

## **"A Grim Fantasy": Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

**O**ctavia Butler's novel *Kindred* ([1979] 1988) begins at the end of an adventure that has left her protagonist, the aspiring young African-American writer Dana, trapped in a wall of her own house—not boarded inside the wall, not even confined, really, but standing with her arm somehow fused into the actual studs and sheetrock of the wall. To a certain extent, Dana's confusion with this situation parallels that of the reader who opens *Kindred* expecting to read a historical novel of slave life only to find herself confronted with images that seem more appropriate to science fiction: How did Dana get there? How is this even possible? These personal and seemingly impossible questions become those of every class of people who find themselves, as Dana does, not simply on the wrong side of history but trapped and maimed by a history stranger and crueler than they have been taught to imagine.

In this essay, I examine Butler's novel as a kind of memory machine that answers these seemingly impossible questions by using science fiction devices to re-present African-American women's histories. One of the few prominent black authors in science fiction, Butler is often lauded for her depictions of future worlds where advanced technologies quite literally mediate race and gender.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, her work is increasingly recognized as participating in African-American traditions of historical fiction.<sup>2</sup> In particular, scholars identify *Kindred* as an important precursor to the neo-slave narratives created by authors such as Toni Morrison and Sherley Anne Williams in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Although these scholars always acknowledge Butler's primary allegiance to science fiction, they rarely pursue the impact this might have on her historical fiction. Yet such a discussion seems fruitful. If one of the goals of African-American historical fiction is to interrogate how "race," "gender," and even "history"

<sup>1</sup> See Sargent 1975; Friend 1982; and Armitt 1996.

<sup>2</sup> See Govan 1986 and McKible 1994.

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Beaulieu 1999 and Rushdy 1999.

emerge through interlocking sets of representations, then it would seem imperative to examine how authors who work in multiple genres might bring the representational strategies of those genres to bear on individual texts. To this end, in the following pages I will show how Butler participates in Afro-feminist projects to interrogate the relationship between historical memory and commercial culture by appropriating and adapting the commercial form of science fiction itself.

Published in 1979, *Kindred* emerged at the end of two decades of intense debate over the representation of African-American history. Spurred on by the grassroots work of civil rights, feminist, and new left activists in the 1960s, scholars in the U.S. academy “began to appreciate how ‘history’ was made not solely by the imperial powers of a nation but also by those without any discernable institutional power” (Rushdy 1999, 4). This led to certain changes in the production of scholarly and official histories as academics pursued research projects geared to acknowledge “America” as the dynamic product of complex negotiations between people of diverse races, classes, and genders. In particular, with the establishment of a black power intellectual presence in the academy, the study of American history also became the study of African-American history, and new historical sources—especially slave testimonials and narratives—provided the foundation for more inclusive models of memory.

Of course, official modes of memory were not the only—or even the primary—ones under scrutiny at this cultural moment. The 1960s and 1970s saw the dawn of a new commercial culture, marked especially by the rapid proliferation of a national (and even global) mass media.<sup>4</sup> As African Americans began entering media-related fields in significant numbers (and as black market shares grew and black intellectuals turned their critical gazes on the mass media), commercial institutions found themselves scrambling to adjust. The complex results of this adjustment were perhaps most evident in the newest and most rapidly spreading of these institutions: television. While stereotypical black advertising figures such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben continued to haunt the airwaves throughout the 1970s, these stock characters were countered by a new kind of commercial advertisement that drew on the language of civil rights and black power movements. For instance, in its award-winning 1971 “Buy the world a Coke” campaign, Coca-Cola offered the American public a

<sup>4</sup> For general discussions of this proliferation and its impact on American culture, see Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1986 and Jameson 1991. For a more specific discussion of how the new commercial culture affected people of color, see Hogue 1996.

utopian vision of racial equality through its depiction of well-groomed, racially diverse adolescents earnestly telling viewers that they'd "like to buy the world a Coke / To keep it company" (Rutherford 1994, 48). Meanwhile, McDonald's paid tribute to black women juggling work with marriage and motherhood by encouraging them to "take a little break today at McDonald's" with their families (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 163). Such images offered the public very specific ways of understanding and remembering American history. By emphasizing the egalitarian nature of contemporary race relations, they implicitly placed the struggle for equality in a past that seemed to bear little or no direct relation to the present. Furthermore, by asking viewers to understand this seemingly clean break with the past as a product of corporate benevolence, such images implicitly equated social and political equality with equality in the realm of consumption itself. Indeed, following cultural theorists extending back to Theodor Adorno, we might better understand this mode of remembering as a process of forgetting by which viewers elide their desires with those of the corporation and, in doing so, alienate themselves from the historical events that initially informed those desires.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere, however, television seemed to respond to emergent demands for more nuanced representations of American history in diametrically opposed ways. In particular, the 1977 premiere of *Roots* (the made-for-television miniseries based on Alex Haley's novel [1976] by the same name) marked a turning point in commercial culture. Watched by more than 130 million viewers, *Roots* was perhaps the first truly public acknowledgment that America was founded largely on the labor of enslaved peoples (Beaulieu 1999, 145). Rather than simply replacing the bad old past with a shiny new future in which all races are equal under the sign of consumption, *Roots* insisted on remembering the American past as an era in which those futures were created through the consumption of black labor. As such, it appeared to perform the same kind of historical revision in the mass media that new left and black power intellectuals were enacting in the academy.

Although commercial modes of memory engaged with their official counterparts in complex and seemingly contradictory ways, the two modes remained bound together by their masculinist approaches to history. As late as 1981, Angela Davis noted that "those of us who have anxiously awaited a serious study of the Black woman during slavery remain, so far,

<sup>5</sup> See esp. Adorno and Horkheimer (1947) 1994. Later theorists who follow up on these insights in terms of raced and gendered histories include Greene 1996 and Hogue 1996.

disappointed” (quoted in Beaulieu 1999, 6).<sup>6</sup> Other African-American feminists expressed a similar disappointment with representations of black women in the commercial realm. For instance, as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu notes in her analysis of *Roots*, Haley (and the TV producers responsible for the miniseries) closely followed the patterns established in slave narratives written by men such as Frederick Douglass; as such, *Roots* focuses primarily on its protagonist, Kunta Kinte, as a rugged “loner . . . determined to save himself, and willing to compromise with his fellow captives only if it means securing his own freedom” (Beaulieu 1999, 146). Women, when depicted at any length, are either reduced to their biological function as child-bearers or presented in “the stock conventions of the suffering enslaved woman” (1999, 147) who inspires the heroic black man to action (Hogue 1996, 13; Rushdy 1999, 3). Similar if more truncated masculinist impulses informed advertising as well. For instance, the young working mother in the aforementioned McDonald’s commercial is also reduced to the role of the suffering woman, a victim of stress and overwork who, like her counterparts in *Roots*, inspires others (here, the benevolent corporation) to social action.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this time period marked the emergence of yet another mode of memory—the African-American woman’s neo-slave narrative. Authors including Gayl Jones, Sherley Anne Williams, and Toni Morrison used this form—an updated interpretation of the nineteenth-century slave narrative—to imaginatively re-present African-American history in a form that privileged firsthand African-American perspectives over their white counterparts. More specifically, these authors addressed African-American *women’s* histories by following nineteenth-century authors such as Harriet Jacobs, shifting emphasis from the lone male hero to the female heroine enmeshed in networks of communal ties, and from literacy and public identity to family and personal self-worth (Foster 1994, xxx; Beaulieu 1999, 13–14). Writers also used the neo-slave narrative to comment on the historical relationship between black women and commercial culture. As Susan Willis argues, tragic characters such as Toni Morrison’s Pecola from *The Bluest Eye* and Hagar from *Song of Solomon* are “sublime manifestations” of the contradiction between commercial representations of equality through consumption and the “reality that translation into the dominant white model is impossible for marginalized people” (1991, 114). By insisting on and exploring the gaps between public fantasy and personal history

<sup>6</sup> As Ann duCille (1996) notes, although writers such as Toni Cade Bambara and Jeanne Noble published books on black women’s history in the 1970s, the academy typically lauded white scholars such as Gerda Lerner as the primary pioneers in this field.

in their fiction, such authors participated in longstanding, time-honored critical traditions of skepticism about (and even antagonism toward) the culture industries as perpetrators of—as Adorno puts it—“enlightenment as mass deception” (120).

Much like other Afro-feminist writers, Octavia Butler has expressed explicit concern with masculinist narratives of African-American history. In regard to *Kindred*, she comments:

When I got into college . . . the Black Power Movement was really underway with the young people, and I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. . . . He said, “I’d like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can’t because I’d have to start with my own parents.”. . . That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* ([1979] 1988). I’ve carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary not only for their lives but his as well. (Rowell 1996, 51)

As Butler suggests here, one of the goals of *Kindred* is to re-present historical memory in a way that acknowledges the impact of slavery not just on isolated individuals but on entire families and networks of kin. Indeed, she goes on to specifically critique the masculinist figure of the heroic loner, noting that although she began the novel with a male protagonist she had to switch his sex because “I couldn’t realistically keep him alive. So many things that he did would have been likely to get him killed. He wouldn’t even have time to learn the rules [of antebellum life] . . . before he was killed for not knowing them” (Rowell 1996, 51). For Butler, then, the fantasy of the ruggedly individualistic hero—especially when that hero is black and subject to the laws of American slavery—is an impossible one, even in the realm of speculative fiction.<sup>7</sup>

Butler begins to depart from other neo-slave narrative authors, however, in her relationship to commercial culture; after all, her literary rep-

<sup>7</sup> Although a full examination of this issue is beyond the scope of the present essay, it is important to note that elsewhere in *Kindred*, Butler interrogates the raced implications of figures such as the heroic, rugged loner through her depiction of Kevin, Dana’s white husband. Unlike the black male protagonist whom Butler initially intended to depict, Kevin is, at least to a certain extent, able to assume this role and survive the antebellum South. In doing so, however, he relegates himself to the position of a relatively minor player in history.

utation is derived primarily from her participation in one increasingly prominent part of commercial culture: science fiction. While this seems to set her apart from other neo-slave narrative authors in some ways, it does align her with another African-American literary tradition. Sheree Thomas notes that authors extending back to Ralph Ellison and W. E. B. DuBois have long used science fiction tropes, including alternate worlds, invisibility, and the “encounter with the alien other,” to estrange readers from dominant understandings of American history and to re-present “the impact and influence of black life on society” (2000, xii). In the 1960s and 1970s, black writers, including Samuel Delany and Butler, joined their white feminist counterparts in publishing full-scale science fiction stories and novels. For these authors, science fiction provided more than just a way to re-present history; it allowed them to explore how such revisions might lead to new and more egalitarian futures as well. As Sarah Lefanu puts it, “unlike other forms of genre writing, such as detective stories and romance, which demand the reinstatement of order and can thus be described as ‘closed’ texts, science fiction is by its nature interrogative, open. Feminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms” (1988, 100).<sup>8</sup> Taken together, then, both the tropes and the form of science fiction provide Butler with the tools to build the kind of memory machine adequate to the needs of Afro-feminist historical revision.

And, indeed, Butler does just that with her self-described “grim fantasy,” *Kindred*.<sup>9</sup> The novel follows the story of Dana, a young black woman struggling to make her name as an author in present-day California. Mysteriously pulled through space and time to antebellum Maryland, Dana comes face to face with her slave heritage on the Weylin plantation and discovers that 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. To resolve this temporal paradox, Dana—and, by extension, Butler’s readers—must learn to understand history itself as a process of narrative production.

Throughout the first half of *Kindred*, Butler specifically uses the science fiction device of time travel to problematize the production of historical

<sup>8</sup> For similar arguments launched by feminist science fiction authors themselves, see Sargent 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Crossley 1988.

memory, especially in its commercialized form. As Damien Broderick notes, such devices allow authors to show how “no element of our own reality can be counted upon automatically to remain as a given, although ideological analysis may readily locate, precisely here, representations of those features rendered invisible by power and usage even as they dictate our lives” (1995, 26). Such analysis clearly pervades the early sections of Butler’s novel. For instance, in her first trip to the past, Dana finds herself suddenly transported to a river in the Maryland woods of 1819, where she saves a young Rufus from drowning. When Rufus’s gun-wielding father appears, she returns to her own world in an equally sudden manner. The whole encounter seems highly surreal to Dana, “like something I saw on television . . . something I got second-hand” (17). By resorting to the prosaic metaphor of watching television, Dana distances herself from the disturbing possibility that the past might be something that quite literally touches her. Almost immediately, then, Butler shows how commercial modes of memory alienate individuals from history in potentially dangerous ways.

Butler also uses time travel to expose the masculinist bias inherent in commercial modes of memory. On her second trip to antebellum Maryland, Dana stumbles upon a group of white patrollers beating a black slave for sneaking off the plantation to visit his free wife and child:

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! . . . I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their back and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. (36)

This passage dramatizes precisely the kind of criticism other black women writers of the 1970s and 1980s leveled at commercial television shows like *Roots* and *The Civil War*. While such programs might prepare Dana for certain aspects of history—the dramatic struggle of the runaway slave, for instance—they do little or nothing to prepare her for the impact these actions might have on the families of the heroic individual so often central to those same programs.

Elsewhere, Butler extends her critique of the masculinist bias in commercial modes of memory to their official or scholarly counterparts. Once she realizes that she will continue to travel through time until she ensures that Rufus grows up to initiate her family line, Dana vows to make the best of her situation by teaching the slave children around her to read and write—and to run for freedom as soon as they can (98). Thus, Dana tries to make sense of her new world by adopting the “literacy-identity-freedom” paradigm typically associated with the male-oriented slave narratives produced by nineteenth-century authors such as Frederick Douglass and reproduced later by twentieth-century writers such as Alex Haley. Within this paradigm, the enslaved person’s acquisition of language skills is the first—and most significant—step toward the acquisition of both psychological and physical freedom; other identifying characteristics are usually downplayed or even erased.<sup>10</sup>

Like other Afro-feminist critics, Butler suggests that while this paradigm is an important part of African-American history, it cannot adequately account for the gendered dimensions of that history. Again, she specifically uses time travel to underscore this point. On catching Dana and one of her pupils in the cookhouse with some books, Rufus’s infuriated father beats Dana mercilessly. As she falls unconscious and feels herself pulled back to California, the shocked Dana can only protest that “this wasn’t supposed to happen. . . . No white had [ever] come into the cookhouse before” (106). On returning to antebellum Maryland several weeks later, Dana is further horrified when she learns that her disappearance prompted the confused and enraged Weylin to punish her fellow slaves by selling some of their family members away from the plantation. Here, then, the partial nature of masculinist narrative structures leads Dana to misread history and her relationship to it in two ways. First, of course, she fails to anticipate Weylin’s appearance in the cookhouse because she perceives the master-slave relationship as simply raced rather than raced *and* gendered. In other words, by forgetting that the cookhouse is a both black and feminine space, Dana also forgets that it is subject to masculine surveillance and penetration. Second, these narrative structures lead Dana to understand herself as a lone individual battling the abstract forces of history rather than as someone enmeshed in familial and communal networks. Thus, she fails to anticipate that her actions might have consequences for

<sup>10</sup> For general discussions of the “literacy-identity-freedom” paradigm in nineteenth-century slave narratives, see Olney 1985; Gates 1987; and Foster 1994. For discussions of how this paradigm was specifically central to male authors, see Twagilimana 1997; Beaulieu 1999; and Rushdy 1999.



those around her—consequences that her travel through time underscores with startling clarity.

The cookhouse scene marks a turning point in *Kindred* as Dana begins to search for a mode of historical memory more appropriate to the experiences of African-American women. Significantly, Butler's use of science fiction devices also begins to shift at this point. As Marleen Barr notes, in science fiction "the alien other" typically signifies a certain anxiety about the raced and/or gendered other. However, women writers often appropriate this device to address their own political concerns: "Women—especially black women—who are alien to patriarchal society, alter fiction's depiction of the alien. . . . In opposition to science fiction stereotypes about vanquishing aliens, [these writers' characters] join with or are assisted by the aliens they could be expected to view as epitomizing the very opposite of humanness. These female characters, who are themselves the Other, do not oppose the Other" (1993, 98–99). More specifically, if feminist characters ally themselves with the alien other, it is precisely because this other "struggles to declare and create the truth" of marginalized people's lives outside those ordained by dominant modes of historical memory (99).

The shift to new modes of memory and new relations to the alien other begins almost immediately after the cookhouse scene. Upon her return to California, Dana resolutely reads and then purges her home of "everything . . . that was even distantly related to the subject [of slavery]. . . . [Their] versions of happy darkies in tender loving bondage were more than I could stand" (116). Simultaneously, she immerses herself in other, distinctly non-American stories of race relations and cultural power. Poring through testimonials from Nazi concentration camp survivors, Dana realizes that her experience of history is not unique, that "the Germans had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred" (117). If Jewish Holocaust stories begin to provide Dana with a new framework for understanding African-American history, it is because they are, ultimately, alien to that experience. Outside the constraints of dominant American modes of memory, they can "declare and create the truth" of both past and present-day power relations.

Elsewhere, Butler specifically uses the encounter with the alien other to carry out the Afro-feminist project of debunking cultural stereotypes of black women as happy mammies or long-suffering victims. Early in *Kindred* Dana dismisses Sarah the house manager as the stereotypical mammy who remains loyal to her white owners—even when they sell her eldest children off the plantation—because these same owners have

deigned to give her a nominal position of power over the other slaves. On her next trip to antebellum Maryland, however, Dana recognizes Sarah as a “frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose” (145), one who plays the part of the mammy out of love for her remaining children and fear that, if she does not, they *will* be taken from her. This insight forces Dana to reconsider her similarities to Sarah. Previously, of course, Dana assumed that her mixed feelings about Rufus were “something new, something that didn’t even have a name” (29). Now, however, she begins to see that this seemingly unique relationship parallels that of all the blacks and whites on the Weylin plantation—in other words, that her personal experience is not alien to, but instead part and parcel of, the American social experience as whole.

Finally, Butler uses the revised encounter with the alien other to show how contemporary black women like Dana might learn to reassess their own relations to history. Initially, this is a difficult task for Dana because there are few (if any) cultural narratives available to help her articulate this. Indeed, she only does so with the help of Carrie, the young house slave triply othered from American history by virtue of her race, gender, and the fact that, as a mute, she seems to be left outside of language itself. After Dana earns the scorn of the other plantation slaves for helping Rufus rape Alice, she tries to make sense of the situation by positioning herself as the long-suffering victim of fate, telling Carrie: “I can see why there are those here who think I’m more white than black” (224). Carrie vehemently negates this claim, wiping her fingers on Dana’s face and then showing Dana both sides of her hand—an action that Dana does not understand until Carrie’s husband explains that “she means it don’t come off, Dana . . . the black. The devil with people who say you’re anything but what you are” (224). In this scene, Carrie silently but powerfully insists on the importance of understanding oneself outside reductive modes of historical memory. As a black woman trying to survive slavery, Dana is more than a traitor to her race or a victim of fate. Instead, as Carrie suggests, Dana’s rich and complex identity as a black woman “don’t come off” just because she has had to make hard choices that are themselves neither wholly black nor white; instead, that identity is informed by those choices. Here, then, Carrie asks Dana to acknowledge that she, too, is the alien other of history.

As Mae G. Henderson argues in her study of contemporary Afro-feminist authors, black women’s literature is “generated less by neurotic anxiety or dis-ease than by an emancipatory impulse which engages both hegemonic and ambiguously (non)hegemonic discourse” (1989, 37). For Butler, truly emancipatory engagements with—and revisions of—racist

and sexist discursive practices depend on black women recognizing themselves as the alien other of those practices. And indeed, it is precisely after Carrie's "lesson" that Dana finally gains control over herself and her world(s). On her final trip to Maryland (which, significantly enough, occurs on July 4, 1976) Dana learns that Alice has finally borne the daughter who will initiate Dana's family line. Meanwhile, however, Alice has committed suicide and Rufus is on the verge of doing the same. Dana prevents Rufus from taking his own life, but the desperate man repays the favor by trying to force her into one last hard compromise, promising to free and protect his and Alice's children if Dana will stay with him as his lover. The bargain seems perfectly reasonable to Rufus—after all, Dana and Alice are nearly identical doubles of one another, and black women are supposed to accede to the wishes of white men. Dana, however, refuses the role of the victim and, for the first time, imposes her own conditions on their already overdetermined relationship: "I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, *but not as my master, and not as my lover*" (260; my italics). When Rufus refuses these conditions and attempts to rape her, Dana kills him and returns to her own world for good. Thus Dana's newfound sense of herself as the alien other leads to a quite literally emancipatory revision of history.

Although Dana's recognition of black women like herself as the alien others of American history seems to be an unproblematic triumph, the closing pages of *Kindred* encourage readers to meditate on the complex ways that this recognition might actually change women like Dana and their relations to history. Most immediately, Butler suggests that Dana does not escape her encounter with American history unscathed. In the seconds before he dies and Dana returns to present-day California, Rufus makes a final, desperate grab at Dana's arm. The result of this final action on the part of Rufus is the scene that begins *Kindred*: Dana comes to consciousness in the safety of her own home only to find that her arm has somehow fused itself to the wall of her bedroom. Although the scene is no less horrifying the second time around, the questions that it evokes (how did Dana get here? how is this even possible?) can be at least partially answered. By using science fiction devices such as time travel and the encounter with the alien other to engage with and reconstruct African-American women's history, Butler shows us that while Dana's literal situation may indeed seem like something out of a fantastic sci-fi scenario, metaphorically it makes perfect sense. As the alien other of American history, Dana is indeed deeply marked by—but at the same time an undisputed survivor of—that same history.

As such, Dana ultimately emerges as the author of a new mode of

historical memory—one that, perhaps not surprisingly, both engages with and writes beyond the ending of its more conventional masculinist counterparts. In the epilogue to *Kindred*, Dana decides to search for the remnants of the Weylin plantation in present-day Maryland. However, when she learns that the plantation has been destroyed, she realizes that she must turn to the very first form of historical memory that her experiences have taught her to distrust: commercial ones, including newspapers, magazines, and advertisements. Here, Dana finds at least part of the proof she needs in articles about a major plantation fire and advertisements for the sale of the Weylin slaves. While an earlier Dana might have accepted such narratives uncritically and despairingly, the older and wiser Dana of Butler's epilogue grieves for those who have been lost but manages to find hope in the midst of her grief:

All three of [their] sons were listed [in the auction advertisements], but Nigel and Carrie were not. Sarah was listed, but Joe and Hagar [Alice's children and Dana's ancestors] were not. . . . I thought about that, and put together as many pieces as I could. . . . [Rufus's mother] might have taken both children. Perhaps with Alice dead she had accepted them. They were her grandchildren, after all, the son and daughter of her only child. She might have cared for them. She might have held them as slaves. But even if she had, Hagar, at least, lived long enough for the fourteenth Amendment to free her. (263)

In this passage, Dana successfully pieces together an alternate family history based on her newfound understanding of historical representation itself as a kind of mutable structure informed by multiple sources: official historical "fact," its commercially oriented counterpart, and, of course, those personal and social experiences outside dominant modes of representation. Indeed, when another character suggests that she will "probably never know" exactly what happened to the Weylin plantation and its inhabitants, Dana touches her empty arm sleeve and replies "I know" (264). Dana's reply is appropriately ambiguous and overdetermined, both acknowledging the impossibility of complete narrative certainty while affirming her own relationship to history as an important source of cultural and individual memory. Thus Dana begins to generate her own representation of black women's experiences of America, one that is fueled by fact and fancy, grief and hope, and loss and love.

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