 49) Mary 3 notices how far behind the limp-footed Trickster has fallen and Mary 3 insists that they use their arms to fly the rest of the way to safety (54). The ability to augment one's human limitations at a moment's notice suggests Trickster and Mary 3 are in fact more than human or not human at all. Additionally, there are moments in which Trickster and Mary 3 transform into Zen and Jules, respectively, and these shape shifts typically occur after a mission is completed and the two cross a watery barrier. What is even more perplexing about the Trickster-Mary 3 storyline is the fact that Mary 3 was formerly a slave to Samuel. Samuel is the man charged with burying the skeletal remains of Emily Flint, the baby burned in a fire that was later started by Mary 3 and Trickster. Mary 3 is given her name because she is the third sex slave of Samuel's, all of whom were named Mary and the two preceding her had met their fate at the hands of this licentious owner. Mary 3 is eventually liberated (how so remains unclear) after which she and Trickster partake in a systemized form of guerilla warfare on behalf of a rebellion (ostensibly) led by Leopard and Eagle. There is also an allusion to Mary 3's arrival into colonial America, during which she had a companion she would

kiss for comfort. This is perhaps De Veaux's way of connecting the Trickster-Mary 3 and Jules-Zen storylines with that of Gomare and Oyamimi toward the end of *Yabo*. By creating these semi-permeable connections across frame narratives De Veaux's novel blends a sense of history as physical experience (materiality) with a mythic spiritual interconnectivity, both of which defy this form of chattel slavery hell-bent on the destruction black bodies, suggesting a reevaluation of traditional understandings of body, spirit, and the division between them.

Mary 3 and Rebel Trickster carry out missions under the direction of Eagle and Leopard, two separate entities with both human and non-human animal qualities. Eagle and Leopard make their first appearance in the chapter "Adansonia Digitata" in which Leopard recounts an alternative history to the disappearance of trees on the West African shoreline, dubbed "The Living Past Present" (24). The story is rhetorically structured to mimic traditional childhood fables, but differs from this genre in that Leopard is discussing the real-world phenomena known as the Atlantic slave trade. In this half fable-half history, trees are anthropomorphized and work to find the African humans which have since left the land but can still be heard screaming from a stone building on the coast way out reach of the trees. In an attempt to "follow and protect" (25) their human friends, one tree named Bravest uproots herself in order to drop a seedpod into the Atlantic Ocean ("the Great Water"). The story explains that these trees "died of heartbreak," but it is their progeny, the seeds carried by fish across the waters which become the "Duppy, Rat Tail, Monkey Bread," and "Jumbie" (26) trees covering the landscapes of the new world for the survivors of the Middle Passage.

The fabular history of the “Living Past Present” portends that the moral high ground of African flora belies the systematic enslavement and destruction of African people, a conclusion evidenced by the existence of African flora, people, and culture across the American and Caribbean colonies. When it becomes evident that the disappearance of the local African populations is connected to the slave port on the coast, anthropomorphized trees come up with a plan to protect their human friends in their new world. If such radical imaginings of the history behind the existence of African diasporic elements in the Western hemisphere was not enough, the fact that the story is mediated through anthropomorphized animals, Eagle and Leopard, would further suggest a triangulation of the aforementioned relationship wherein the survival of any one group—humans, non-human animals, trees—requires assistance of and collaboration with the other two.

“Living Past Present,” Eagle’s alternative history describing the existence and persistence of African people in the Americas, relies on a belief of animism, African cosmology, talking trees and fish capable of synchronized kissing. The inclusion of a popular form of storytelling among African and African diasporic people suggests that fables symbolize alternative modes for understanding what is taken for granted by the teleological rationalism of the Western variety. *Adansonia Digitata*, commonly referred to as a baobab tree, is one of the most recognizable species of the *Adansonia* genus originally found in sub-Saharan Africa. Its ability to withstand extreme heat and water deprivation symbolizes a natural force of resistance and its widespread growth across the Caribbean makes it as diasporic as the people it “protect[s]” (25). In this way De Veaux

acknowledges the commonality between human and nature to traverse the Middle Passage and thrive thereafter, suggesting an analogic relationship between nature and people. I argue that inclusion of African mythologies in *Yabo* is a statement against Westerner notions of empiricism or proper historical documentation due to the fact that these stories are shared orally. Their orality taps into an otherwise indescribable spiritual permanence divorced from Western metrics of plausibility. *Yabo*'s alignment with non-Western traditions foregrounds an advancement of heretofore unimaginable valences for interpreting subjectivities of individuals of the African diaspora whose history was always plagued by rupture and violence.

As a defining aspect of Eagle and Leopard's relationship the act of storytelling and exchange of myth serves as a mediation point between the natural world and the human world. In the chapter titled "Between Here and Nowhere," one such instance of this is when Leopard tells Eagle about "Spirits' Revenge," the myth behind the existence of slave ship capsizes and the hurricanes that cause them. "Spirits' Revenge" is hardly captivating because its oration is less-than convincing at best and at worst a bad homage to how the story really goes (101). I argue that the 'less-than convincing' quality of this fable is not for lack of credibility in an empirical sense but is actually directly related to both the context in which it was delivered as well as a lack of character development resultant of Leopard's poor oratory skill. Peering out toward the "Great Water" for what seemed "a day? A century?" Eagle asks Leopard,

Do you recall why we came here? To remember, [replies Leopard]. Well then, we need a story. Eagle sat up, looked about, assessed the attentiveness of the sand. She cleared her throat. No, no, Leopard said. She was tired of Eagle's long-



winded stories. I will tell a story. You? Yes, I. I will tell a story. The story of The Spirits' Revenge (101).

Leopard's storytelling starts by stating how Great Water was glutted by "lost and confused" spirits, the African casualties of the Middle Passage. Upon their realization that they would be lost forever, denied of the "anchoring rituals of kin and community," such activities being the right to any and all formerly living people, the spirits went "instantly mad," which to Leopard serves as enough detail to convey the story behind hurricane seasons (102). Yet this is not a sentiment shared by Eagle and she makes her disappointment known. "Is that it? Eagle shouted" (102).

Reading such an austere account of the origins of hurricanes, Eagle's frustration stands in for any connoisseur of stories of satisfactory quality, including readers of *Yabo*. Eagle and Leopard approach storytelling from very different pedagogical perspectives. Eagle prefers to tell stories layered with character development, mythology, and frame narratives as exemplified in the chapter "Adansonia Digitata," wherein it is through Eagle the story "Living Present Past" is related. Comparatively, "The Spirits' Revenge" is lacking both in terms of the quantity of rhetorical devices working in conjunction with the one another and in terms of the personal investment Eagle makes in her oration. Framed as the untold, alternative history behind the disappearance of the trees from Africa's West coast, even before the story has even begun, Eagle shrouds "The Living Present Past" with an air secrecy. Instead of answering right away, Eagle pauses, strutting "closer to the water, letting it lick at her feet" (24). Leopard's response to Eagle's assertion that the reason there are no trees where she and Leopard stand, because "they

died of heartbreak,” reveals Leopard’s investment in source material originating in authoritative figures: “That’s not in the elders’ stories,” she says almost accusatorially (24). As I detailed above, the fable of “The Living Present Past” anthropomorphizes trees and fish (“fish caught these seeds in their mouths and kissed them into the mouths of other fish”) (25-6), situating this story in the tradition of fables on the level of rhetoric. Eagle, however, does not provide a moral or pithy maxim which is typically provided at the end of fables. Rather, she gathers as evidence the existence of flora indigenous to Africa and lets the world speak for itself. The moral, I argue, is discernible to the mindful listener for whom the oration is a lesson worth passing on in and of itself.

Eagle concludes her story in a way that blurs the distinctions between storyteller and characters, increasing the interconnectedness between Eagle’s world and that of this orated history. “When *our* humans who survived this journey were on land again, they were separated onto many islands, where fish spit seeds into the waters, and in time there grew up many trees” (26, emphasis added). What is unclear about this conclusion is a question of narration. Namely, who is doing the speaking? Eagle? The tree called Bravest? It may even be a moment where De Veaux’s voice might be a contender for this conclusion’s oration, if one were to consider authorial intent and De Veaux’s voice in her previous works. I argue that this moment of narrative ambiguity does the rhetorical work of collapsing the past and the present, this more fluid temporal field acts operates as moral and therefore fulfills this fable’s narrative arch. Thus, the alternative version of the accepted story of the disappearance of trees resists the temporal linearity undergirding “The Spirits’ Revenge” as told by Leopard. What is more, De Veaux ends “Adansonia

Digitata” with the ambiguous pronoun ‘our,’ which makes determining the identity of an individual narrative voice tricky business yet is ultimately in service of a reading of this story as if it were a shared collective experience. Successfully delivering an oral history is determined by an orator’s ability to narrate contents proper performance of a story; it is with these tenets for captivating storytelling by why Eagle’s oration embodies the moral lesson of “The Living Present Past.” In other words, when Leopard sincerely ask “Where are the trees?” (24) that used to live on the same spot she stands she positions Eagle, who knows more comprehensively the answer to that question than most, to orally narrate a story that can only be told in such moments of seeming coincidence. As a story which ends at the same time it begins and whose narrator ultimately loses her individuality, “Living Present Past” resists conforming to Western notions of narration by subverting the notion of time as disparate units and subjects as identifiable singular entities.

Framed as an untold history uncovering details not included “in the elders’ stories” (24) “Living Present Past” is a product of its liminality: namely, “The Living Present Past” is an unauthorized version of history that is exchanged by word of mouth and lack of a written record down requires that it live on through chance encounters among knowledgeable storytellers and willing listeners. Its framing as a transgressive history is reflected in an alternative lesson, its propensity for moments of narrative ambiguity, and its performance doubling as its moral and framing.

The alternative forms of narration present in the oral histories told by Eagle and Leopard contextualizes the other pairs of characters within a tradition founded upon similar nonlinear temporalities and nonsingular individualities. Mary 3 and Rebel

Trickster embark on a series of journeys that disrupt conventions that ground any single character's experience as belonging to them and them alone. Moments of this can be found in the chapters titled "Constellations" and "The Grammar of a Person" in which Mary 3 transforms into Jules and Rebel Trickster transforms into Zen, or vice versa. How might we be able to understand the relationship these characters have to their other lives that is supposedly happening in the same moment? One might be asked to 'suspend disbelief,' to allow for the fantastical to take over, or that most texts within the modernism genre participate in this form of deconstructive practices and to see *Yabo* within that tradition. While none of the responses warrant total disregard it would be a disservice to the opportunities for alternative figurations for interpreting subjectivity in narratives of black women resultant of these collapses of time and character in *Yabo*.

When Mary 3 transforms into Jules and Rebel Trickster into Zen, these moments are coupled with the physical movement of these women across waters. In the two moments of transformation discussed below, the waters in question are creeks or some other manageable body of water. In "Constellations," for example, "They crossed over the woods that divided the creek in two, landing amidst the pine and magnolia trees of a simultaneous life; in which Mary 3 lived as Jules and Trickster, as Zen" (54). A similar scene is offered in "The Grammar of a Person:"

They walked for some time before they came to one of the park's many footbridge. Its gothic arch spanned a bridle path underneath. The limbs of trees on either side of it were full with lazy, bright green leaves. Jules and Zen were half way across it when Zen felt a series of shivers. The bridge became an unpaved street, and they, as Mary 3 and Trickster, scurried close to its shadows" (106).

The comparison focuses on the quality of fluidity, of life and death, that is inseparable from water. I do not mean to make the insensitive false equivalence between the choices made by Jules/Mary<sup>3</sup> or Zen/Trickster to cross waters and the nonconsensual transatlantic voyage on which so many women embarked. Water, as a shared medium for transition and transport for De Veaux's text and transatlantic history, makes women grapple with its fluid and unpredictable nature. Whether it is crossing an ocean or crossing a river, *Yabo* is ultimately about the transformative capabilities water has on African diasporic women, how its mere presence or its sound can induce change. Water in *Yabo* is transformative; the outcomes of such transformations being heavily influenced by the body of water in question. To that end, I argue that *Yabo*'s treatment of water's life-giving and death-dealing qualities reflect a more realistic perspective of water's complicated relationship to women of the African diaspora and the novel does not altogether privilege material experience over spiritual deference or vice versa, it is through an understanding of water as both productive and destructive that De Veaux presents nature and women as having a dynamic that is both deferential and mutually constitutive.

Water carries with it a vast amount of metaphorical potential. It connects and bridges worlds, it is present at the start of life and at the end of it, and it is defiant against total domination by humans or anything else. Natasha Omise'eke Tinsley uses the metaphor of water in her 2008 piece "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic," in which she supplants Paul Gilroy's ship metaphor for water. In his work, *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy introduced the concept of the ship as a driving metaphor steering the pathways by which

artifacts of the African diaspora flourish across the Atlantic. In her successful queer feminist critique of Gilroy's framework "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" takes as evidence of the transformative qualities of water the presence of *mati*, a Dutch word for shipmate used by African diasporic women to describe their relationship to other women with whom they traversed the Middle Passage. These relations were sometimes sexual but most importantly the presence of such bonds between women across the Atlantic signifies the ability of queer relations amongst black women to survive and resist total domination by slavers, rapists, and men who traded in the physical exploitation of black women's bodies.

"Before we begin our analysis of Sylvia Ardyn Boone's *Radiance from the Waters* and Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*," Professor Steeva Braille continued, "let's consider the artifacts of stories, of negotiating environmental forces contextualizing Gilroy's "black Atlantic.'" (38-9). In this scene in *Yabo* from the chapter titled "Ache Now" Zen finds herself finally enrolled in a seminar of the SUNY professor she always wanted as her graduate school advisor. In what follows Dr. Braille simulates a Middle Passage crossing for her students. She seats them in two, tight rows facing one another, binds their hands and feet with rope, plays the sound of lapping water, and facilitates the classroom's transition into a transatlantic journey. "The walls of the room fell away, and when they fell, there was the ship, the *Henrietta Marie*, carrying a different [Zen], another her, that was its captain, Nathaniel Paynewell, through a night and a storm" (39). Water functions as the driving force facilitating transition into a liminal space from one life to a "different" one. And yet the waters of the Atlantic Ocean

are not simply passive recipients of curious travelers: these waters are also the destructive force that will eventually capsizes the *Henrietta Marie* in the penultimate chapter of *Yabo*. Water is anything but the passive object here and De Veaux's treatment of the life-giving and death-dealing force of water challenges the more palatable version of water's behavior as discussed in "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic." When Zen, Jules, Mary 3, and Trickster cross a tame body of water, they cannot escape its transformative properties. They are not, however, crossing the Atlantic Ocean, which would ostensibly hold a larger amount of historical and cultural significance for African diasporic women than the creeks and babbling brooks crossed by Mary 3 and Trickster. Alternatively, as is shown in the classroom exercise facilitated by Dr. Braille, the mere invocation of the sound of water can be enough to induce the transformative potential of it, as if water had a story to tell whose oration alone can induce listeners to enter other historical moments.<sup>12</sup>

This new line of inquiry begs the question, If we are to understand water as a storyteller then what story does it have to tell? If water can speak a language understood by Dr. Braille, Mary 3, Eagle and Captain Paynewell then oral histories function as an infallible, universally accessible model for sharing information. Water requires presence and attentiveness of its listener, much in the way Eagle and Leopard exemplify the proper and improper ways of orating mythologies, respectively. The centrality of sound or, rather, the possibility of creating a soundscape which allows for the transmission of a story untold in Western traditions, presumes the perfect storm of dependent variables

---

<sup>12</sup> "A river crosses the rocks it flows over. We can cross over the stories of those rocks, crossing the river in the narrative canoe" (40).

coming together within specific contexts. The presence of a orator coupled with a ready listener opens up a sonic space wherein a story's teller—Eagle, Leopard, Dr. Braille, or the Atlantic Ocean—can produce the narratives typically hidden in the shadows.

### Conclusion

The grim fantasy genre was once a product of Butler's resistant strategies against women's erasure from science fiction, fantasy, and slave narratives. The baton has been passed to De Veaux in this never ending-fight against neoliberal impulses to white wash a horrid history of anti-black torture and the destruction of women's selfhood. Through her extended treatment of oral storytelling, the inclusion of gender fluidity, and the attention to where scholarship and authorship is today, De Veaux expands grim fantasy along narrative, gender, and academic pathways.

Connecting Butler's concept, grim fantasy, with Wynter's concept, demonic grounds, allows for a productive reading of *Kindred* and *Yabo*'s ambiguous and complex conclusions. Exploring the unwritten geographies with literature reveals a lacking in black women subject formation that was a product of systematic onslaught against them. Dana and Zen are at odds with the men in their lives. The "dead is dead" is not an attitude they can afford to acquiesce to. As such, dead *is not* dead. They haunt. They persist. They are the foundation of what makes erasing them possible.

Dana and Zen express a dissatisfaction in the explanatory power of the "facts" defining the chattel slave history of their ancestry. Dana cowers at her first real confrontation with the hard truth of America's slave past, but does not use her frailty as



an excuse to surrender to fate. Zen is at odds with the mechanics of industry and capitalism when she finds out New York City's financial district was built on top of catacombs packed with slave skeletons. Her task, much like anti-capitalist activist of today, feels daunting, yet hope is still there. For Dana and Zen, the grim fantasy is a lived reality that cannot be ignored. Their grim fortitude defines their narrative and that of their ancestors whom the champion.

## Bibliography

- Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. Print.  
---. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Warner Books. 1993. Print.  
---. *Parable of the Talents*. New York: Warner Books. 1998. Print.  
---. *Patternmaster*. New York: Doubleday. 1976. Print.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. "Depression is Ordinary: Public Feelings and Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*." *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2012. 131-146.
- Craft, William and Ellen, *Running a Thousand Miles to Freedom, or, The Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*. In *Great Slave Narratives*, edited by Arna Bontemps. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
- De Veux, Alexis. *Yabo*. Washington, D.C.: Redbone Press, 2014. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Ed. Robert B. Septo. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. [1789] Edited and with notes by Shelley Eversley. Introduction by Robert Reid-Pharr. New York: Modern Library, 2004.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. Print.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr. New York: Penguin, 1987.

- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays And Speeches*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984. Print.
- Maran, Rene. *Batouala*. London: Heineman. 1987. Print.
- McDowell, Deborah E. "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition," in *African American Autobiography: A Critical Collection of Essays*, edited by William L. Andrew. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Halls, 1993. 36-58.
- McKay, Claude. *Banjo*. San Diego: Harvest Books, 1929. Print.
- McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis. 2006. Ebook.
- Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana*. Auburn, NY: Derby and Miller, 1853.
- Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2-3. 191-215. 2006.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophies*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984.
- Toomer, Jean. *Cane*. New York and London: Liveright, 1923. Print.
- Wekker, Gloria. *Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. Print.
- Woodard, Vincent. *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism within U.S. Slave Culture*. Ed. Justin Joyce and Dwight McBride. New York: New York University Press. 2014. Print.
- Wynter, Sylvia. "Afterword: "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground; of Caliban's Woman.'" *Out of Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido. Trenton, NJ: African World Press. 1990. 355-372.
- Yaszek, Lisa. "'A Grim Fantasy': Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Signs*, University of Chicago Press. Vol. 28, No. 4. pp. 1053-1066.