The Neoslave Narrative Project: A Study of Select Texts and Contexts from 1971 to 2023

By

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DEDICATION

To my family, for everything you've done for me and for always reminding me to keep moving forward.

To the friends I've made in the past five years, for always being there.

To those whose stories have yet to be told, may your voice be heard.

ABSTRACT

The relatively new field of civil rights literary studies investigates the role of literature in understanding and challenging the single-story narrative of the struggle for civil rights. Julie Armstrong's *The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* (2015) features essays on fiction, films, plays, and poetry that engage in some way with the standard chronology of the civil rights movement, 1954-1965. Although neoslave narratives have generated a substantial amount of scholarship, critics have yet to consider these texts as civil rights literature. My study examines three neoslave narratives within the field of civil rights: Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). I also examine each text's adaptation: the made-for-television version of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), both miniseries versions of *Roots* (1977; 2016), both the graphic novel (2017) and Hulu television series (2022) based on *Kindred.* Neoslave narratives challenge the consensus narrative of the civil rights movement in two primary ways: extending the standard chronology and creating a bottom-up people's history. When reading neoslave narratives as civil rights literature, these novels aid in the shaping of what Scot French calls "social memory." My interest in the civil rights movement in the American popular imagination puts me in conversation with both historians and literary critics as well as scholars and consumers of popular culture.

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Introduction

Nikole Hannah-Jones' *The 1619 Project* became available to the primarily White, middle-class reading audience of *The New York Times* in August 2019. Shortly after its release, critics on both ends of the political spectrum called attention to its main argument: to "reframe American history" (Silverstein). Critics from both sides rallied around various reasons to support or reject the way in which American history was being reframed. *The 1619 Project* tells the story of Black Americans through various genres and media–short stories, poetry, a podcast, and, later on, a children's book, a book, and a Hulu television miniseries. Although progressive politicians tended to support the main goal of the *Project*, which reminds Americans of all races that Black Americans continue to suffer from the long-lasting effects of slavery, creating a continuous present between 1619 and the present, conservative politicians and historians took issue with the *Project's* suggestion that American history, as Americans are taught in school, can be written from the perspectives of minorities. The driving impulse behind *The 1619 Project* is the need to tell the stories of Black Americans in new ways to reach wider audiences. Hannah-Jones accomplished writing history through asking her collaborators to write about the past to understand the present.

The same impulse can be seen in Julie Buckner Armstrong's *The Cambridge Companion to American Civil Rights Literature* (2015). This collection opens a new field of literary study, one which acknowledges that both Black and White authors, in particular those who participated in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, frequently revisit the period of the canonical[1] movement in their writings. Authors such

as Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun* [1959]), Harper Lee (*To Kill a Mockingbird* [1960)]), James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time* [1963]), and Eudora Welty ["Where is the Voice Coming From?" [1963]) wrote during the civil rights movement and acknowledge the movement in their writing. In her introduction to the collection, Armstrong recognizes that the civil rights movement (from 1954 to 1965) is not typically thought of in terms of the literature produced shortly before, during, or after the "end" of the movement.[2] Instead, the movement is typically defined by specific pieces of legislation (*Brown vs. Board of Education* [1954], the Civil Rights Act [1964], and the Voting Rights Act (1965)] and the actions of leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. The goal of her collection, then, is to bring together scholars and creators who address the civil rights movement. Her contributors seek to work through questions of "historical complexity as well as local and global significance" (6). According to Armstrong, authors who take part in the tradition of civil rights literature are creating art which results in an alternative to what scholars of history call the "consensus narrative" or "consensus memory" (6).

Just as the films, poetry, and other various genres highlighted in Armstrong's collection provide an in-depth discussion of the civil rights movement and how various creators responded, there is another genre which suggests that the violation of Black Americans' civil rights started long before the canonical civil rights movement began and continues to today: the neoslave narrative. It is the purpose of this project to include neoslave narratives in the canon of civil rights literature. Neoslave narratives, when thought of as civil rights literature, challenge a simplified narrative which sets the struggle for civil rights in the decade between the passing of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act (1965) and in select southern states. In

particular, neoslave narratives challenge a consensus memory which emphasizes four particular aspects: 1.) the movement is located in the American South, 2.) takes place primarily between the years 1954 and 1965, 3.) valorizes iconic male leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr., and 4.) demonstrates preference for change made through nonviolent direct action. Classifying neoslave narratives as civil rights literature might appear unconventional because these texts do not always include direct references to the civil rights movement proper, yet it is the contention of this project that neoslave narratives do similar work as civil rights literature: texts like Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) extend the timeline of the struggle for civil rights, returning to as early as 1619 to demonstrate the ways in which various leaders and actions contributed to the struggle. Each of the texts in this study are revised into other genres, sometimes years after their first publication. These readaptations of the texts under consideration in this project further demonstrate the value of thinking of these texts as civil rights literature because they emphasize the continued role these texts play in how Americans think about the struggle for civil rights, gaining wider audiences each time these texts are revised and reshaped into other pop culture iterations.

The Literary Debate Surrounding the Civil Rights Movement

The beginning of the civil rights movement has been debated for decades. In a speech at the 2005 conference for the Organization of American Historians (OAH), Jacquelyn Dowd-Hall gave a speech entitled "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" (2005) which makes the case that the civil rights movement

can be thought of as beginning as early as the 1930s with the passage of certain pieces of legislation which affected housing, education, and other civil rights for Black Americans rather than the canonical starting point of 1954 with the passing of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Dowd-Hall's primary concern is with how historians have previously recorded the civil rights movement in ways that she claims make it "Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain" (1235). As president of the OAH, she challenges historians specifically, to recommit themselves to civil rights scholarship by creating "a more robust, more progressive, and *truer* story" (1235). Her challenge to "make civil rights harder," or to complicate our understanding of the civil rights movement outside of the traditionally taught consensus narrative, sparked scholarly debate, eventually expanding outside of the field of history and into literary studies.

Christopher Metress, a scholar of southern literature, responded to Dowd-Hall by arguing that literature should be included in the debate about how American historians chronicle the civil rights movement. Metress' "Making Civil Rights Harder: Literature, Memory, and the Black Freedom Struggle" (2008) suggests that literature is an often-overlooked means of understanding and interpreting historical moments. He points out that "the legacy of the movement is very much tied to how it is emplotted. Top-down histories tell one story; bottom-up histories tell another" (148). Metress recognizes that history can be told from various viewpoints, with certain versions of history whitewashing and silencing the perspectives of underrepresented people and perspectives. Metress is interested in what Dowd-Hall calls the "political uses of the past," prioritizing literature, as this dissertation does, to "open up new sites of memory

for the civil rights historian," which Metress believes will "also help to keep alive the movement's power to speak effectively to the unresolved challenges of our times" (148). Looking to literature, as Metress suggests that scholars should, gives us news ways to "emplot" history. My project responds to Metress' call with a focus on neoslave narratives as valuable "verbal artifacts" which help to "emplot," or retell, the stories of the civil rights movement (140). These texts are uniquely suited to complete Metress' demand for "[emplotting]" bottom-up history because these narratives recognize the continuous present of slavery, a throughline across centuries. Literature like neoslave narratives and works like *The 1619 Project* enable the creation of the "more robust, more progressive, and *truer* stories" that Dowd-Hall encouraged her audience to produce (1235).

The inclusion of neoslave narratives into the field of civil rights literary studies complicates the single story narrative even more so than *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and *Mississippi Burning* (1988). With the inclusion of neoslave narratives comes the possibility of expanding the time period that the struggle for civil rights encompasses back to 1619, which then allows for authors and historians to portray various characters and people as leaders of the movement, rather than popularized, canonical leaders who become mythologized. The fact that often neoslave narratives are revised into various genres signals their cognitive hold on contemporary audiences.

Defining Neoslave Narratives

Neoslave narratives gained popularity as the role of Black American authors and scholars evolved in the 1960s. While Bernard Bell first identified the genre, Ashraf

Rushdy's integral book-length study, *Neoslave Narratives: The Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), offers the first in-depth examination. His definition informs the use of the term in this dissertation. Neoslave narratives, according to Rushdy, are novels which "assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Defining neoslave narratives in this manner pays homage to the tradition of the nineteenth-century slave narrative, a genre which emerged to tell the stories of those enslaved who managed to escape to freedom in the North. Novelists who returned to the slave narrative reshaped the genre. According to Rushdy, the neoslave narrative emerged primarily post-1968, as Black Power gained traction and academia continued to grow and become more inclusive. Black authors looked for ways of "[engaging] in an extended dialogue" which allowed them to reflect on and interact with their own time period (Rushdy 5). For some authors, this meant returning to a genre established by their literary ancestors.

Following the work of Bell and Rushdy, Valerie Smith contributes her own definition of the neoslave narrative, this time emphasizing the importance of creativity in her definition. In her chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007), Smith points out that while these contemporary authors are building on the already extant genre of the slave narrative, they enjoy more artistic freedom than the original slave narrators. These authors, Smith contends, "possess a measure of creative and rhetorical freedom unavailable to the freed and fugitive slaves who wrote narratives during the antebellum period" (169). Those creative and rhetorical freedoms, such as those that enable Clint Smith, a creative contributor to *The 1619 Project* to represent the Middle Passage through the image of a finger gliding across a

globe in his poem "August 1619," allow authors of neoslave narratives to inhabit creative spaces previously unavailable to their creative ancestors. Whereas slave narrators sought to prove their humanity while also demonstrating the veracity of their story (Andrews *To Tell A Free Story* [1988]; Foster *Witnessing Slavery* [1994]; Sidonie Smith), the authors of neoslave narratives generally do not have these same constraints, such as the use of time travel in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). Neoslave narratives, by building on the extant slave narrative, become valuable pieces of literature that help us to emplot the struggle for civil rights by envisioning a movement which is centuries long. Inserting neoslave narratives into the field of civil rights literature means opening the creative space of looking to the past to understand the present.

Twenty-first century scholars continued to create their own related terminology to talk about the genre of the neoslave narrative. Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002) focuses on the specific role of women in neoslave narratives. Mitchell ultimately contends that she has identified a "new genre" called "liberatory narratives" (xii). She considers female slave narratives written in the nineteenth-century "emancipatory narratives" which were "written to advance the cause of abolition and freedom by revealing the unspeakable realities of chattel slavery, especially for Black women" (xii). In the twentieth century, the liberatory narrative "reveals the unspeakable–indeed, the unacknowledged–*residuals* of slavery in the context of Black womanhood as it illuminates the enduring effects of our racist and sexist American history in today's society" (xii). Mitchell's woman-centered terminology brings the neoslave narrative into the present, framed specifically for women: "emancipatory narratives" pay tribute to the

enslaved Black women who suffered through both slavery and the continued "*residuals*" of slavery that Black American women face in American society. Using a genre that explores the past, authors of liberatory narratives–or, for the purposes of this study, neoslave narratives–comment on the politics of gendered inequality that plague our present.

Arlene Keizer's *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004) expands the field geographically, examining neoslave narratives set both inside and outside of the United States. Seeking to challenge how the African American literary field thinks of these texts, Keizer contends that the phrase "contemporary narrative of slavery" more accurately describes these narratives. Within her study of texts about slavery in the US and in the Caribbean, Keizer makes the integral point that slaves did not just escape to the North but traveled in any direction available to them.

To "liberatory narratives" (Mitchell) and "contemporary narratives of slavery" (Keizer), A. Timothy Spaulding adds "postmodern slave narrative." Spaulding's *Reforming the Past: History, the Past, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (2005) suggests that neoslave narrative authors are able to "re-form the slave narrative itself, as a document and critique of American slavery, by recovering the ideological project that served as the slave narratives' original foundation" by prioritizing the terminology of the "postmodern slave narrative" (8). Spaulding focuses on the nineteenth-century slave narrative, noting that "[as] a prototype for its postmodern counterpart, the slave narrative represents an early model of postmodern discourse–one that combines multiple narrative forms and rhetorical strategies to produce a hybrid of personal expression, popular

elements, and politically motivated cultural critique" (12). The postmodern slave narrative, then, is an intersection point of history and identity creation that allows for a discussion of race, gender, and politics. With each renaming from Mitchell, Keizer, and Spaulding, these scholars recall how a genre like the neoslave narrative must meet the needs of an author, speaking to the versatility of the genre and how the genre is able to reshape itself for a contemporary audience, acknowledging centuries worth of injustices, as *The 1619 Project* does.

Terminology surrounding neoslave narratives again evolved with the publication of Tim Ryan's *Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery Since* Gone with the Wind (2008). Ryan prefers to eschew the term "neoslave narrative" altogether while not offering an alternative because he finds it too limiting to the field of African American literature as a whole. Ryan acknowledges that, given the progression of time, scholarship is beginning to "explore how contemporary counternarratives–often by women, African Americans, and other traditionally excluded individuals–challenge and present alternatives to a long-dominant white, racist, patriarchal historical metanarrative" (5). While I want to retain the term "neoslave narrative" for my study, I find Ryan's argument on history exactly on point: "History, however is not–and never has been–a series of agreed-upon facts and dominant master narratives. Instead, it is a network of ongoing debates and continually contested interpretations; in short there actually has been a long tradition of histories in the plural" (5). He avoids assigning any specific defining term to the neoslave narrative because of his stance on counternarratives of history: "It is precisely because they wish–understandably—to distinguish the qualities of postmodern fiction and the achievements of recent black novelists that critics tend to understate

drastically the degree to which there have always been dissenting historical counternarratives" (6). Ryan makes the astute observation that labels tend to limit, or perhaps more obviously, categorize a text and the political meaning it can have. Refusing to rename the neoslave narratives of this study by giving them another label allows me to examine these texts as they look back, fitting themselves into "the long tradition of histories in the plural." Naming these texts for what they are, neoslave narratives, draws a throughline, sparking reminders of famous enslaved authors who had their stories written down[3] in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Social Construction of Civil Rights Memory

In his argument for the importance of literature in the emplotting of history, Metress highlights an integral concept to civil rights literary studies: social or collective memory. This terminology, particularly that of "social memory," is helpful because it allows for distinction between how and why authors of neoslave narratives look to the past to understand and demythologize the present, creating a throughline between time periods.

French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs first discussed the concept of "collective memory" in his unfinished book *On Collective Memory* (1925; 1992). His posthumously published work posits that "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories" (38). The translator and editor of Halbwachs's work, Lewis A. Coser, further emphasizes Halbwachs's point that collective memory is "not a given but rather a socially constructed notion. Nor is it some mystical group mind" (Coser 22). As Scot

French would later define social memory (1995), Coser points out that "there are as many collective memories as there are groups and institutions in a society" (22). It should also be recognized that within Halbwachs's work that there are two primary types of collective memory: historical and autobiographical. Both types are applicable in different ways to this study, but for the moment it is more pertinent to examine historical memory. This type of collective memory, according to Halbwachs's translator and editor comes from the use of documents and other methods of memorializing events. Importantly, Coser notes that, according to Halbwachs's work, "the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present" (25). For Halbwachs, historical memory is essentially a social construction which is shaped over time and by people.

Richard H. King's "Politics and Fiction Representation: The Case of the Civil Rights Movement" (1996) is among the first pieces of scholarship to suggest that literature is integral in how Americans remember the civil rights movement. King suggests that there is "an obligation…to 'enter into' the world of past actions and events before making judgments based on 'our point of view' alone" (162). Literature focused on the movement, King argues, creates a microcosm of the movement, or a "simulacrum of experience" (162). Literature allows both writer and reader to ruminate on "history." By "entering into" the past, writers of civil rights literature emplot history in various ways. When writers of neoslave narratives "enter into" the past, they recreate history by writing stories which theorize the thoughts and feelings of someone who is impacted by the struggle for civil rights. Civil rights literature thus has a unique role in its connection to both literature and history because it participates in the "production of social memory"

(Metress 141). In the Introduction to a 1995 issue of *Southern Cultures,* Scot A. French defines the "social memory" mentioned by Mettress. French believes that one way of thinking of social memory could be the ways in which "diverse peoples come to think of themselves as members of a group with a shared (although not necessarily agreed up on) past: Hatfields and McCoys, southerners and northerners, blacks and whites, natives and immigrants, Americans all" (French 9). French goes on to propose that "history is a genre of memory" and that historians should ultimately realize that "we are just telling stories about people telling stories. . . . *Our* stories should be testaments to the enduring significance of *their* stories, not monuments to our own changing perceptions of the past" (10; 17). French's work, like Halbwachs's work, reminds us of the importance of memory to various groups of people while also encouraging audiences to think about the importance of how stories are told. When included in the field of civil rights literature, these texts remind audiences that the stories recalled and retold numerous times are those that shape how they think of the civil rights movement.

Brian Ward's "Forgotten Walls and Master Narratives: Media, Culture, and Memories of the Modern African American Freedom Struggle" (2001) asks how master narratives shape American perceptions of history and how literature shapes memory. Ward acknowledges that many figures of the canonical movement have been "pressed into service," ultimately creating a "'master narrative,' of what the postwar black freedom struggle, in all its various phases and incarnations, was really about" (8). The "master narrative," Ward claims, is "a set of conventional wisdoms about the postwar freedom struggle and its origins, nature, trajectory, achievements, and legacies" (8). Defining the struggle via these "conventional wisdoms" plays a role in how Americans

have socially constructed their memories around the civil rights movement, appearing in both public school education and the memorialization of certain figures, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. Similar to Metress's later argument, Ward contends that literature provides audiences with other means of interpreting and understanding the emotional as well as political impacts of the movement. The master narrative which Ward speaks of can be confining for the creation of social memory, perhaps one of the reasons why *The 1619 Project*, while disrupting the social memory of the role of injustices toward Black Americans since 1619, received so much backlash upon its publication. While the master narrative offers a straightforward and "satisfying morality tale" as Dowd-Hall puts it (1235), it is also a dangerous space to inhabit because it is exclusionary. The master narrative of the civil rights movement is familiar, taking place through specific images: diner sit-ins, high-powered water hoses aimed at Black bodies, Martin Luther King, Jr. standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The field of civil rights literature, particularly when neoslave narratives are included in the field, asks, "What if the movement was not so easy to encapsulate? What if social memory was changed?"

Before publishing his response to Dowd-Hall in 2008, Metress began his scholarly work at the intersection of civil rights history, literature, and memory with the publication of *The Lynching of Emmett Till: A Documentary Narrative* (2002). In his introduction to the collection of various documents, court transcripts, and newspaper articles surrounding Till's murder and the resulting trial, Metress explains the process that he went through as he collected data for his project: "I thought I needed a 'history' to preface what for the most part was an anthology of 'memory'" (*The Lynching of Emmett Till* 4). After noting how Till's death has been memorialized in various pieces of

literature, Metress goes on to explore the concepts of memory versus history, stating that, for him, memory is

> unstable, prone to the vagaries of self-interest susceptible to error with the passage of time and shifting popular perceptions of historical events. 'History,' on the other hand, is more objective, a detached assessment that, while still prone to error, subjects itself to more demanding rules of evidence. There is, of course, some truth to this, but to insist on such a fierce distinction between memory and history is to overlook the more intimate relationship between the two perspectives. (10)

Ultimately, Metress contends that there is no way to separate history and memory. Instead, "Memory, I was forced to conclude, does not come after history. It is, instead, the very stuff of history, the narrative material out of which history emerges" (10). Understanding the relationship between history and memory, in this way, allows people to challenge how they think, record, and remember "facts." Social memory allows audiences to shape how different historical facts are collectively remembered. Certain leaders of the civil rights movement are idolized because the social memory constructed around them views them in that manner; alternatively, other potential leaders have been forgotten because the social memory around them has been left undeveloped.

Americans tend to have a very specific image or understanding of the civil rights movement. Each image, speech, newspaper reel, or sound recording contributes to how the movement is portrayed and remembered in the collective popular American consciousness. And yet, contemporary creators and, especially writers, continue to revisit those memories and continually reshape them. Neoslave narratives allow contemporary writers to revisit and reshape social memory surrounding the struggle for civil rights.

Emplotting Civil Rights

In his article, "Making Civil Rights Harder: Literature, Memory, and the Black Freedom Struggle" (2008), Metress emphasizes the importance of literature to understanding and interpreting history. He contends that historians do not turn to literature, limiting their analyses of texts to superficial examinations and not acknowledging that literature has great "cognitive value" (141), failing to recognize that histories are frequently themselves only one "version" of the events, facts, or stories being told. Foundational to Metress's argument is the scholarship of Hayden White, whose controversial realignment of history, literature, and linguistics states that histories are essentially "as much *invented as found*" (Metress 140), making literature an essential artifact that must be considered to create the "fuller story" for which Dowd-Hall asks. Metress continues the work of White by examining how scholars can emplot history by using literature.

The focus of this project on the relationship between neoslave narratives, civil rights literature, and social memory puts it in an interdisciplinary space, and also on a path of critical inquiry with only a few travelers, most importantly Barbara Melosh, Roberta M. Hendrickson, and Trudier Harris. In her article, "Historical Memory in Fiction: The Civil Rights Movement in Three Novels" (1988), Barbara Melosh reconsiders the role of remembering the civil rights movement across the works of authors like Rosellen Brown, Meredith Sue Willis, and Alice Walker. These women, Melosh contends, present "the afterimage of history, its imprints on the writer's consciousness and way of seeing the world. In this sense, novels are themselves primary sources, historical evidence of ideology" (65). Thinking of literature in this way, as a

primary (historical) text, allows scholars another way of looking at the past. Literature becomes another perspective to consider as other emplotments of history are created. Additionally, Melosh makes the apt point that authors like the ones under examination in this study can and should be impacted by their historical context—consciously or not, authors absorb memories from the groups they are a part of or that they have themselves helped to create.

Roberta M. Hendrickson's "Remembering the Dream: Alice Walker, *Meridian*, and the Civil Rights Movement" (1999) continues the argument for utilizing literature to help emplot history. Hendrickson focuses on Walker's personal experiences while participating in the civil rights movement and how those experiences specifically shape *Meridian* (1976). She ultimately argues that by "[focusing] on *Meridian* as a novel of the Civil Rights Movement," specifically as a Womanist novel, she hopes to "show how Walker used her experience. . . and the experience of others of her generation to deal with the social, political and philosophical issues raised by the Movement, issues that continue to engage us today" (111). After working through her examination of the novel as a piece of Womanist fiction which addresses women's roles in the movement, Hendrickson finally reminds her audience that Walker "reaffirms the Movement's vision of freedom, equality and nonviolence and its commitment to the black and poor and compels us to think about these issues once again" (126). While Walker focused on personal experiences in the 1950s and 1960s, those memories still resonate in the world today. Like the neoslave narratives considered in this study, Hendrickson suggests that Walker's novel reminds contemporary readers that the struggle for civil rights is ongoing. Hendrickson considers *Meridian* a civil rights novel because of its explicit connections to

the civil rights movement. Even though the neoslave narratives studied in this dissertation do not all share the same explicit connections to the civil rights movement, considering them as civil rights literature not only extends the time period of the struggle but also suggests it is ongoing.

Trudier Harris's *Martin Luther King Jr., Heroism, and African American Literature* (2014) focuses on how Martin Luther King, Jr. is memorialized in various pieces of African American literature. Her focus on the "how and why" authors in a variety of genres choose to address King as a folkloric and historical figure is threefold:

> First, each of these writers recognizes King as a heroic figure, whether they applaud that heroism or deride it. Second, that heroic traits that ensure King's transcendence of the ordinary to extraordinary inclusion in literary works is based, in part, on African American folk traditions. . . . Third, the inherent ambiguity of African American heroic folk traits makes for political as well as literary entanglements that call into question the life of King as incorporated into the literature as well as the intentions of the writers in preserving, tainting, reclaiming, or elevating King's historical legacy. (2)

These authors balance the reality of King's life (including his various affairs and his propensity for drinking) with his mythologized identity as a popularized leader in the canonical movement. Addressing King as both a historic and a literary figure allows Harris to consider his legacy while also thinking about how authors choose to memorialize him. Harris's analysis of King's appearance in these various plays, novels, and poems suggests that the authors of these texts work to emplot a different version of history.

Each text examined by Melosh, Henderickson, and Harris continues a tradition of looking to the past to understand the present. The texts examined by these scholars might write about popularized leaders or their own experiences during the canonical movement,

but they also recognize that writing about the movement is another way of narrating or emplotting history. By writing down their experiences, fictionalized or not, these authors participate in shaping social memory of the civil rights movement.

Outline of Dissertation

As has been demonstrated, as a genre, neoslave narratives have received significant, although arguably not ample, attention–*but* not as civil rights literature. In this study, three neoslave narratives published post-1971 and their resulting popular culture artifacts are examined as pieces of civil rights literature.

Chapter One, "Miss Jane as Memory Maker in Ernest's Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971)," investigates the role that the titular character plays in the creation of civil rights memory while also examining the role that the made-for-television film of the same name plays in the production of civil rights memory in the context of the 1970s. This chapter begins with a discussion of Gaines' clear relationship with his Black southern identity and his dedication to the creation of a "Black peasantry" which demonstrates an accurate depiction of his experiences in the Black South (Gaines 611). *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and its film version situate Miss Jane and the primary Black men of the novel (Ned and Jimmy, respectively) within a tradition of Black advocacy which started decades before the beginning of the canonical civil rights movement. Reading *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as civil rights literature makes visible the deep and complicated roots of civil rights protest, locating those roots in slavery and therefore reframing the events of the mid-twentieth century as something "other" than how it exists in the US popular imagination.

Chapter Two, "The Roots of Memory: Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* (1976) as Civil Rights Literature," explores how and why the Haley family's story became emblematic of the story of many Black Americans. The primary focus of this chapter is on Haley's Black male family members as leaders within a centuries-long movement for civil rights, leaders who struggled to provide for their families even when the institution of slavery prevented it. This chapter contends that Haley portrays these men as actively making the decision to maintain or obtain their freedom while living in an institution which might suggest that Black men are not capable of leading their families. The miniseries adaptations that followed the novel's publication (1977; 2016) resonated with middle class audiences, further shaping how Black manhood and resistance is understood and portrayed in American media. When both the novel and the miniseries are read as civil rights literature, the impactful position that *Roots* holds within American memory demonstrates a tradition of protesting for civil rights which is centuries-long and continents-wide.

Chapter Three, "Memory Machine: Neoslave Narratives as Past and Present in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979)" examines the neoslave narrative genre, the graphic novel counterpart of Butler's work, and the recent Hulu adaptation of *Kindred* (2022) to consider Black humanity in two different contexts – the early nineteenth-century and the mid-twentieth-century. This chapter situates the male characters of Rufus, Kevin, Luke, and Nigel as everyday men who participate (or do not) in the struggle for freedom. Additionally, this chapter addresses the female characters of Dana, Sarah, and Carrie as everyday women who take on leadership roles within their communities. The television adaptation of *Kindred* offers twenty-first-century viewers the opportunity to reconsider

Butler's novel as a story which works to portray the struggle for civil rights as ongoing, particularly with the creative choice to portray Dana as a twenty-first-century woman. Reading *Kindred*, its corresponding graphic novel, and the television adaptation as civil rights literature emphasizes the everyday people living across centuries who took part in the freedom struggle rather than only those popularized by the media.

The conclusion of this project returns to the definition of civil rights literature and rethinks how these texts contribute to and shape a collective memory of the struggle for civil rights. Additionally, this final section will consider questions of redefining the long civil rights movement and how this redefinition helps to complicate the field of civil rights literary study.

Chapter One: Miss Jane as Memory Maker in Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*

Included in the special 25th anniversary publication of *Callaloo: The Best of Callaloo Prose* (2001) is a speech originally given by Ernest Gaines in 1971 at Southern University in Louisiana. Gaines' title "Miss Jane and I", as well as his first sentence, leads his reader to believe that he is recalling a woman who had a significant impact on his life. It soon becomes apparent that he is writing about a fictional Black woman, the main character of his 1971 novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. In his description of his relationship with her, it becomes apparent that, to him, Miss Jane, is, to some extent, real, and that realness has come across to other readers and reviewers:

> Since the publication of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* last April, I've read several reviews in which critics have called Miss Jane a real person. A representative of *Newsweek* asked me to send the editors of the magazine a picture of Miss Jane Pittman to be used with a review of the novel. I had to inform her that I could not, since Miss Jane is a creation of my imagination. The lady who called me was both shocked and embarrassed–'Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!' she said. ("Miss Jane and I" 608)

Many others assumed Miss Jane was an actual person, including the actress Ruby Dee who reviewed the novel for *Freedomways.* Gaines writes that another close journalist friend of Gaines "also feels that I must have, at some time in the past, interviewed my grandmother or my aunt who raised me when I lived in the South" (608). Even Bob Cromie of *Bookbeat* thought Gaines had used interviews with his grandmother to help create the character of Miss Jane. Gaines' success lies in his creation of a fictional character whose experiences resonated with so many readers.

When *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) is read as civil rights literature, the deep roots of the freedom struggle are exposed. These roots extend at least

to the mid-nineteenth century and thus challenge the chronology of the civil rights movement. In addition, Miss Jane aids in the social construction of how we remember the events of the freedom struggle by collecting memories of those around her and retelling them. The novel, when read as civil rights literature, focuses our attention on the leadership of the movement, emphasizing the leadership roles of everyday Black men and women. Gaines' novel gives us male characters who resemble iconic male figures, yet he chooses to focus instead on Miss Jane as the heroine-turned-activist. The novel presents a centuries-long people's history of the freedom struggle that centers on women and their contributions to the movement. The resulting made-for-television film (1974) further demonstrates how the story has been brought back into the American popular consciousness, emphasizing the emotions that a canonical post-civil rights viewer might feel while watching the men and women of Gaines' participate in the struggle for civil rights.

Before moving to a close examination of the neoslave narrative and later the made-for-television film starring Cicely Tyson (1974), both of which address and resist aspects of the consensus narrative, Gaines's understanding of himself as a Black southern writer must be examined. Viewing Gaines' interest and interactions with Black southern history provide the necessary context for seeing him as a civil rights writer.

Depicting the "Black Peasantry"

A distinguishing feature of Ernest Gaines' work is his ability to create characters who feel true-to-life for his readers. The focus on the execution of such characters plays a particularly important role in reading any of Gaines' work as civil rights literature

because it helps to focus our attention on the many rather than the few who took part in the struggle for civil rights. By prioritizing the "lived experience" of the "Black peasantry," Gaines gave his readers a revisionist American civil rights history.

In interviews regarding his work, Gaines foregrounds the importance of his personal experiences growing up in the South through the creation of the character of Miss Jane Pittman. While the fictional Black woman has often been mistaken as a real person, Gaines consistently states that he based the character on several people whom he knew growing up, in particular his aunt who could not walk (Gaines "Miss Jane and I" 608). For several years, his aunt was his primary caretaker. A composite character, Jane seems like she could be *any* southern Black woman–she could be his grandmother or his aunt, or any other elderly Black woman that he might have known as he was growing up in Louisiana during the 1930s and 1940s. Slipping or switching between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, works to Gaines' advantage because it allows him to create characters who seem real, like Miss Jane. By working in the genre of the neoslave narrative and titling his novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines invites his readers to consider Miss Jane as a freedom fighter, alongside Frederick Douglass, one of the most famous authors of a nineteenth-century slave narrative, or Malcolm X, whose "as told to" autobiography generated impressive sales for Alex Haley in 1965.[4]

Scholars such as Charles Rowell frequently note the importance of Gaines' upbringing to his creative works. Gaines himself spoke of his similarity to other authors who were not able to write about anything other than the location they grew up in, claiming that "I doubt that I will be able to do it [write about California] until I have gotten rid of this Louisiana thing that drives me, yet I hope I never will get rid of that

Louisiana thing" (Rowell 40). Once Gaines moved out of the state of Louisiana, he began reading southern authors, such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner, but he quickly realized that he "found most of the work that I read untrue and unreal to my own experience; yet, because I hungered for some kind of connection between myself and the South, I read them anyhow" (Gaines "Miss Jane and I" 610). As Gaines continued to read, he looked for authors who focused on the lives of everyday people or specific racial groups, authors who represented their characters accurately. Gaines found solace in the works of authors like Pushkin, Gogol, and Turgenev largely because

> I felt that they wrote truly about peasantry. . . . Their peasants were not caricatures or clowns. They did not make fun of them. They were people – they were good, they were bad. They could be as brutal as any man, they could be as kind. The American writers in general, the Southern writer in particular, never saw peasantry, especially black peasantry, in this way; blacks were either caricatures of human beings or they were problems. They needed to be saved, or they were saviors. They were either children, or they were seers. But they were very seldom what the average being was. ("Miss Jane" 611)

Gaines's self-study raised questions for the aspiring writer about what he was attempting to accomplish with his writings. In an earlier nonfiction essay written by Gaines for *The Southern Review,* Gaines explains how he came to understand his particular purpose as a writer: "[I] had to sit and think: how could [I] relate this [search for "I" or identity] to the lives of [my] ancestors and to the people whom [I] had grown up around; how to articulate their, [my] own people's, experience; how to articulate thoughts that they had been denied to articulate for three hundred years" (Gaines "A Very Big Order"). What Gaines "articulates" in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* demonstrates his knowledge and understanding of real life and real people, not "caricatures" or "clowns." In this way, Gaines speaks back to a southern literary tradition that "never saw. . . black

peasantry" ("Miss Jane" 611). The struggles that Miss Jane faces are not just her struggles; they represent the struggles and the fight for freedom of a people, "true" and "real" to Gaines' lived experience.

Scholars note Gaines' awareness of the past and present, especially when viewed in connection with his time in Louisiana. In interviews, Gaines emphasizes historical context, speaking of how the past cannot be fully escaped particularly "because Louisiana is definitely not only my past but my present also. . . . There is a difference between living in the past and trying to escape it" (Rowell 42). In his third-person account of his childhood and his experiences with literature growing up, Gaines states that he quickly learned as a young adult that race was an integral part of his life because "[he] had come from a world where the two races, white and black, were separated but he had never thought he was less than anyone else. He had always carried his share of the load. . . . So he had never thought less of himself than he did of any other" (Gaines "A Very Big Order"). Gaines talks specifically about both creating characters like Miss Jane who would have experience or knowledge of specific cultural events, while also dealing with his own role as an author in a post-Black Arts Movement world with a specific understanding of the role of a "writer" versus a "black writer" (Rowell 45). And yet, Gaines was able to take those experiences growing up a Black American man in the South, along with his dignity, and shape them into characters like Miss Jane. Rather than allowing himself to succumb to the racism of the times by thinking that he could not accomplish the creation of his own literary worlds akin to what he grew up reading, Gaines instead took on the role of the Black southern author and began writing. While Gaines writes accurately, in a sense, about the experiences of Black Americans living in

southern states like Louisiana,[5] he attempted to navigate his position within the various political contexts of the civil rights movement and the subsequent Black Arts Movement. The fact that he did not ignore these contexts should prompt readers to consider how exactly Gaines' fiction addresses the cause of these social and political movements. Put differently, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* should be read alongside *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* as a neoslave narrative, and Miss Jane should be seen as a fictional counterpart of Rosa Parks. In both cases, the personal is political, with the political reaching back to slavery and continuing into the twentieth century.

Scholar Marcia Gaudet continues the trend of discussing Gaines' perception of himself as a writer in creating life-like characters. Gaudet asserts that it is the use of personal narrative traits which creates this intimacy (27-28). For Gaudet, the combination of personal narrative and oral folk tradition brings Miss Jane's character to the forefront of her story, allowing the author to fade away and the narrator to "[take] over and '[interact]' with the reader" (24). Miss Jane's story is a composite of the experiences of people she has come in contact with over a long period of time. Making her a repository of memory for all the various stories of many different people gives Gaines the space in which to create a character who embodies the oral tradition of southern storytellers who keep history alive. Centering his novel on the story of a southern Black woman who has lived through slavery, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and two World Wars provides Gaines a rich canvas upon which to comment on matters crucial to American identity while honoring the experiences of Black women.

Scholars emphasize the importance of oral tradition and history to Gaines' work. According to editor David Estes, people in Gaines' work "find their identity within, not

outside of, that particular history" (10). Gaines' most memorable characters are those "who talk about the legacy of oppression, capitulation, and resistance, keeping alive in the community the events of the past stretching all the way back to the days of slavery. Their stories, passed orally from one generation to the next, are part of African-American folk history, which stands in contrast to the white version of our national history" (10). Other scholars, such as Jack Hicks, have also examined the concept of orality and community as it appears in Gaines' work. Hicks proposes that a sense of community becomes increasingly important to Gaines' novels: he contends that "[the] bones of his book are communal, oral and rhetorical, spirituals, black folk sermons, slave narratives, biblical parables, folk tales, and primitive myths," all of which work together to make Miss Jane a "repository of Southern black life since the Civil war" (16). Note that Hicks, like Gaudet, acknowledges the centrality of Miss Jane to the story. Prioritizing *her* voice and *her* experience demonstrates not only Gaines' celebration of an engagement with orality, but also the centrality and importance of Black women's stories over the course of centuries.

Gaines' sense of himself as a writer includes a connection between spirituality and freedom, something William Andrews explores in his essay, "'We Ain't Going Back There': The Idea of Progress in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*" (2017). Andrews pays particular attention to Ned Douglass and Jimmy Aaron, two male characters who have a profound impact on Miss Jane's life. Like his historical namesake, Ned encourages Miss Jane and others in his community to use their lives to make progress for the collective Black American community in the South. Jimmy Aaron also serves his community as a guide, one who knows that "only in reaching the folk where

they live can Jimmy promote the evolution of their consciousness necessary to make them resist the white man's effort to dispossess them" (566). Addressing male leadership in terms of spirituality demonstrates the kind of messianic terms in which civil rights leaders were held and memorialized in standardized histories. Prioritizing the stories of these two male characters, Andrews demonstrates the kinds of voices that are held as central to the story of the civil rights movement–men who are thought of in god-like terms. Andrew's reading, ironically, marginalizes Miss Jane's leadership qualities. At the end of the novel, well after Ned's murder,[6] Miss Jane exemplifies resistance to White oppression as she walks toward a "Whites only" segregated drinking fountain. Again, placing the focus on a century-old Black woman helps to prioritize her voice and her story while also calling attention to all of the people who have played a role in the centuries-long struggle for civil rights.

Scholars have documented how Gaines' position as a Black southern writer included his perspective on Black womanhood and history. Valerie Melissa Babb examines Miss Jane as a "personified archive" (93), claiming that "[it] is noteworthy that Gaines invents a female narrator. Rarely has American history been chronicled through the perspective of a black woman, and to allow a black woman's voice to recall history is a striking act of fictional revision" (77). Accordingly, it is through Miss Jane that "others are able to connect their experiences to the recent and distant past, and her life is a composite of many episodes in larger black life" (77). While Miss Jane's story is a communal one, it offers "an insider's intimate perceptions and observations" which "add another dimension to history" (79). At the same time, Miss Jane is also viewed by other people in her community as a way of knowing and understanding: "What makes Jane

such a symbol to her people is her connection to the African-American past and her embodiment of African-American history" (95). She enables those in her community to "see themselves, their parents, their grandparents, and their great-grandparents" (95). Many readers, particularly those who confused Miss Jane for a real woman, saw something in her, something that reminded them of family members. When the made-for-television film premiered three years after the novel's publication (1974), that revised history found its way to a wider audience.

Scholar Robert Patterson discusses how Gaines's view of Black southerners helped to shape the novelist's focus on Black women's history. In *Exodus Politics: Civil Rights and Leadership in African American Literature and Culture* (2013), Patterson suggests that by focusing the story on Miss Jane, Gaines effectively "decenters exodus politics as *the* political model of black leadership" ("'Is He the One?'" 35). Rather than privilege the leadership of men over women, Gaines views the leadership of men and women as complementary, demonstrating that "sole dependence on a male leader keeps communities from recognizing their own empowering role in freedom struggles" (35). In addition, Patterson makes the case that Gaines shapes the gendered expectations of leadership largely "through changing historical, economic, political, and cultural contexts" (36). Examining different forms of leadership, Patterson finds that women played just as important roles in the civil rights movement as men, albeit not always widely known or publicized. Gaines's novel, when viewed in this light, challenges social memory and highlights the importance of female leadership.

While *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* has already received a fair amount of critical attention from scholars, scholars have yet to explicitly call Gaines'

neoslave narrative civil rights literature. Thus, in this chapter, Gaines' novel is examined as challenging three main components of the consensus narrative. The novel expands the chronology of the movement while participating in the creation of a people's history which resists the gendered narrative of the civil rights movement. When read as civil rights literature, Gaines' novel challenges this strictly defined era by extending the movement into the nineteenth century, thereby challenging the consensus narrative which prompts us to create a people's history. To read *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as civil rights literature means rethinking how the course of the centuries long struggle for freedom impedes a "top-down" patriarchal story in the American imagination—a story that celebrates Black male leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. while marginalizing not only Black female leaders but female methods of leadership as well.

Ned and Jimmy: Composite Male Characters

In his abridged discussion of *The King Years* (2013), Pulitzer Prize-winner Taylor Branch foregrounds the role that nonviolence would play in Martin Luther King Jr.'s position as civil rights leader. During one of his first speeches regarding the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycotts, King told his riveted audience: "'The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest'" (Branch 10). King encouraged his listeners to act in a specific manner–to not incite violent protest whenever possible. The concept of nonviolence became such a fundamental part of the movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation published a short, illustrated pamphlet entitled *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story* (1957). The short comic opens by telling King's story–starting with his childhood and his education in both the North and the South

before shifting to tell the rest of the bus boycott's story from the perspective of another man, given the unremarkable name of Jones. The flyer continues through Jones' perspective, detailing the effectiveness of the boycott and the nonviolent method emphasized and supported by King. According to the short comic, King gained followers through his approach to nonviolence, providing a series of steps for how other nonviolent direct action groups, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committed (SNCC), started in Nashville in 1960, might use the method to support their own protests, since it can be "used against any kind of evil" (*Martin Luther King* 13). Interestingly, from Jones' perspective, King's story shows both men *and* women participating in the civil rights movement. Women are pictured boarding the buses after the boycott ends, faithfully enacting nonviolence as Dr. King has instructed them. One woman tells the driver, "I'm going to pray for you" (9) while another woman, who has been slapped by a White passenger, thinks that she could easily beat him but will instead "remember what Reverend King told me about peace and nonviolence. I'll just keep my hands clasped that way there won't be any trouble" (9). For King and his followers, keeping hands clasped in front as well as joined in prayer are methods of engaging in nonviolence, of doing what Lincoln imagined: bringing the formerly enslaved into citizenship, ensuring that Black Americans have access to rights previously denied by centuries of forced labor.

Miss Jane is much like the women in the comic, an observer of both history and the boys she raised into men. Having Miss Jane interact with each of these male characters demonstrates, for Andrews, that "freedom from the burden of the racist Southern past cannot be achieved by running away from it" ("We Ain't Going Back There" 565). Instead, each of the men in Miss Jane's life confronts the past and suggests

ways of moving on. In the neoslave narrative, Miss Jane has three main love interests, all of whom are, to some extent, involved in the political activism of the freedom struggle. Her adopted son, Ned, becomes a teacher, preacher, and leader in the freedom struggle. He is killed because he presents a threat to the southern way of maintaining not only racial difference but also race-based hierarchy. Jimmy, one of the children born and raised in the slave quarters and labeled by the community as "The One,"[7] is killed after he becomes a potential leader of the civil rights movement in 1962. While the title has pretentious leanings–Jimmy could be "the one" to save them all or "the one" of Miss Jane's "children" to succeed outside of the quarters—Jimmy's unofficial nickname also suggests singularity when, in fact, the movement needs the support of the whole community to survive. Gaines follows history here: Black male leaders were more frequently assassinated or murdered because they were perceived as threats, and at the end of the novel, Miss Jane honors these men by being brave and walking to the water fountain; instead of allowing their work to end with their deaths or arrests, she continues on. Even while honoring their memory, however, Gaines also deconstructs the idea of "the One"—the one man who will effectively lead the movement, create equality, and erase racism. Instead, it is Miss Jane who survives them all, understanding that it is up to her to continue down a dusty country road toward her (freedom) bus, to continue the protest and activism.

Jane is a teenager when she first becomes Ned's adoptive mother. During their journey to Ohio after their emancipation, she gives him his biological mother's flint and iron. Jane takes the rocks from Big Laura,[8] Ned's dead mother, and she tells him "it was go'n be his job to see that they got to Ohio same time we did" (Gaines 24). He continues

to carry the rocks with him throughout his time traveling around Louisiana with Jane. Giving him the rocks from an early age symbolically allows them to shape his personality as a child. Although he is quiet while he is with Jane, he is also smart, and the rocks teach him responsibility which any other young child might not have fully understood. While the rocks give him the literal means to start a fire, a physical means of resistance, metaphorically, the rocks are representative of him learning about the injustices that Black Americans face and deciding that education and leadership are feasible ways in which progress can be made.

Ned eventually sets aside his rocks, but he still has been imbued with the qualities of a firebrand. As he gets older, Ned changes his name. As a child he had taken on Jane's last name as his own; he now changes his last name to one of political significance, Douglass, after Frederick Douglass. Over time his name evolves into Edward Stephen Douglass, echoing the name of Illinois senator Stephen Douglas. Ned's choice of name is significant. Frederick Douglass, as Miss Jane points out, is one of the very popular names among the formerly enslaved men. Choosing a name like either Douglass or Douglas signifies an adherence to certain principles, such as the advancement of Black American individuals through education and advocacy, as Douglass did with his orations and the publication of his first narrative, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). In addition, the name Stephen Douglas suggests involvement with abolition similar to Frederick Douglass's involvement with abolition before and during the Civil War (Levine 60-61). Linking himself to iconic historical figures suggests that Ned will himself become an orator who will continually work for the betterment of the Black American community that remains in the South.

Ned, because of his name and the philosophies that he begins to echo, is what Babb considers a "personified archive," a man made up of other men, actual male figures of history (93). Those voices and philosophies continually haunt Gaines' novel and help to explain why so many interviewers, journalists, and friends mistook Miss Jane for a real person. Gaines honors these male ancestors while also suggesting that the work started by these men must continue after they are gone. The act of civil disobedience that Jane takes part in at the end of the novel, long after Ned's death, and the storytelling by Gaines through Miss Jane are ways of continuing the work started by these male forebearers. When thought of as civil rights literature, this continuation of the work challenges both the chronology and the gendered nature of the consensus narrative, making civil rights harder to contain, simplify, and mythologize.

Ned's advocacy for Black rights becomes another avenue for honoring male predecessors. He joined a committee which, as Jane tells us, would travel "round and see how the colored people was treated" and ultimately, "when the committee found out the colored was treated no better than they was treated in slavery they told them to leave for the North. Ned's job was to tell people how to get to New Orleans. How to travel, where they could stop, where they could find help and food" (Gaines 75). Eventually, he becomes one of the people to leave, largely because he feels like it is his time to begin leading:

> "After the war wasn't my time," he said. "But I went everywhere you wanted me to go."
> "People don't keep moving, Ned." . . .
> "Everybody else going," he said.
> "Many going, but not everybody," I said. "I think you ought to go. But not me." (78)

Jane recognizes that it is time for Ned to lead, and he cannot do so if he remains in the South. While he is away, he works with White people who help him continue his education, enabling Ned to become an orator and teacher after his time in the military, a relationship which resembles that of his predecessor and namesake Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison, the editor of *The Liberator* who wrote the Preface to Douglass' 1845 narrative. Ned makes intentional choices about activism. Douglass wrote, gave speeches, and worked alongside other abolitionists to aid the abolitionist cause before the Civil War. Ned, like Douglass, also chooses to give speeches and to advocate against injustice, but he also chooses to come back to the South, to Louisiana, a hotbed of racism and White supremacy. He honors Douglass' memory by becoming a speaker and an advocate for change, but he also seems to realize that by returning home to Louisiana, his impact will be most noteworthy.

Ned returns to his community in Louisiana during Reconstruction, embracing the nonviolent principles for which King would advocate decades later. Although Reconstruction brought about rapid and radical political, economic, and social changes to the South, these changes were often met with resistance from former White slave owners, reluctant to give up their former way of living. In his study, *Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (2012), Allen Guelzo contends that before his assassination, Abraham Lincoln believed

> There was a dim shore ahead for the whole nation in the spring of 1865, an unmapped future that would involve reintegrating the Confederate states back into the political Union, bringing freed slaves into the full citizenship that their centuries of unrewarded labor had earned them, and manhandling the old Democratic South into the new Republican future of railroads, markets, and free labor. (467)

Miss Jane's story and remembrances address the "unmapped future" after Reconstruction on the lives of the formerly enslaved. The "dim shore" that the country faced was made only dimmer by the reluctance of White southerners to change their perception of the racial structure of the South. Miss Jane's remembrances of Ned demonstrate this reluctance to "reintegrating" that White southerners felt, highlighting the racial tensions that grew after the War and the creation of the Freedman's Bureau, eventually culminating in Ned's assassination. The uncertainty of an "unmapped future" and a refusal toward "reintegrating" throughout Miss Jane's story tells us how monumental of a task it will be to "[bring] freed slaves into full citizenship" and to bring the country together again, as Lincoln dreamed. Once Ned comes home to Miss Jane, he begins to advocate for the educational rights of Black Americans, angering the White community and making him something of an outsider to his community. As Thomières suggests, "[Ned] went away, he lived abroad, he was influenced by foreign ideas" (223). He asks Miss Jane whether preachers are talking about Booker T. Washington or Frederick Douglass. Miss Jane remembers the moment with Ned: "'Mr. Booker T. Washington taught that all colored ought to stay together, work together, and try to improve their own lot before they tried to mix with the white folks. Mr. Frederick Douglass taught that everybody ought to work together. Ned had always believed in Mr. Douglass's teaching" (Gaines 105). By demonstrating Ned's knowledge of the different philosophies regarding Reconstruction-based racial policies, Miss Jane shows how Ned's education has shaped not only his experiences and his beliefs, but also her own. He quickly sets himself apart as someone who will speak regarding his beliefs, and that he will be a person that the Black community will listen to. By having Ned refer to actual people, Gaines' novel

becomes a history lesson, one that honors male orators like Douglass and Washington, while also locating the roots of the modern civil rights movement in slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. It is through this history lesson that Gaines shows his audience how history can be a construction with more than one story to tell.

Ned's work allows him to honor his predecessors by preaching and spreading a message about Black humanity. Two weeks before he is killed, two White men, the LeCox brothers, observe him and convey his message to the larger White community. Miss Jane recalls that Ned's sermon began by asserting that Black Americans have just as much of a right to the earth as the White man does:

> "This earth is yours and don't let that man out there take it from you," he said. "It's yours because your people's bone lay in it; it's yours because their sweat and their blood done drenched this earth. The white man will use every trick in the trade to take it from you. . . . But remember this," he said. "Your people's bone and their dust make this place yours more than anything else." (112-13)

In his sermon, Miss Jane remembers that Ned demonstrated that there is a past from which the Blacks of the South must build their future. Andrews suggests that Ned's attempts at resituating the role that Black Americans play in the rebuilding of the United States demonstrates "that they have learned the necessity of conserving a useable past on which to build a viable future. . . . Instead of rejecting their past as something shameful from which to flee, the black folk preserve their martyred ideals . . . the better to hold fast to hope" (564). Ned's ideas echo those of Lincoln. Rather than remaining on the "dim shore" of the future, however, Black Americans must understand and know their "usable past" as a means of creating their own future in a country under tremendous political and social upheaval (Guelzo 467).

Jane's retelling of Ned's sermon uncovers the radical difference in how Black Americans *should* be treated and how they *are* treated by Whites. Jane puts the emphasis on Ned's encouragement to his audience to remain together and to work together, remembering Ned saying that "'I'm much American as any man; I'm more American than most. . . . America is for red, white, and black men. . . . The black man cultivated this land from ocean to ocean with his back. The white man brought tools and guns. America is for all of us.' he said, 'and all of America is for all of us'" (Gaines 114-15). Miss Jane's remembrance of Ned's sermon shows us his skill as an orator, giving a sermon with a radical message to it, which is perceived as a threat by the White listeners. Black Americans have been in America since before the nation *was* a nation, as Hannah-Jones points out with *The 1619 Project*, and they deserve to be reframed in the context of the histories that we tell, recognized with "full citizenship." Ned, through Miss Jane's memory as his audience member, asks us to consider whether America, since the forced arrival of the first enslaved Black people in 1619, is really "for all of us."

Jimmy Aaron is another male character whom Miss Jane guides and supports. While Miss Jane never leaves Louisiana, the young men in Miss Jane's life must leave and gain an education in order to become leaders in their local community. Jimmy, like Ned, leaves the quarters in Samson in 1954 and eventually returns after becoming an activist. Miss Jane remembers the situation: Jimmy left "from here the same year they passed that law in Washington. Went to New Orleans to stay with his mama and go to school. They passed that law in the spring, he left here in the summer" (229). "That law" refers to the passing of *Brown vs. The Board of Education* (1954), an earthquake in the freedom struggle and quest for civil rights. At the same time, Miss Jane notes that it

seems that everything regarding the "Civil Rights trouble" was happening in other locations not in Louisiana (230): "Everything that was going on was going on somewhere else. Alabama, Mi'sippi, New Orleans – but not Samson" (231). Like Ned, Jimmy does little to purposefully incite violence in his protest, yet he is killed because he is perceived as a threat. The final "postbellum" section of the neoslave narrative makes several direct references to the classical era of the civil rights movement. Jimmy is born, raised, and returns to the quarters while he works to advance the cause in Bayonne. By making this explicit association between the slave quarters of a former plantation and the civil rights movement, Gaines creates an important throughline–slavery supposedly has ended, but over a century later, Black Americans are still living in what used to be the homes of their slave ancestors. Their presence prompts a potent question: what is truly "post" about "postbellum"? Miss Jane and Jimmy, with their participation in the civil rights movement, make the slave quarters a *center* of the movement, highlighting the power that can come from the previously "never seen. . . black peasantry" (Gaines "Miss Jane" 611). They plot, plan, strategize and generally work to keep the movement going by occupying Black spaces like the quarters, the Church, the fields, all in an effort to bring light to an otherwise "dim shore" (Guelzo 467).

Jimmy's insistence on leading a protest emphasizes his willingness to be directly involved in the fight while others resist. Like Ned, receiving an education is what encourages Jimmy to leave the plantation and to become a social activist. Once Jimmy starts to travel outside of Samson and Bayonne, however, he begins to realize a desire to become more educated and to leave the quarters. As it did for Ned, traveling also provides Jimmy with the impetus for his social activism because, according to Miss Jane,

"what he wanted was to help. But he didn't know how" (Gaines 229). Just as Miss Jane saw some of herself in Ned, her portrayal of Jimmy suggests that she might see something of herself in him, too. Although she herself has no formal education and was never able to travel outside of Louisiana, Miss Jane eventually learns how to help the freedom struggle. Jimmy takes on the role of the activist, and so too does Miss Jane, both of them working in their own ways to resist White supremacy and unjust laws. The male characters of Gaines' novel demonstrate an awareness of the leaders who came before them by honoring their memories. By making these connections clear, Gaines creates a throughline across generations and centuries. Ned and Jimmy are both, in some manner, "personified archives," composites of their ancestors and the iconic male leaders of the freedom struggle.

Miss Jane: Guide, Supporter, Activist

By choosing to have Miss Jane as his main character, Gaines clearly recognizes that both Black and White men dominated the narrative of the freedom struggle, as heroes and martyrs. Although Miss Jane's story retells the stories of both Ned and Jimmy, Gaines' neoslave narrative decenters the roles of these men as being the *only* figures partaking in the struggle for civil rights. Before acknowledging the work of Martin Luther King Jr., Miss Jane tells the White teacher about the women and children who were also beaten or killed in the struggle for "full citizenship" for Black Americans that Lincoln believed must come after the Civil War (Guelzo 467). She insists that people who study or learn about the civil rights movement pay tribute to these everyday women and children too:

> Look what they did that young lady at that Alabama school. Look what they did them little children there in Tennessee and there in Arkansas. What about that thing they had to kick out the Catholic church there in New Orleans? Supposed to be great leaders–but who was the bravest? Tell me. . . . Any of them braver than Miss Lucy? What a charming young lady. What a beautiful face. What lovely eyes. And them little children? I still remember the little faces looking through the car windows at the dogs standing on two feet barking at them. (Gaines 230-31)

Miss Jane provides a history lesson of sorts by remembering the women and children throughout the South who have participated in the struggle: in Clinton, Tennessee (1956) and Little Rock, Arkansas (1957), groups of twelve and nine Black children, respectively, were bused into schools, despite violent protests from White parents.[9] In both cases of desegregation, the National Guard was called in to "protect" the students, and yet the protests became violent. In Little Rock, President Dwight Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to aid the students in attending school (Bunch); in Clinton, violence continued for two years, resulting in the bombing of Clinton High School in 1958 (Hassell). "Miss Lucy," as Miss Jane calls her, refers to a Black woman seeking an education: Autherine Lucy Foster became the first Black woman to enroll at the University of Alabama in 1956, until the school suspended her (ostensibly for her own protection) and then ultimately expelled her (Goldstein). The "little children"[10] Miss Jane remembers is slightly more ambiguous—she could be referring again to the violence witnessed by children seeking an education and instead threatened by police dogs barking and lunging at them. Miss Jane acknowledges these women and children while recalling events in her past to the White teacher of the neoslave narrative. Miss Jane does not just listen to baseball on the radio, nor does she have Jimmy read her only the sport section of the

newspaper, as she tells us she does. She has heard of all of these women and children and sees them as leaders in the struggle because of their sacrifices.

Jane's recall of these events is a way of honoring iconic women of the movement as firestarters. While Miss Jane does eventually acknowledge the work of Martin Luther King Jr., she also sees Rosa Parks as being the person who started the movement. She tells the White teacher that "What Miss Rosa Parks did, everybody wanted to do. They just needed one person to do it first because they all couldn't do it at the same time; then they needed King to show them what to do next. But King couldn't do a thing before Miss Rosa Parks refused to give that white man her seat" (Gaines 241). Gaines again blurs fact with fiction–Miss Jane, a fictional character, knows of Parks and King, both real-life historical figures. Blurring the lines between history and fiction makes clear the constructed nature of both—so-called "history" is a verbal artifact, as is Gaines' historical neoslave narrative. Through Miss Jane, Gaines suggests that not only did women participate in the civil rights movement but that the type of determination and bravery she sees in Miss Lucy and the "little children" of Arkansas and Tennessee actually outweighs that of the "great leaders" who dominate the consensus or master narrative.

Gaines' history lesson honors the sacrifices and courage of both men and women. Early on in the novel, the slaves are deciding whether they should leave the plantation at the end of the Civil War. Young Jane is one of the first to speak, telling Unc Isom and others to show her the direction to Ohio, blithely making the comment of "I'll show y'all where to go" (11). Her bold assertion echoes that which might have been uttered by Harriet Tubman as she too led a group of scared formerly enslaved people to freedom.

Jane's insistence inspires others to leave too. Throughout her autobiography, Miss Jane is resolute about her desire to travel north, specifically to Ohio, although she never makes it out of Louisiana, and is, in fact, only able to make what is essentially a geographically lateral move. This desire stems from her interaction with a Union soldier, Mr. John Brown,[11] one of the soldiers who stopped at her former Master and Mistress's plantation. He renames her, changing her name from Ticey to Jane because he says "Ticey" is a slave name and instead Jane is "'my girl's name back there in Ohio. You like for me to call you that?'" (8). While Brown's renaming of Jane is problematic–largely because it resembles the forcible renaming that enslaved people underwent either on arrival on slave ships from Africa or upon being sold to new masters–his arrival at the plantation and the immediate relationship spawns a hopefulness in Jane that going north to Ohio will mean freedom, spurring her to demonstrate her independence and self-reliance to reach her goal.[12] In the moment that Jane is renamed, she experiences being stripped of her slave name and given the equivalent of an anonymous last name. As mentioned by the other people that Jane interacts with later in the novel, Brown could be used by any number of other people in the growing US population. The setting of the novel is specific—Louisiana—and yet the names "John Brown" and "Jane" could be anyone, anywhere in the country.[13] In this manner, Jane is both a specific Black woman telling a specific story but could also be any Black woman telling the story of all Black women anywhere in the US. Jane's name also honors the memory of white abolitionists like John Brown.

Gaines positions Miss Jane in the novel to support and guide the next generation. Leaving her alive after the massacre of the former slaves allows Gaines to construct her story in such a way that Miss Jane is a leader and also a mother to the movement. She

insists on continuing through with her plan, while also becoming an adoptive mother at a young age when she takes responsibility for Ned. Her fortitude shows Ned what might be necessary for a leader to become important to his community, making her his first model of Black leadership, placing her alongside Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington. When Ned comes back, the first person he seeks out is Miss Jane. She is one of the first people to know of his plan and the threats against his life. Years later, when Jimmy comes to Miss Jane to seek her council regarding the protest he is organizing, she becomes one of the few people who know about the upcoming demonstration (243). Both of these men look to Miss Jane to validate their plans for helping others achieve equality. Each time, she cautions them to be careful, as she does with Jimmy, whom she tells "People and time bring forth leaders. . . . Leaders don't bring forth people" (241). According to Miss Jane, just because he has come to think of himself as a messianic leader does not mean that Jimmy should assume that he will be a leader of the movement or that the road to leadership will be easy. And, in the final scene of the novel, Miss Jane is on the move again, only this time she is walking in a very specific direction—down a dirt road, followed by other people living in the quarters, to wait for a bus to take them into Samson and finish the protest that Jimmy started.

In Gaines' neoslave narrative, the frame narrative demonstrates the importance of Miss Jane's role as a guide and supporter. The neoslave narrative's frame begins with an introduction written by a White teacher/historian who states that he has wanted to hear and write down her story for many years, explicitly marking the year–1962. He also provides an almost explicit date for the other end of Miss Jane's timeline:

> each time I asked her she told me there was no story to tell. I told her she was over a hundred years old, she had been a slave in this country, so there had to be a story. . . I told her I wanted her story before school opened in September and I would not take no for an answer. (v)

The teacher's voice is present only at the beginning of the novel, much like that of a nineteenth-century White editor for a slave narrative, such as William Lloyd Garrison's editorial presence in Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative or the later oral narratives of formerly enslaved people recorded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s and 1940s. He knows that she cannot write down her story herself since she is illiterate, and he has the means of exposing her story to the public. The insertion of a White teacher/editor serves as an important reminder for readers of Gaines's novel—while Miss Jane's story is told, however it is "tempered" by the lens of the White editor. And yet, there is still importance in having it be a White *teacher* who is interviewing Miss Jane. He could be a reliable ally for Miss Jane, someone who will tell her story as accurately as possible while transmitting it to the next generation of possible activists and allies.

Because of her age, Miss Jane's memories and actions are meaningful, allowing Gaines to position his main character as a guide for her community. As noted in the editor's opening of the neoslave narrative, Miss Jane, at 110 years old, continually invites others to help tell her story. The novel thus speaks to the experiences of many different people as well as "a people," the "black peasantry" (Gaines "Miss Jane and I" 611), as acknowledged by the White historian in the preface to the novel. He recognizes that the story, while told primarily by Miss Jane, is supported and continued by the other people in her community and life, making any memory or story she might tell socially

constructed. Miss Jane's caretaker and friend Mary tells him that "you could not tie all the ends together in one neat direction. Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are all Miss Jane's" (viii). All the stories that Miss Jane tells are interrelated, demonstrating the roles and impacts various people throughout her life have had on her, seemingly making her into a memory keeper for those whose stories are related to hers. Mary Ellen Doyle claims that "history is what happened to people Miss Jane knew" (95). Miss Jane, like Ned and Jimmy, shows Gaines's audience that history is a construction, a story with many voices and people. At this point in her life, however, she is the only person left who can still chronicle their histories. Unlike messianic figures, like Ned or Jimmy, Hicks reminds Gaines' audience that Miss Jane is a woman, a woman who "must endure and sustain her people. Man dies in opening the future; and while woman seems to sense intuitively that he will be destroyed, she is powerless to stop him. It falls her lot to watch and *remember*, at all costs to *remember*–as Jane does so well–and to walk through the doors opened for her" (18). The story that Miss Jane remembers takes place in one location but also in many locations, focusing on the young men she has raised into leaders, but also on the men and women who worked to lead the movement. Her story takes place in one location, but also throughout the South, with both one "central" leader (Jimmy) but also many other unrecognized women and children who also served as leaders.

When read as civil rights literature, Miss Jane's story asks readers to consider the ways in which a community participates in the production of social memory. It prompts audiences to ask how Miss Jane, as a memory keeper and memory maker, shapes the knowing and understanding of a shared past for her community. As Metress suggests,

reading Gaines' neoslave narrative in the tradition of civil rights literature allows readers to understand the story (and the history) of many people in a different, more telling manner, creating a "bottom-up" narrative. This bottom-up narrative shows us that Miss Jane's socially constructed memory is not just her story alone—it is the story of many different people. Telling the story of her experiences on the plantation allows Gaines to solidify Miss Jane's character as a guide and supporter, someone whose wise counsel aids those people around her as they navigate the realities of life over the course of a century.

The Realities of the 1960s: Miss Jane as Contributor to Social Memory

Three years after the original publication of Gaines' novel, the made-for-television film version of Miss Jane's story made its premiere in 1974. The film brough the story to life for the White middle-class viewing audience, telling essentially the same story while emphasizing the role of Miss Jane as a personified archive, or a contributor to the social construction of memory around the struggle for civil rights. Screenwriter Tracy Keenan Wynn and director John Korty worked alongside Gaines on the project, their collaboration receiving praise from critics and winning a record-breaking total of nine Emmys (Feldstein 160). The primary draw for the middle-class viewing audience was the choice to cast Cicely Tyson as Miss Jane, a choice which presented a familiar actress in a role which would (re)engage audiences with Black history. The made-for-television film, when thought of as a civil rights text, emphasizes the emotional aspects of memory to remind viewers that the story they were watching on television was an interpretation of Black American history which extends the struggle for civil rights.

The television film brings to life a familiar storyline for viewers of the film and readers of the novel, this time providing the visuals to accompany the emotions that Miss Jane felt. Because Miss Jane is being asked to recall history by the White reporter, it should be acknowledged that much of what she recalls is shaped by her own thoughts and feelings. In the film, despite the insistence of Miss Jane (Cicely Tyson),[14] Ned (Thalmus Rasulala) still gives a riverbank sermon which emphasizes the importance of Black labor in the development of America and the relationship between races in America after the Civil War. In his sermon on the riverbanks, he beseechs his audience to be mindful of their humanity:

> You got some Black men who'll tell you that the White man's the worst thing on Earth but let me tell you this: all men are the same. The same evil you see in White, you see in Blacks, and likewise, the good to be found is in all men, White and Black. The enemy is not skin! It's ignorance. It was ignorance that put us here in the first place. . . . You got folks here saying 'Let's go back to Africa', 'Let's go back to Liberia.' Well, I am not African! I'm American, a black American, and proud of it. Look inside yourself and say 'What am I? What else besides this, this black skin?'. . . . This, this land, America, belongs to us all, but, I don't mean that we own it, but that it's God's, and that makes it as much ours as any man's. You are not vested by no man. Be Americans, but first, be men! (*The Autobiography* 01:14:28-01:17:39)

As the neoslave narrative does, the film's version of this sermon highlights Ned's skill as an orator. Even though his message is relatively positive, Miss Jane's remembrance of this moment in Ned's life is focused both on her fear and his message. Miss Jane attempts to stop Ned from giving his riverbank speech because she knows that it will cause further uproar among the White people in their community. The same question is raised by the neoslave narrative and echoed by the film: is this land *really* "for all of us"? The answer is a resounding "no": while Ned gives his sermon, White men are visible, fishing in a

canoe and listening, a silent threat in the background which amplifies Miss Jane's tension. Framing Miss Jane's response to Ned's speech with such emotions and with the threat of violence in the background reminds White middle-class viewers of the chronology of the struggle for civil rights. Even though nothing about Ned's sermon should incite fear or violence from the White population, the response is that the free Black population of Louisiana is under constant observation by the White population, much as an overseer might watch the enslaved people under his control. This same metaphor might be applied to the canonical civil rights movement—Jim Crow laws were still in place to prohibit the Black population from receiving a fair education or preventing the right to vote, with White supremacist thought threatening progress as it was made by the Black population.

Viewers are again asked to reconsider the chronology of the movement through the different spaces utilized in the television film. The audience follows Miss Jane's growth as she travels throughout the state of Louisiana in the hopes of going north. This time, however, the audience is given visuals to accompany her story—porches, whitewashed former slave quarters, old plantation houses. The film opens with a 110-year-old Miss Jane celebrating her birthday in a small, wallpapered room, surrounded by other friends and neighbors. Once Jimmy (Arnold Wilkerson) appears, she requests that they go outside, making it more apparent that the house that she lives in is one of the fixed-up and whitewashed former slave houses. It is here that Jimmy tells Miss Jane about his civil rights protest and his desire to have her take part in his movement (*The Autobiography* 01:39-04:09). At this point in the film, time collides for the viewer: Jimmy and Miss Jane are standing on the porch of what is clearly an old house, probably

one dating back to when the property was a plantation, and yet they are talking about a civil rights protest. While this space is an essentially Black space and Jimmy and Miss Jane are openly discussing their perspectives on the upcoming protest and the struggle for civil rights, the viewer must reconcile their understanding of the chronology of the civil rights movement with their location. In this moment, the film emphasizes that the chronology of the movement extends back to the nineteenth century, at least, and well into the twentieth century.

The meshing of time experienced by the viewers of the film is further emphasized by Miss Jane's resistance to Jimmy's request for her council and support of his planned protest. She believes that the people in the area around Bayonne are not ready for this kind of protest and change. Her memory is long, filled with both her own memories and the memories of others, and because she possesses these memories, she understands that asking a young girl to get arrested and then marching to the courthouse in protest, as Jimmy plans to do, will not make effective, lasting change. Throughout the film, Miss Jane implicitly draws on the memories of herself and others to support her objections to Jimmy's plans. While Jimmy's plans might honor the work of his ancestors, Miss Jane's concerns about Jimmy's plans underscore an awareness that these predecessors like King and X were assassinated, leaving behind work to be continued. No single man can be "the One" to win the fight for equal rights and freedom.

The blurring of the chronology of the movement is again created with the appearance of the White reporter throughout the film. Upon his first visit to Miss Jane, Quentin Lerner (Michael Murphy), the White reporter presumably working for a newspaper similar to *The New York Times*, eventually makes it past the owners of the

former plantation house, finding Miss Jane and Lena (Beatrice Winde) sitting on the front porch of Miss Jane's house. Lena immediately questions why he is encroaching into their space: "Tell me again: whatchu wanna know about Miss Jane for?" (*The Autobiography* 05:34-05:39). In the neoslave narrative, the reporter is instead a teacher, and his presence fades away after the preface to Miss Jane's story. In the film, the reporter's presence is almost constant, radically changing the proposed audience for Miss Jane's story—from schoolchildren in the South to White adult readers of magazines and newspapers like the *New York Times*. Even though Lena immediately questions his reasons for meeting with Miss Jane, he directly tells both of them that he wants to talk with Miss Jane because she was a slave and that he would like to hear what it was like "in those days" (00:06:29-00:06:33). Given that Miss Jane is already aware of the civil rights protest going on in Bayonne when the reporter visits, her response to his phrasing, a loud "Hmm," and her movement, rising from her rocker on her front porch and going into her home, part of former slave quarters, seems to demonstrate frustration. There is not an "in those days" for Miss Jane: those days are these days, and she has lived long enough to see that not much has changed for Black Americans like her. In the neoslave narrative, Gaines gives Miss Jane the awareness that *she* will teach *him*, and by extension, Gaines' White audience. The film implies Miss Jane's awareness of the situation as well, a smart move on the part of screenwriters, especially since the viewing audiences, like the viewers of the later television adaptation of *Roots*, would be mostly White, or, in the context of the film, White adult readers of the *New York Times*.

Audiences are forced to reconcile Miss Jane's long history with recent contemporary history. Quentin argues with his editor for why her story should be

included in an upcoming issue. The editor demands that Quentin cover "the John Glenn story," diminishing the importance of Miss Jane's story by pointing out "a magazine this size can't survive on a story about an old woman" (*The Autobiography* 01:34:10-01:34:30). Miss Jane's story is not just "another human interest story" (01:34:19-01:34:23), yet the importance of it does not matter to the reporter's boss. John Glenn, the first White American man to orbit Earth and a former US senator (Watson), highlights the time period during which Miss Jane remembers her story. Putting her story alongside that of other major landmark events in American history, such as the Space Race, suggests Americans of the 1960s and 1970s expressed more interested in looking outward, exploring outer space, than in confronting "the realities of the sixties" which Nikki Giovanni references in her review of the film (D17).[15,16] The realities of the sixties meant recognizing that the decade itself was a tumultuous one—ranging from the deaths of major political figures (John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X), the passing of landmark legislation (the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act), and reconciling the "end" of a movement which was supposed to provide change and equality for Black Americans. Instead, the after-effects of these "realities" continued into the 1970s for the viewing audience, meaning that they will also have to align Miss Jane's story with their definitions of progress in the 1970s.

Miss Jane's walk to the fountain is the focal point for the intersection of the past and the present for the television film viewer. Near the opening of the film, viewers see Jimmy and his fellow civil rights protesters, along with the young Black girl they plan to have arrested for drinking from the fountain, facing the camera, walking toward the courthouse and the "White only" drinking fountain they intend to desegregate (07:12-

07:54). Another brief shot shows the White authority figures of Bayonne, including Sherriff Guidry (Teddy Airhart), standing defensively beside the fountain, holding a baton. No words are spoken, but tense body language from the White authority figures tells viewers that any action that these young Black protestors take will be met with violence. These young people are willing to take a by-any-means-necessary approach to achieving their goals for desegregation. In contrast, at the end of the film, viewers are finally given the visual to Miss Jane's walk to the fountain, which the neoslave narrative leaves undescribed. Unlike the walk of the young protestors, Miss Jane's walk does not appear as aggressive; her walk is not filmed from the front as the other one is, but instead from the side, including close ups of her face and other body parts, such as her legs (01:43:00-01:46:00). Her walk is slow and measured, as any elderly woman's might be, accompanied by calming music. Her walk to the fountain seems almost unremarkable for Miss Jane, just another peaceful Sunday morning walk, although surely she knows the significance of what she is doing since those who live in the quarters received the news that morning about Jimmy's death. Jimmy had been imprisoned and then killed after his attempt at desegregating the fountain (01:41:00-01:41:34). By walking to the fountain in such a manner, Miss Jane both takes part in the civil rights movement and also pays tribute to the other protestors who came before her. She completes one part of the walk toward freedom for them, having used her memories and observations to guide her in deciding when to get involved in the protest. This walk to the fountain demonstrates for audience members that Miss Jane is finally taking on her role as an activist in the civil rights movement, after a century's-worth of life. By getting involved at this stage of her life, Miss Jane's presence acknowledges that many other people of different ages and

genders besides young men participated in the struggle. She has watched young men die before her, and this walk to the water fountain in Bayonne tells viewers that it is now time for each person who is called to the movement to be involved.

Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, Gaines' neoslave narrative, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* makes civil rights harder. When examined as civil rights literature, the ways in which Gaines' work honors those leaders who worked for equality calls attention to the men, women, and children whose stories do not exist in the popular American consciousness. In Pauline Kael's review of the movie, "Cicely Tyson Goes to the Fountain," she concludes with the statement that "[there] is probably no imaginable way that at this point in American history we could be as deeply moved by a white woman's story—no matter how much truth there was in it—as we are by this black woman's story" (*Reeling* 266). Kael's statement serves as a reminder that the stories of people like Miss Jane can easily be forgotten if not brought to the American popular consciousness. Gaines' novel and the made-for-television adaptation provide readers and viewers alike with a unique opportunity: to learn and (re)engage with Black history.

In the next chapter, Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) and both miniseries based on the novel (1977 and 2016) are examined as pieces of civil rights literature. The novel's portrayal of the Kinte-Haley family positions Haley's Black male family members as demonstrative of the Black male experience in the struggle for civil rights. Both adaptations continue the trend of focusing on Haley's male family members. Readapting the novel years after the original publication reminds American

middle class viewing audiences of the on-going struggle for civil rights, focusing on the roles that Black men play in the centuries-long struggle.

Chapter Two: The Roots of Memory: Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* (1976) as Civil Rights Literature

When Alex Haley's *Roots* premiered on television in 1977, no one was prepared for the impact that the miniseries would have on the American public. Even though television shows had already addressed slavery (most recently by a British series, *The Fight Against Slavery* [1975]), the concept of a miniseries was still relatively new for the American viewing public (Stollery 113). *Roots* aired on television over eight nights. White American audiences were captivated by the horrific brutality of the story, people rushing home from work in an effort to catch the next installment (Taylor "Everybody's Search for Roots" 64). With its premier, the show set a precedent for how later television shows would address slavery (Edge).[17] The show sparked a national search for ancestry and identity for enough of the viewing audience that the National Archives faced an increase in their genealogical resources across the board (Gerber 87; Athey 173) Elisa Bordin explains the surge of interest in this way: "Haley's family discovery and sense of completeness coming from the knowledge of his African origins has set in motion a widespread desire for a personal 'Kunta Kinte moment,' a longing which informs today's renewed interest in matters of black family trees" (4). The experience of finding his ancestor, Kunta Kinte, and tracing his lineage from West Africa to various plantations in the American South and finally to Tennessee gave Haley not only a renewed sense of his own family history, but also the sense of how his story reflects a long and rich history of Black resistance.

Haley's neoslave narrative challenges the single-story narrative of the civil rights movement in similar ways to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971)—the novel

extends the chronology even further, expands the geography of the movement, and creates a people's history, although in terms of gender, *Roots* celebrates male leadership and various forms of resistance. The cognitive power of the novel can be seen through Alex Haley being awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1977 and the viewing records broken with the release of the miniseries, resulting in a place in the American consciousness much greater than the made-for-television movie of *Miss Jane Pittman* (1974). Viewing *Roots* via the context of the Moynihan Report (1965) provides the necessary context for interpreting the novel as civil rights literature. Both miniseries emphasize the role of *Roots* in the American popular mindset, portraying for their viewing audiences how the struggle for civil rights utilized various methods of resistance.

Telling Family Stories for Money

Haley first began writing *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* shortly before the publication of the Moynihan Report[18] in 1963 while also working on other projects. While writing news articles for both *Playboy* and *Readers Digest*, Haley interviewed Malcolm Little, also known as Malcolm X. As Haley worked on compiling his interviews and transcribing them into what would become *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), he became aware of the role his work could play in the politics of the era, a realization which shaped both the autobiography and Haley's monetary exploitation of his relationship with a controversial public figure. According to Robert Norrell, "[from] the outset of the writing of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Haley shaped the content of the book to maximize both its sensational value and its commercial success. He had the advice of mentors in making the manuscript accommodate political and commercial

realities—and prejudices" (65). While Haley himself was not explicit about his political beliefs, his work on the *Autobiography* demonstrated a shrewd awareness that a "fatigue about race concerns was setting in among whites" (Norrell 67). Haley's work with Malcolm X gave him a heightened awareness of how his writing about a divisive, controversial figure situated him in the popular American mindset. While being aware of the commercial value of Malcolm X's autobiography, Haley also navigated writing about the social and political movement without alienating his ["fatigued"] middle-class White readers.

Awareness of cultural and commercial value of stories continued to play a role in Haley's writing as he began to write *Roots*. He spent ten years researching and writing his family history, from 1967 to 1976. *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* is the result of different family stories Haley heard about "the African" while sitting on his grandmother's front porch (Norell 7). She would recite a specific story, passed down for generations, recounting the tale of Kunta Kinte: "'Yeah, boy, dat African say his name was "Kin-tay"!. . . He say de guitar a 'ko,' de river "Kamby Bolongo," an' he was choppin' wood to make hisself a drum when dey cotched 'im!'" (Haley 865). In 1967, while conducting research, Haley also consulted a griot in Gambia named Kebba Foana Kinte[19], a man who would be able to recount the story of the Kinte family, including that of "the African" whom Haley had heard so much about growing up (Delmont "Alex Haley" 65; Norell 112). A griot, according to Mylene Remy, is "a combined storyteller/historian [,] . . . a musician, poet, historian, and paid publicity agent (working on a fee basis or an annual salary) [, who] "must know everything that is going on, in public and in private. He is the village's memory, its newspaper'" (qtd. in Vollmer and

Devere 18). The griot shapes the memory of the community, preserving the values, traditions, and stories of the village while also transmitting its history. Consulting a griot seemingly gives Haley's story a sense of legitimacy—he both attempted to conduct thorough research while expanding on the stories that he grew up hearing. Griots also provide a traditional method of keeping historical record; by contacting the griot of the village that his family lineage may have come from, Haley firmly situates his family roots in Africa and emphasizes how their story is unique and important enough to be remembered and preserved.

Haley compares the years he spent traveling around the country, delivering lectures that would typically end up being about his research for *Before this Anger* (the original title for *Roots*) to civil rights activity. According to Haley, "rather than marching in 'civil rights demonstrations, I marched from airport to airport dragging the ever-present enormous leather bag of *Roots* research data'" (Delmont "Alex Haley" 66). While giving these lectures, Haley would gauge the reactions of his audience, and then reshape his story, further creating "'historical and emotional accuracy'. . . . He could tell which aspects made people laugh or cry, which stories captured attention, and which anecdotes bored people" (Delmont 68). So, while Haley was collecting factual research on his family, consulting ship logs, and even traveling to England and Gambia to continue his research, his work was also very much contingent on and shaped by how he perceived his audience to be receiving his story. Over time, Haley would eventually write what he called "faction," a blend of fact and fiction (Delmont *Making Roots* 58). Haley's story spanned from the eighteenth-century with his ancestor Kunta Kinte's capture in Gambia, to the twentieth century and his family settling in Henning, Tennessee. The movement

between Africa and America as well as the progression of time captured throughout Haley's novel echoes Clint Smith's poetic contribution to *The 1619 Project*, where he envisions replicating the Middle Passage through the movement of his hand across the globe between continents ("August 1619"). The movement between countries in Haley's neoslave narrative serves as an important reminder that slavery, as it existed in the US, was an international trade, one which altered the course of millions of people's lives. The resistance and the efforts to gain civil rights is international.

Haley's neoslave narrative *Roots* should be seen as a counterpart to the legislative efforts to advance the course of Black Americans. Haley's work is rooted more deeply in the Black American story than those legislative efforts guaranteeing them the right to vote or an education. While Haley wrote *Roots*, the classical phase of the civil rights movement was ending. With *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), Black Americans had won the right to be treated as full citizens of the US, with the right to vote and the right to education, at least legislatively. James Baldwin notes in his review of Haley's novel, political parties have "invested the black vote with a power, and exhibits toward it a respect" ("How One Black Man"). Haley's research and engagement with the question of identity signaled a shift in the Black population to observing and thinking about their personal histories. Rather than shying away from the oral histories that he had heard, Haley accepted them, eventually using his work to "[reverse] the negative legacy of slavery, sidestepping it as a scar and recollecting desired histories of an imaginatively archaic ordered and harmonic world" (Bordin 6). By contemplating his own history and offering it to the public for consumption through the publication of his novel, Haley underscores the various constructions of history, or, as

Metress reminds us, how history is "emplotted" (148). Haley plotted his family history and presented it as an American saga.

Despite its early positive reception, soon after the publication of the novel, Haley began to receive criticism, in part because critics questioned his ability to trace his family history back to the eighteenth century. Bordin, for example, points out that the novel might be thought of as "an imagination of the past in the service of Haley's present and his vision of the future" (6), largely because of Haley's choice to focus specifically on Kunta Kinte rather than on any of his African and Black American ancestors. Whereas Bordin focuses on Haley's future as an author and creator, David Chioni Moore takes a more literal approach to the bloodlines of Haley's novel. Moore acknowledges that if one were to take a family tree and reorient it, "the farther back one can trace a single ancestor, the *less and less* that ancestor represents you, except–and this is a significant point–by a process of retroactive and selective affiliation" (13). The progression of generations, as Haley presents it, makes Kunta Kinte his primary ancestor. As Moore suggests, it appears that Haley picked the one ancestor with whom it seemed most advantageous both financially and emotionally to draw a connection. By "[retroactively]" and "[selectively]" choosing an ancestor for his audience to make deep emotional connections with, Haley picked the family member that he thought would be most advantageous to telling his family's story while also choosing the person whose story allowed him the most creative flexibility when it came to writing and publication. Even if the story is fictional and the choice of family members is subjective, Haley creates an image of a family history that clearly resonated with many people.

Released in 1977, immediately following the massive success of the novel's publication in 1976, the first of the television adaptations premiered, coinciding with the country's bicentennial anniversary. Instead of choosing to show the miniseries over the course of twelve nights and notably not during the February sweeps week (the period of time in which audience popularity determined funding and renewals), program executive Fred Silverman and producer Stan Margulies elected to broadcast the show on ABC over the course of eight nights from January 23-30th (Fishbein 272). The series was hugely successful, attracting an estimated 130 million viewers, 90 percent of whom were White. Television and film critic Pauline Kael offered a praised-filled commentary on the miniseries, billing *Roots* as TV's way of "[keeping] the audience away from movies for eight nights in a row" ("Where We Are Now" 267). Kael goes on to assert, "*Roots* shows how TV could finish off movies" ("Where We Are Now" 269). Black American readers and viewers of the television series also emphasized the show's importance. Helen Taylor claims "it was the most important civil rights event since the 1965 Selma, Alabama, march" ("Everybody's Search for Roots" 64). Deemed critically remarkable, the show drew a massive audience each night of its premier.

The 1977 miniseries provides a mixture of history, orality, and romance, all made palatable for a primarily White primetime viewing audience. Similar to the choice to cast Cicely Tyson in the lead role for the made-for-television version of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), LeVar Burton was purposefully chosen to play the role of Kunta Kinte, largely because the directors wanted someone who was unknown to audiences, making it easier to become fully immersed in the world of *Roots* (Fishbein 279).[20] Casting directors also felt the need to provide White characters who were familiar

to their audiences so that, although these White characters would be portrayed as behaving in a despicable manner, White audiences would not be overly alienated (Fishbein 279).The adaptation starred Cicley Tyson, O.J. Simpson, and Maya Angelou alongside recognizable White actors such as Robert Reed (*The Brady Bunch*), Lorne Greene (*Bonanza*), Ralph Waite (*The Waltons*), and Ed Asner (*The Mary Tylor Moore Show*). The storyline of the miniseries was radically altered, with the insertion of new characters such as Captain Davies (Asner) and the alteration of specific scenes that occur in the novel to cater to White comfort. White audiences could sympathize with White characters such as Davies while still distancing themselves from those White characters morally corrupted by slavery. As C. Richard King puts it, these decisions

> highlight the invisible ways in which whiteness imprints cultural production. They also underscore a central tension of post-civil rights America: white only and white supremacy no longer have a place in public culture or polite discourse, but white sensibilities and sentiments still dictate the limits of acceptability and intelligibility. (73)

In addition to the casting decisions described above, other methods of reducing potential White discomfort considered by film makers included making intentional choices about the presentation of main characters and the inclusion of new characters with whom the audience could sympathize. Alienation, in this case, would mean that White audiences could potentially feel overly burdened or attacked if presented with an adapted miniseries that was not to a large extent already familiar to them. Catering to a White audience shaped the adapted work in ways that distinguish it from the novel.

The release of the miniseries brought Haley even more scrutiny from critics. Following the premier of the television series, Mark Ottaway published “Tangled Roots” in the *London Sunday Times*, suggesting that Haley’s family history was not believable. It

was likely, Ottaway argues, that Kunta Kinte had never existed in the manner that Haley described because of historical inaccuracies that he, Ottaway, discovered while conducting his own research in Gambia (17). David Gerber's article, published in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, summarizes Ottaway's concerns, primarily with Haley's research methods and descriptions in the African section of the saga: "Haley seems to have attempted to create what he thought to be the archetypal experience of an abducted African: wrenched quickly and excruciatingly from his village home, and immediately placed into the horrors of the Middle Passage and of American bondage while memories of home and family were fresh and an African personality intact" (Gerber 98). Soon after the publication of Ottaway's article, Haley's work faced charges of plagiarism, resulting in two lawsuits.[21] Haley eventually admitted that parts of his novel had been taken from Harland Courlander's book, *The African* (1967). Margaret Walker, author of *Jubilee* (1966), which is considered one of the first neoslave narratives, brought forward the second plagiarism case. Haley would pay $650,000 to Courlander while the Walker case was eventually denied (Delmont *Making Roots* 190, 193). These cases call into question the relationship between fact and fiction (or "faction" as Haley would have it),[22] while also challenging the bounds of creative license and the politics of marketing a book as autobiography.

The critical conversation around *Roots* has a decidedly defensive tone to it, with critics feeling compelled to explain why they think *Roots* remains important, despite the controversies that surround its publication. Both plagiarism and charges of "a-historicity" (Bordin 4) have impacted these conversations. In her 2005 defense of *Roots*, "[He] Didn't Come Here on the Mayflower: A Defense of Alex Haley's *Roots*," Margaret Baur

questions why scholars are so reluctant to discuss Haley's work critically. She claims that "If *Roots* was a hoax, it was a hoax Americans wanted desperately to believe, which says something more important about Americans than anything [Philip] Nobile [a critic of Haley's work] says about Haley" (380). Americans would rather believe a fictional story rather than be faced with a factual account of slavery. Baur's commentary on the novel notes that particular scholars of American history, as well as the general public, have a general impulse to reject any narrative which challenges the "Mayflower myth" taught in American schools, which is part of the reason why half a century later *The 1619 Project* would cause a political uproar. Focusing particularly on the text, rather than the miniseries, Baur asks questions of those who are skeptical of Haley's work: "why strive so hard to destroy the possibility that at least one African American family can replace the 'X' with their actual African name?" (390). "How can you not see," she asks, "that the truths in this book are so much more important than the facts (or lack thereof)?" (391). She examines the work that Haley put into writing the novel and its critical reception, stating that Haley's work, while it may not necessarily be historically accurate, is attempting to create something authentic, that speaks to Black American experiences. Haley's work, Baur contends, functions to help readers of all races identify with the book, noting that each reader has "selective memories of the book" (397). She thinks of these memories as being potentially dangerous to the text–each reader will find something of different significance, with some readers looking past the authenticity and horror of slave treatment and becoming fascinated by other aspects of the book, such as accuracy. According to Baur, scholars should look past the accuracy of Haley's work and instead look for authenticity.

Critics have also thought of *Roots* as a text which engages with the past and its historical present. In her discussion of both *Roots* and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* as postmodern texts navigating the implications of the past, Stephanie Athey contends that "since the 1960s, novels of slavery have enacted and/or directly addressed specific social and discursive contradictions of the present moment" (170-71). Her main point reflects the "realities of the sixties" Nikki Giovanni discusses in her review of the made-for-television version of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), as discussed in the previous chapter. Authors use these "specific and social discursive contradictions" to better reflect on the social and political moment, using slavery as a throughline to do so. Recognizing how neoslave narratives interact with both the past and the present becomes important to the meaning of Haley's *Roots*. In particular, Athey suggests that *Roots* be put in conversation with its historical context, particularly the Moynihan Report, which "[perverted]" the "'norm'" of American family life, "[placing] the black family and African Americans in general in a pathological relation to [White] American society" (172). Unlike the Moynihan Report, Haley's work tends to refute stereotypes of Black American families as deficient by "an epic depiction of the continuity and strength of the African American family over seven generations" (173). Ultimately, Athey counters critics who suggest that Haley avoids engaging in contemporary, twentieth-century politics. She points to the first section of the book–the section that largely takes place in Africa–as the place where Haley engages with and reacts to the Moynihan Report most directly.

I build on Athey's work by seeing Haley's novel as civil rights literature. The next section of this chapter will begin the close examination of Haley's neoslave

narrative as civil rights literature. By making Kunta Kinte the hero of Haley's family and an ancestor to other Black families in the US, Haley creates a narrative that roots the mid-twentieth-century struggle in eighteenth-century Africa.

Haley's Male Characters as the Epitome of the Black Man

In *Roots*, Haley asks his audience to reconsider leadership in the struggle for civil rights. He focuses on how his family manages to survive and thrive under the patriarchal leadership from three generations: Kunta Kinte, Chicken George, and Tom. Haley thus places emphasis on the ability of a man to lead his family and thereby demonstrate good leadership. He views men as the backbone of a strong family. As Moore reminds readers of *Roots*, out of all his ancestors, Haley also intentionally made the choice to present Kunta Kinte as the first person of his family's bloodline, his oldest and perhaps most significant ancestor (Moore 13). In turn, Kunta continually reasserts the importance of sons to a family and the specific roles that are expected of both men and women. While still in Africa, Kunta eagerly participates in "man-training," which he sees as personal growth which will make him suitable to take care of the village and to continue the family line via marriage and fatherhood. During man-training, he is told "'[if] men are to return [to Juffure], your fears must be erased, for a fearful person is a weak person, and a weak person is a danger to his family, to his village, and to his tribe'" (Haley 120). Some readers of *Roots* might be shocked to encounter the strong, powerful, politically and socially-aware Black men presented in the novel, especially in light of the publication of the Moynihan Report, which depicted Black men as essentially weak and incapable of leadership, emasculated by Black "matriarchs" on welfare. Trained from a young age to

fulfill their role as fathers and leaders of the community, the men of Juffure take part in specific chores based on age, ranging from feeding goats and serving as lookouts to making decisions that will keep the village functioning.

Kunta learns about responsibility from his father. Kunta idolizes his father, Omoro, viewing him as the epitome of what a man should be, learning valuable lessons about manhood, and eventually his own role in Juffure from Omoro. As Kunta becomes aware of the world outside of Juffure, he turns to his father to gain more information about the world and how they fit into it, such as when Kunta's younger brother, Lamin, asks him what slaves are. Kunta turns to his father to ask questions about slavery, discovering that slaves "'aren't always easy to tell from those that aren't slaves'" (68) and that "'one should never speak of slaves in the presence of slaves'" (69). Kunta's father goes on to explain that slaves often become valuable members of their communities and that they can often buy themselves out of slavery. Generally, the people that Omoro describes as being slaves are treated in a much more humane manner than the kind of slavery that Kunta will later experience in America. Haley's description of African slavery still provides the enslaved with respect. Distinguishing the differences in slavery on the continent of Africa and the relatively new form adopted in the US demonstrates how Haley depicts the civilized lives of African villagers who do not rely on violence to keep power structures resulting from slavery in place. By demonstrating these vast differences in the institutions of slavery on different continents, Haley creates juxtaposing images: the civilized African and the barbaric American.

During the Middle Passage section of *Roots*, Haley creates a link, a painful one, that reminds readers that the violent methods used aboard the *Lord Ligonier* are a part of

a continuum of Black resistance paralleling nonviolent protests staged in the twentieth century. Reading *Roots* as civil rights literature makes this link visible across both centuries, providing a more complex and complete image of the freedom struggle. Haley's neoslave narrative emphasizes the impacts of the Middle Passage on the humanity of Black people. The Middle Passage scenes are graphic, depicting the violence done to Africans while they were being transported to the US and other locations in the transatlantic slave trade. Haley demonstrates Kunta's life before his capture as relatively happy, learning from his father and growing up under the care of his mother. Once captured, though, the novel focuses on the fear and anger of Kunta and his fellow Africans. The enslaved people clearly receive no respect, chained below deck with little to no light or air, unable to sit up or move around freely. Fed mush, which gets thrown up frequently because of seasickness, other illnesses, or infections, they are unable to move, the space they are chained in filling with vomit and other bodily wastes. The air is very poor, and disease is rampant. Many perish during the terrifying journey. And yet, the men below decks work together to channel their fear, gradually learning each other's languages to resist White violence. They begin to act in a democratic manner to decide how they should overtake and kill their captors. To emphasize the extent to which each African on the ship has been violated, the women sing: "It was a happy sound, but the words they sang told how these horrible toubob had taken every woman into the dark corners of the canoe each night and used them like dogs. 'Toubob fa!' (Kill toubob) they shrieked with smiles and laughter" (212). The phrase "Toubob fa!" becomes a battle cry for each African man and woman on the ship. They stage a protest, putting aside any tribal differences. The objective of overtaking and killing the White men has been made

clear for each of the men from early on in their journey across the sea: each African man has had their basic right to their humanity violated.

Haley also establishes how the need to be free is shaped by Kunta's acquired knowledge. Kunta carries with him the knowledge he observes from the behaviors of the men in his home village in Africa and informs his decision to escape from the Waller plantation four times. Each time, Kunta makes specific plans and choices to help him escape, such as choosing to take a long knife used to cut wire (Haley 298), sharpening an ax to use as a weapon (297; 306), making a saphie charm to protect himself (306-307), or killing and drying a rabbit for food to eat as he runs (306). Utilizing his skills from man-training enables Kunta to survive for a longer period than a man without those skills. At this point in his life, Kunta has observed, learned from, and applied what he has seen men do, all for his own survival. In his portrait of Kunta, Haley shows a man who values his autonomy, preferring to act on his own, with a strong sense of self-preservation. While a young man, Kunta does what he can to maintain his autonomy despite his enslavement, looking for ways to survive and return to his family. His continual perseverance and use of various protection methods show how Kunta refuses to allow himself to be broken by the brutality of American slavery. Portraying his ancestor with this degree of resilience, Haley emphasizes how incredible the story of his family is while also suggesting the roots of resistance in the current civil rights era.

Haley's neoslave narrative also emphasizes that there were frequently violent repercussions from the White population for exercising traditional knowledge, especially in attempts to gain freedom. After several escape attempts, Kunta is finally hobbled by

the slave catchers who overtake him in the woods. Beating Kunta with both the butt of a gun and a whip, stripping and tying him to a tree, the slave catchers give him an option:

> Standing before him, the bleeding one began making gestures. He pointed to Kunta's genitals, then to the hunting knife in his belt. Then he pointed to Kunta's foot, and then to the ax in his hand. When Kunta understood, he howled and kicked–and was clubbed again. Deep in his marrow, a voice shouted that a man, to be a man, must have sons. . . .
>
> One pushed the trunk under Kunta's right foot as the other tied the foot to the trunk so tightly that all of Kunta's raging couldn't free it. The bleeding toubob picked up the ax. Kunta was screaming and thrashing as the ax flashed up, then down so fast–severing skin, tendons, muscles, bone–that Kunta heard the ax thud into the trunk as the shock of it sent the agony deep into his brain. As the explosion of pain bolted through him, Kunta's upper body spasmed forward and his hands went flailing downward as if to save the front half of his foot, which was falling forward, as bright red blood jetted from the stump as he plunged into blackness. (Haley 313)

This scene graphically depicts the willful violence of the White slave catchers and the terror of being exposed to such violence. At this point, Kunta cannot clearly articulate his choice to the slave catchers, nor can he fully defend his decision to run away. Rather than providing Kunta's thoughts on being captured and subjected to this violence, Haley only offers a glimpse into Kunta's terrified thoughts: he needs to have children to consider himself a man. To Kunta, having children means preserving and transmitting his native culture. This line of thinking is also significant because of its meaning for Haley–for the purposes of his story, he needs Kunta to have children so that Haley himself can be born. In this gruesome scene, Haley focuses on the graphic image of the front half of a foot being cut off, detailing how the ax quickly "[severs] skin, tendons, muscles, bone" before the front half of the foot "which was falling forward" reaches the ground (313). In this moment, the choice of running away and regaining his freedom is stripped away. Taking away that choice further emphasizes a disparity between races in this moment,

demonstrating the dangerous nature of the "dim shore" which Allen Guelzo argues Abraham Lincoln felt the country was on the precipice of in 1864 (467). In the years to come, long after Kunta's hobbling, that "dim shore" would become more treacherous, particularly as the goal of reintegration of Black Americans into their "full citizenship" becomes more refined (467).

Haley's novel demonstrates constant parallels between the African and Black American men Kunta views as role models. As Kunta gains more awareness of his new predicament as a slave in the colonies, male family is reconstructed and provides guidance and advice. Each man that Kunta views as a role model—the fiddler, the gardener, and the Gambian—provide him with advice about life, survival, and family. When Kunta visits with the Gambian man the second time, he receives two major pieces of advice: "What you needs most to live here patience–wid a hard shell" (Haley 389) and that he needs to take a wife to have children with and to pass on his heritage (391). Kunta also realizes that, unlike the other enslaved people on the plantation, he seems to have maintained his dignity, which he thinks "must become as a shield between him and all of those who called themselves 'n****rs.' How ignorant of themselves they were; they knew nothing of their ancestors, as he had been taught from boyhood" (393). The recognition that he has maintained his identity is especially important for Kunta's story, given the emphasis that American slavery placed on stripping Black people of their humanity and identities. Realizing that despite his enslavement he has maintained his dignity and humanity helps Kunta to exert some form of control over his life. The advice to have a hard outer shell helps him to adhere to a nonviolent stance that allows for his survival. Drawing constant parallels between African and Black American male role

models further debunks a Moynihan-influenced reading of Haley's saga. Kunta proves himself quite capable of navigating the system of slavery, particularly after his daughter Kizzy is born. As Kunta himself becomes the father and role model, he transmits information about his culture and life in Africa to Kizzy, disrupting the strict pattern of man-to-man passing on of specific knowledge and thus hinting that new leadership structures will take root in the American colonies.

Knowledge contributes to Haley's perception of his family (both biological and nonbiological) as exceptional once Kunta arrives in the US. As the slave population in certain areas of the country continued to expand, the White population became generally more nervous about the possibility of slave revolts. Similar to the men who captured Kunta on his final escape attempt, slave catchers and "pattyrollers" were given license to utilize violence to make sure that slaves were kept in check. Additionally, the enslaved people on these plantations shared what information they had about the slave trade and White fears. The gardener specifically mentions the fact that

> "It's a ol' Virginia law to patrol de roads, or anywhere else n****rs is, an' whip an' jail any of 'em gits cotched widdout a writ-out pass from dey massa. An' who gits hired to do it is dem po' whites what jes' loves cotchin' and beatin' somebody else's n****rs 'cause *dey* ain't got none. What's behind it, y'understan', all white folk sacred to death dat any loose n****r is plannin' a re-volt." (348-49)

By highlighting the fact that many White slaveholders were afraid of the possibility of revolt, Haley juxtaposes the fact that White people resort to violence to maintain their status quo with enslaved people who found nonviolent means of achieving their freedom. The gardener also correctly claims that the White population in different counties feels that their status quo is doubly under threat, stemming from the risk of uprisings led by

enslaved people, enticed by the freedom promised by King George the Third during the American Revolution. Luther, for example, relays to those at the fiddler's house that White folks are not just worried about taxes, but also that "'Dey's sayin' it's some counties got twice many n****rs as white folks. Dey's worryin' dat king crost' the water might start offerin' us n****rs freedom to fight 'gainst dese white folks. . . . Fact,' he said, 'done heared some white folks so scared, done took to lockin' dey doors at night, done even quit talkin' 'round dey house n****rs'" (354). These men share the information that they gather when they can. Because of White fears of slave revolts, it is doubly important for the enslaved population to transmit what information they know to the other people in their communities. Being able to contribute to the conversation enables the enslaved men to resist where possible and to protect their families.

Haley's demonstration of how the hierarchy works on the Waller plantation suggests that there have been Black men for centuries capable of leading the struggle for civil rights. Sharing information regarding either the Waller family and plantation, politics, or other social news contributes to the slave hierarchy of Haley's novel and, to some extent, cohesion as a community. Older men like the fiddler and the gardener are revered because of their age, and they share their information first in social gatherings, most of which take place after work is done for the day. Almost every night, most of the slaves on the Waller plantation gather to hear the fiddler, Kunta, or Bell[23] talk about what they have heard that day. Each time, though, the fiddler or the gardener provides their own thoughts on the matter, usually coming across as having a sense of authority about what they're saying, even if they have no actual knowledge of the matter: "It never failed to amaze Kunta how the fiddler and the gardener seemed to know so much about things

they'd never seen and places they'd never been to, for he distinctly recalled having heard both of them say they had never been outside Virginia and North Carolina" (429). These men are critical thinkers about current events, drawing on what they know and common sense to help support their arguments. By showing these gatherings as places where critical thought and discussion takes place, Haley's saga works to dispel the notion of the ignorant, lazy enslaved person. By constructing the hierarchy of the slave community in such a way, Haley demonstrates how elders (regardless of gender) within the community would be viewed as leaders who have valuable knowledge and insight. At these nightly gatherings, slaves learn of various rebellions that occur around Virginia and the increase of slaves sold south.

Haley's portrait of Chicken George demonstrates the thesis of *The 1619 Project*: Black men and women helped to build the country, despite the various injustices that they faced for centuries. Young George demonstrates an ability to mimic those around him, such as the preacher who visits the plantation of George's master and father, Tom Lea. George goes around "preaching" as the preacher would, to the point that he gains the attention of his master-father and begins to take on a role as a serving boy in the Lee's household (578-79). Being involved in the dinners that his master and mistress host allows George to gain information about the outside world. Eventually, like his grandfather and grandmother before him, George begins to bring information back to his mother and the other people on slave row, eventually telling them about political events, such as the meeting held by approximately three thousand former slaves and freed slaves in Philadelphia who "sent some res'lution to dat Pres'dent Madison dat both slave an' free n****rs done helped build dis country, well as to help fight all its wars, an' de

Newnited States ain't what it claim to be less'n n****rs shares in all its blessin's" (580). He also relays information about popular culture of the time period, such as the development of minstrels which "soun' like to me he say white mens blackin' dey faces wid burnt corks an' singin' and dancin' like n****rs" (581). However, unlike the political conversations that Kunta, the gardener, and the fiddler take part in, George's role in the novel demonstrates an awareness of the ways in which Black Americans are used and disposed of by the White American population—in ways ranging from politics to pop culture. Highlighting these injustices through Chicken George allows Haley to establish how integral families like his own have been to the creation of the US. Failing to recognize their importance, Haley suggests, minimizes the role that Black Americans have played throughout American history. Haley's neoslave narrative offers a history lesson for readers, as the earlier *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Hannah-Jones's more recent *The 1619 Project* do, serving as a teaching tool that equates Black history with American history.

Haley's novel also warns of the dangers of not striving for self-improvement. As he works alongside Mingo and Tom Lea, George receives the nickname "Chicken George," which helps him to separate himself from his family on slave row. For a large portion of his life, Chicken George is a womanizer and generally a restless person, similar to his master-father Tom Lea. The relationship and similarities in personality between George and Tom Lea show a resistance to relying on race to categorize identity. Chicken George's character is, it seems, a critique of Black men not living up to their full potential. The relationship between Tom Lea and Chicken George—as both father/son and master/slave—complicates matters because it emphasizes on two levels the hierarchy

that exists between the men. Lea's presence is a hindrance to George and a warning too: George could easily become like his father, as seen in their shared preference for women and gambling, and yet, Lea's presence is also a constant reminder that George, even though he is Lea's son, does not have the same freedoms. George must continue the quest for freedom that the African, Kunta Kinte, began years before to come to his full potential as a man.

The opportunity to gain freedom becomes an impetus for personal change for men like Chicken George. Unlike his grandfather Kunta Kinte, Chicken George does not contemplate what it means to be free, partly because he did not have his freedom as a young man, as Kunta did. It is not until Chicken George's children are grown and begin to take on their own roles in the family that George begins to think about buying himself and his family from his master-father. The contemplative silence that comes with being alone with the chickens after the death of Uncle Mingo makes Chicken George begin to think of freedom and "what it must be like not to belong to someone. What would it feel like to be 'free'?" (687). Over time, his resolve to buy his and his family's freedom grows. George consults with his wife, Matilda, first asking her about how much of his winnings they have saved and then working with her to begin figuring how much more money they need to save to buy their whole family's freedom, plus that of the other ailing field hands. He has put the responsibility of saving money in the hands of Matilda and has not questioned her about their funds until he begins to think about freedom. They also include their son Tom in their conversations and plans for freedom since Tom is deemed the most level-headed of their children. Unfortunately, Chicken George's attempts at making money quickly fail.[24] When Master Lea has an opportunity to make what he

thinks will be enough money to convince others that he is from a higher social class, rather than carrying the stigma of coming from "White trash," he invests most of his property in the endeavor. Chicken George foolishly volunteers two thousand dollars of what he, Matilda, and Tom have saved "which he was going to turn over to the massa to be bet on the Lea birds" (718). In his desperate attempt to provide a better future for his family, Chicken George loses his money and is turned over as payment to a man from England. Chicken George is again a critique of those turning to "easy" ways of making money, rather than working hard. He loses all of his money in a bid to buy his and his family's freedom, perhaps a suggestion from Haley that freedom and equality cannot be easily bought or won. The freedom and equality George is looking for can just as easily be lost when hinged on someone (or *something*) else's success.

In *Roots,* Haley presents his Black male ancestors as complex and flawed but not stereotyped. While Chicken George is away, Tom becomes the leader of the family. According to his mother, Tom is much more rational and able to make decisions that will keep the family together (739). When Massa Lea finally must sell his remaining slaves, Tom speaks with him and successfully encourages him to sell everyone as a family. Because of his negotiating, only those who are too old to be sold are left behind.

Watching Family Stories on TV: The 1977 and 2016 Adaptations of *Roots*

Roots premiered on television to much acclaim, captivating American middle-class viewers and reminding them that the formal end of the Civil War had only been a century before. The landmark show, among the first of its kind, provided powerful context for images of civil rights protests viewers would have seen in newspapers and newscasts in

the 1950s and 1960s. Sticking to the familiar storyline of the novel, Haley and the series creators sought to avoid alienating their White audiences while highlighting the injustices that Black families, like Haley's, experienced. Both the 1977 and the 2016 television adaptations of *Roots,* viewed by millions, influence social memory as it pertains to the struggle for civil rights. When thought of as civil rights texts, both miniseries demonstrate for viewers the importance of various methods of resistance to the struggle, with the 2016 adaptation emphasizing the brutalities of slavery and the 1977 adaptation displaying methodic nonviolent resistance.

The 1977 adaptation successfully reminds viewers of the brutality of slavery. Specific scenes were invented for the remake to bring the brutalities and realities of slavery back into public consciousness. "Episode 3", for example, contains what is perhaps one of the most famous scenes of the series. After a runaway attempt, Kunta (LeVar Burton) is chained to a post and repeatedly whipped. Mr. Ames, the Irish overseer (Vic Marrow), continually demands Kunta say his name, expecting him to respond with his slave name: "'When the master gives you something, you take it. He gave you a name. It's a nice name. It's Toby. And it's going to be yours 'til the day you die'" (01:29:21 - 01:29:34). During this torture, the camera pans across the enslaved people forced to witness Kunta's punishment and humiliation as well as the Black man forced to whip Kunta. Despite the brutal torture, Kunta refuses to utter his slave name until the point that he is so physically and mentally broken that he finally relents. As soon as Kunta says "Toby," he is cut down and Fiddler (Louis Gossett Jr.) rushes to his aid, reminding the barely conscious African that he will always be Kunta Kinte and that "'There's gonna be another day'" (01:33:11-01:33:12).[25] This graphic scene of brutal

torture does not appear in the novel but made for riveting television. While Haley's novel allows Kunta to retain his African name and some of his culture, the adaptation demonstrates visually a symbolic stripping of identity, heritage, and culture. The directors of *Roots* thus ask their audiences to (re)engage with Black history by bringing to the screens inside of viewers' homes the socio-political concerns of 1970s Black America. The moment elicits a sense of compassion from post-civil-rights viewers and encourages them to acknowledge the perpetrators of the violence of slavery, such as the White master, Mr. Reynolds (Robert Reed), or overseers like Mr. Ames, neither of whom the camera shows as flinching in the face of such brutal torture. While watching Kunta be stripped of his identity and forcibly renamed, viewers are confronted with the realities of his humanity, the inhumanity of his White owners, and the effects that slavery will have on him and his future.

The final moments of the 1977 miniseries illustrate a clear understanding of the context within which *Roots* seeks to intervene. In "Episode 6," Chicken George (Ben Vereen) has returned to lead his family to Henning, Tennessee. In a scene entitled "Free At Last," the Lee family is shown standing on the top of a hill with Chicken George at the forefront. He removes his hat and begins talking to his grandfather as the family kneels as if in prayer: "Hear me, Ol' African . . . the flesh . . . of your flesh . . . has come to freedom. You is free at last. We is free!" (01:29:46-01:30:08). Through the speech-like prayer of Chicken George, the viewer is reminded of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, creating a throughline between the hills of Henning, Tennessee in the late 1800s and the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. Chicken George's prayer also recognizes that the freedom gained is rooted in an African past. The

struggle began the moment slave traders captured Kunta in Juffure, West Africa, in the eighteenth century. While American viewers might interpret this ending as a happy ending, when thought of as civil rights literature, the scene brings focus to Fiddler's prayer: "There's gonna be another day," a day in which the injustices they face, both in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries, will end, replicating the sentiment of "We shall overcome," the anthem of the civil rights movement.

Forty years after the original adaptation premiered, the series was remade, demonstrating an awareness of the new historical context in which it was being made. The History Channel aired the new adaptation of *Roots.* As *New York Times* reviewer James Poniewozik points out: "Viewers who watched *Roots* four decades ago have since lived with racial narratives of moving forward and stepping back. They've seen America's first black president elected and a presidential candidate hesitate to disavow the Klu Klux Klan" ("*Roots* for a Black Lives Matter Era"). Creators of the 2016 version acknowledged audience needs by making the series considerably shorter and faster-paced, shaving off two nights worth of material and upping the amount of violence and gore shown on screen. Although the series is shorter, like the 1977 original adaptation, the 2016 remake utilizes creative license to emphasize different resistance strategies embraced by participants in the struggle for civil rights.

The violence of the Middle Passage is central to the opening of the 2016 remake, "Night One" of the 2016 version does not open with the village of Juffure,[26] but instead opens with an image of Kunta chained in the belly of a ship, covered in sweat, jarred from sleep by water dripping on his head. He begins screaming and attempts to break his chains. All of this, meanwhile, is overlaid with Alex Haley's voice (narrated by Laurence

Fishburne), quoting Mark Twain: “The two most important days of a man’s life are the day he is born and the day he understands why” (“Night One,” 00:00:37-00:00:44). The remake is clearly focused on the violence associated with slavery, repositioning Kunta early on as the hero of the story. The visual image of Kunta, however, chained and screaming, creates for the viewer the shocking image of a singular man attempting to break metal, showing viewers that the version of Kunta presented in this remake will be willing to take a by-any-means-necessary approach to ensure his survival. And yet, Kunta, as the unknowing forebearer for Haley’s family, bears the weight of slavery on his shoulders; he must endure to ensure the survival of his family’s freedom.

The remake’s creators utilized creative license to put the plot’s emphasis on the various methods used by the enslaved to resist their enslavement. In “Night One,” as in the original novel and adaptation, Omoro (Babs Olusanmokun) is presented as a righteous and heroic figure. By using nonviolent means Omoro stops the Koro family from transporting enslaved people without using the guns that he and his compatriots capture from the Koro (00:02:30-00:03:33). He then makes it back to the village in time to pray for his wife, Binta (Nokuthula Ledwaba), who is in labor with Kunta (00:04:47-00:05:05). This opening interaction demonstrates that Omoro can take action to protect others, but then immediately return to his growing family to be a suitable father for them, and it also reminds viewers that this will be the kind of father figure that Kunta grows up idolizing. Omoro’s actions, however, position him to become an enemy of the Koro family, aligning one family against another, which eventually has resounding repercussions. As a teenager, Kunta (Malachai Kirby) is later kidnapped as the Koro’s revenge. His kidnapping creates a dramatic and powerful parallel for the audience with

the selling of Kunta's daughter Kizzy (Anika Noni Rose) years later. Just as Omoro challenges slavery by stopping the transport of slaves and the selling of them, Kizzy will also challenge American slavery through nonviolent means: by forging a pass for her love interest, Noah. She will be punished for it too—she is separated from her parents and raped by her new owner, Mr. Lee. Both Kunta's kidnapping and Kizzy's selling in the 2016 remake emphasize for the audience that slavery is an evil, no matter who participates in it (the Koro family or the Waller and Lee families) and no matter where (Africa or America). The 2016 adaptation of *Roots* brings the novel and the original miniseries back into the American popular consciousness, this time utilizing creative license to show various methods of resistance that the enslaved might have used to achieve their freedom. The creation of a throughline between Kizzy and Omoro helps to solidify that these methods have been used for centuries.

The 2016 adaptation reminds its audience that the American Revolution of 1776 did not guarantee freedom to *all* people living, working, and raising families in America. "Night Two" introduces other socio-political matters that affected the lives of slaves. Kunta escapes Dr. Reynolds's plantation and becomes a part of an all-Black battalion for British troops. Kunta quickly surrenders his weapon when British troops find him, and he tells them that he "will kill many Americans for your King!" (00:03:57- 00:04:00). Their dragoon leader reluctantly gives him water and directions to a camp where he will be given food and a letter of manumission, which may or may not be accepted by southern slaveholders. Later on, after Kunta has become the buggy driver for Dr. William Waller (Matthew Goode), they encounter people celebrating the end of the Revolutionary War. With no sense of irony, Dr. Waller excitedly responds to the encounter with "Long live

freedom! Long live freedom!" ("Night Two" 00:33:13-00:33:18). None of this appears in the neoslave narrative or the 1977 adaptation. In Haley's original work, the Revolutionary War is information that comes to the plantation by word of mouth. By including these scenes, the 2016 remake shows the viewer the irony of the country's battle for independence and liberty. Kunta is shown playing an active role in a violent movement where one group of people, attempt and *succeed* at fighting for freedom from an oppressor. While Kunta previously made it clear to the British that he is willing to kill for his freedom, once the Revolutionary War is over, the White population denies freedom to the enslaved, including Kunta, reveling in their own role as oppressors.

Conclusion

When examined through the context of the Moynihan Report and the various resistance strategies that participants in the struggle for civil rights embraced, Alex Haley's *Roots* demonstrates for readers and viewers alike how his family stories can be emblematic of the family stories of all Black Americans. The cognitive power of the novel and both miniseries on the American public consciousness helps to reshape the public's understanding of the civil rights movement. Instead of thinking about the civil rights movement in terms of laws, protests, and actions, Haley's work reshapes the struggle, putting the focus on the everyday men and women who took part in the movement. Through the creation of a story about a singular family's survival and will to thrive, Haley's novel becomes a narrative that is relatable and representative of the same struggle that millions of other Black American families faced.

In the next chapter, I will investigate Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) as civil rights literature. Unlike *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,* Butler's neoslave narrative does not directly reference the events typically associated with the canonical phase of the civil rights movement. However, *Kindred*, its later graphic novel counterpart (2017), and its Hulu adaptation (2022) can be thought of as taking part in this literary tradition by asking its audience to reshape how they conceive of the leadership of the movement by upsetting binaries and instead exploring the lives of everyday people as leaders.

Chapter Three: Memory Machine: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) as Past and Present

In her essay "Positive Obsession" (1995), Octavia Butler examines how she began to write. She recalls voraciously consuming whatever books her mother would bring home from work, books that were "yellow with age, books without covers, books written in, crayoned in, spilled in, cut, torn, even partially burned" (129). Each of these books shaped her identity as a writer. Over time, Butler began writing stories and attempting to have them published, finding her niche area in science fiction, in spite of the "kindly, unhelpful things" that her teachers would say, such as the one teacher who exasperatedly asked her, "Can't you write anything normal?" (131). Despite these discouraging words, Butler continued with her writing career, eventually publishing eight novels by the time she wrote "Positive Obsession." In the final section of her essay, Butler considers her role specifically as a Black female science fiction writer. To the frequently asked question, "What good is science fiction to Black people?" (134), Butler responds by asking her reader to think about how science fiction suggests alternative, more liberating ways of thinking and being:

> What good is any form of literature to Black people?
> What good is science fiction's thinking about the present, the future, and the past? What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing? What good is its examination of the possible effects of science and technology, or social organization and political direction? At its best, science fiction stimulates imagination and creativity. It gets reader and writer off the beaten track, off the narrow, narrow footpath of what "everyone" is saying, doing, thinking–whoever "everyone" happens to be this year.
> And what good is all this to Black people? (134-35)

Butler defines science fiction as a space where she and other Black writers can scrutinize different aspects of humanity, asking their audiences to reengage with the difficult

aspects of American history. Science fiction gives Butler the space to look at historical "facts," challenging her audience's perceptions of the past and its repercussions on the present.

This chapter contends that Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), alongside Damien Duffy and John Jennings's graphic novel adaptation (2017) and the Hulu television series adaptation (2022), should be read as texts which participate in the field of civil rights literature, reminding audiences that injustices toward Black Americans have been taking place for centuries, as early as the arrival of the first enslaved people in 1619. All three of these texts extend the canonical setting of the movement outside of the American South and the 1954-1965 decade, refocusing on everyday leaders, and realigning nonviolent direction action and violence as methodologies working alongside each other.

Science Fiction and Revisionist Histories

While *Kindred* satisfies Rushdy's definition of the neoslave narrative, because of fantastical elements like time travel, the novel is typically categorized and discussed by critics as science fiction, not as a neoslave narrative, and certainly not as civil rights literature. Science fiction is a predominantly male field. When Stephen W. Potts asks Butler in 1996 if she believes that science fiction is "primarily a white male genre," the writer responds "Yes" before adding that when she does public speaking events, there are frequently people who are surprised that there are female science fiction writers because "people do have a rather fixed notion of what science fiction is" (337). In the same interview, Butler also notes that women might be writing something science fiction-adjacent, such as "Jewelle Gomez – she's not science fiction but she is fantasy, and that's

in the family" (Potts 337). Butler thus presents science fiction as an umbrella term, a way to describe multiple genres with fantastical elements that "[stimulate] imagination and creativity" while also taking both reader and writer "off the beaten track" (Butler "Positive" 135). Aligning herself in this way, it would seem, gives Butler some flexibility with her writing–she does not have to write something that is explicitly science fiction, or fantasy, or horror. Instead, the results could potentially be a blend of all three, a creation that, as Rushdy reminds his readers in his examination of neoslave narratives, "whistles and hums" with its ancestry (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 5). Butler approaches writing with flexibility and a willingness to experiment with form and genre, so when thought of as combining the neoslave narrative genre—a modern form which owes its ancestry to nineteenth-century slave narratives, which are themselves an amalgamation of genres—with a genre like science fiction, the results are rich, complicated, and inclusive.

There are other reasons why Butler's *Kindred* should be considered a neoslave narrative as well. The novel relies on the genre of the slave narrative to tell the story of its main female characters, such as Dana Franklin. As Rushdy defines the neoslave narrative, authors return to the tradition of the slave narrative, taking on the voices of a slave narrator to tell what William Andrews famously called a "free story." Although Butler's female protagonist exists in a variety of settings (only one of which is an antebellum southern plantation), *Kindred* and its various adaptations tell the stories of enslaved women dealing with the repercussions of slavery in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Upon publication, critics raised questions about *Kindred's* genre. In her discussion of *Kindred* and another of Butler's novels, *Wild Seed,* Sandra Govan states

that *Kindred* is a "rich [text] which neatly [defines] the junction where the historical novel, the slave narrative, and science fiction meet" (82). Butler herself eschews labeling the novel specifically as science fiction, instead calling it "'a grim fantasy' since there is 'absolutely no science in it'" (qtd in Crossley 269). Lisa Yazsek notes that during the 1960s and 1970s, there were White female authors who utilized the genre of science fiction and that both Butler and Samuel Delany joined these women because "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" (1058). Yazsek goes on to add that "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" (1058). Butler's neoslave narrative is grounded in Black history and her own personal experience with the Black Power Movement as it gained prominence in the late 1960s. Her personal affinity for science fiction and her awareness of her position as a Black woman living in California after the canonical civil rights movement allowed her to utilize science fiction as a means to encourage her audience to engage with Black history and to confront the difficult aspects of American history.

Before turning to a close analysis of *Kindred*, its graphic novel counterpart, and the recent television series, it is worth examining the context in which Butler wrote, as a Black woman in California in the late 1970s. Considering Butler's life and her experiences as a Black female writer in California during the 1960s and 1970s provides necessary context for her emotional responses to growing political movements.

A Glimpse into Butler's Personal History and Historical Context

In 1968, as the Black Power movement gained traction among larger groups of young Black people, Butler took part in the first ever Black literature course offered at Pasadena City College, where she learned about writers she had never encountered before (Behrent 795). Perhaps most importantly to Butler's future writing career, however, she encountered a classmate who "was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive" (Rowell and Butler 51). Just as Butler's mother, who had worked in whatever jobs she could find to provide for her child, this young man could not excuse what he thought of as "[the former generation's] humility and acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, 'I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents'" (Rowell and Butler 51). This frustration with the older generation became "the germ of the idea" for *Kindred* (Rowell and Butler 51).

Butler recognized that history, while it is difficult to face, was also something that most writers writing about slavery must confront as they worked to write a truer, fuller narrative of the past in order to "[stimulate] imagination and creativity" ("Positive" 134). When Butler began writing *Kindred,* she researched slave narratives, returning to the stories of the past to understand slavery, and the present, better. In her 1991 interview with Randall Kenan, she told him that while she was reading through these excruciating stories, she found that "I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it. I think that's what most fiction writers do. They

almost have to" (497). Many Americans, as the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) (2018) argues in their preface to teaching about "hard history," resist talking or learning about history if it means confronting uncomfortable facts. Instead, as Hasan Kwame Jeffries observes, Americans are fascinated with nostalgia. Jeffries further argues: "If the cornerstone of the Confederacy was slavery, then what does that say about those who revere the people who took up arms to keep African Americans in chains?" ("Teaching Hard History") As Butler points out, so too does Jeffries and the SPLC: "Slavery is hard history. It is hard to comprehend the inhumanity that defined it. It is hard to discuss the violence that sustained it. It is hard to teach the ideology of white supremacy that justified it. And it is hard to learn about those who abided it" ("Teaching Hard History"). Butler knew that she had to have an accurate image of what slavery was like before she could write about Dana's encounters with her slave-holding ancestors, and that she would have to return to a form that gathers layers of meaning: the slave narrative. By researching the slave narrative, Butler had two perspectives to work with regarding slavery—that of the enslaved and the owners of the enslaved, both of whom are ancestors to contemporary Americans. Both perspectives allowed her to present the tough, albeit "cleaned up version," of slavery while also asking audiences to confront hard history.

Butler had specific reasons for writing *Kindred* at that point in her writing career. She told Kenan: "'I was really dealing with some 1960s feelings when I wrote this book'" (497). Butler sought to understand why people like her mother and other participants of the classical phase of the struggle for civil rights did not seek more radical change. Butler recalled watching her mother walk "in back doors and generally [be] treated in a way that made me . . . . I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what

she did" (496). Like other people attempting to escape the institutionalized racism of the Jim Crow South, Butler's mother and other Black Americans migrated to California. The migration of Black people and families to other parts of the country outside of the South, according to Megan Behrent, would later contribute to "the militancy and radicalism of the 1960s" (799). After having worked in conditions slightly better than slavery in the South, Butler's mother served as a domestic worker, working to feed her child. She still faced racism in California that was not any different than what she might have found had she stayed in the South. Yet, Butler and other people who grew up watching their parents doing the same kinds of work and acting in what they considered a subservient manner, grew up resenting that their parents appeared not to advocate for themselves.

The contention of this chapter is that by working through her "1960s feelings" in *Kindred*, Butler's work participates in efforts to complicate the master narrative of American history, particularly as it is taught in American schools. Political upheaval shaped Butler's views of Black America. Behrent examines Butler's political views during her time in college, noting that Butler attended Pasadena City College in 1968, while the Black Panther Party formed and gained traction in Oakland, California in 1966 (796). For Behrent, to ignore the political context of the novel is to ignore an integral aspect of Butler's writings. She claims that by studying *Kindred* through the lens of the 1960s Black Power movement, it is possible to create a more complicated and nuanced understanding of "power, oppression, and resistance" which serve as "continuities between the resistance of her generation and that of generations past" (798). Behrent reminds her audience that "the personal is not only political but historical, rooted in a familial and national history that entangles the protagonist, reminding her [Dana and

Butler] that individual survival and resistance always has a collective and historic cost" (799-801). Looking for these similarities and patterns, as Behrent suggests doing, helps to create a more complex and fuller narrative of the civil rights movement.

The consensus single-story of the civil rights movement focuses almost exclusively on nonviolent direct action to effect social change. In 1965, after the Watts Riot ended, King returned to Los Angeles, where he was told by protestors, "'We won. . . because we made them pay attention to *us*'" (Theoharis "Alabama on Avalon" 51, italics mine). It should be noted, however, that the "us" in this case came to mean almost exclusively Black men. In addition, the impulse by protestors to tell King that they made the media pay attention to them serves as a reminder that, although there are multiple impulses for resistance, the media typically only illustrates one at a time. In 1963, for example, it was King, standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In the late 1960s, it was the Black Panthers, wearing black berets and carrying guns. Although the civil rights movement was by no means only located in the South before the Watts Riot,[27] the riot served as a reminder of the relationship between differing methodologies, eventually resulting in the development of the BPP in Oakland, close to Butler's later experiences in Pasadena. Armed self-defense was a common trend both in the South and in movements outside of the South. Although violent and nonviolent methodologies are not necessarily separate ways of achieving change for the civil rights movement, it should be acknowledged that there were key differences in how the southern civil rights movement and the BPP utilized violence, particularly in connection to Black masculinity: whereas in the South armed resistance had "instilled a sense of pride in African American men" with their rationale being "the simple necessity to

protect black communities" (Wendt 158), the BPP insisted on utilizing guns and violence "to affirm and nurture black masculinity" (158).

Part of the differing image of Black masculinity that the civil rights and Black Power movements, as well as the BPP were navigating, stemmed from the publication of the Moynihan Report in 1965. In the second chapter of this study, "The Roots of Memory: Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* (1976) as Civil Rights Literature," I discussed the Moynihan Report and the detrimental presentation of Black families. Here, it is necessary to examine more specifically the report's image of Black masculinity. Whereas the previous chapter on *Roots* addressed Haley's family, particularly the men, as exceptional, here it is worth considering how Butler presents her male characters as everyday people. The report suggested that family structures in Black America were vastly different from White families and were "approaching complete breakdown" in many cities (5). The report goes on to discuss the "Roots of the Problem," locating those roots in slavery and Reconstruction and claiming that masculinity became a site of hostility as segregation took hold after the Civil War. According to the report, "Keeping the Negro 'in his place' can be translated as keeping the Negro male in his place: the female was not a threat to anyone" (16). The hostility that men experienced supposedly hindered the emergence of strong father figures and workers as urbanization expanded across the country, while women continued to head their households as they had throughout slavery and Reconstruction, eventually making their way into white collar positions and upper education as well. Despite its patronizing and patriarchal discussions of race and sex, the report provides a fuller, truer image of the injustices that Black men and women faced when thought of in the context of the different impulses throughout the

1950s to the 1970s. Because of the Moynihan Report and the American public's general perception of Black masculinity, both the Black Power movement and the BPP made its recovery a central aspect of their respective philosophies. Butler's neoslave narrative seemingly addresses the Moynihan Report through her Black male characters, like Nigel in *Kindred*. These men participate in resistance in their own ways while also demonstrating Black masculinity in a strong light.

Historians studying this era examine how women played a role in the movements through any available means. These women "wanted to lead but they did not wish to assert themselves at the expense of their men" (Fleming 207). The women who became leaders of the civil rights and Black Power movements were able to navigate this fine line between appealing to masculinity and maintaining a sense of their own femininity. Gloria Richardson, the leader of the Cambridge movement in Maryland, was labeled as a "castrator" for stepping outside of those fine lines while political activist and scholar Angela Davis listened to men discuss how women were taking over the organization, often calling it a "'matriarchal coup d'etat'" (Fleming 208). The experiences of Richardson and Davis signal the work of historians like Fleming writing a bottom-up version of civil rights history, effectively decentering a top-down masculine narrative. Looked at from a literary perspective, Butler attempts to decenter this same top-down narrative similar to the work of Ernest Gaines. This becomes apparent when we consider both *Kindred* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* as civil rights literature.

The next section of this chapter begins by considering *Kindred* as civil rights literature. When read in this tradition, this novel emphasizes the differences between generations of men and women who took part in the struggle for civil rights across

centuries. The adaptation into a graphic novel and a television series, discussed later in this chapter, released decades after the original publication of the neoslave narrative, ask a contemporary audience to (re)engage with Black history in the Black Lives Matter era.

Everyday Stories, Bottom-Up History

The consensus narrative of the civil rights and the Black Power movements focuses predominantly on top-down, popularized models of male leadership. This type of narrative extends well beyond the 1950s and 1960s with prominent figures such as Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Philip Randolph, Jesse Jackson, and Barack Obama. While Butler's neoslave narrative features Black female protagonists (as Gaines' *Autobiography* did), she provides multiple male characters throughout *Kindred* who help to demythologize the "heroic" or "savior" image of the Black man leading a movement for change. Instead, Butler's purpose is to tell the stories of everyday people, rather than heroic figures, writing a Black people's history. When thought of alongside the addition of texts like slave narratives to English courses or the creation of African American studies programs in the 1960s and 1970s, Butler's novel echoes the idea that the lives of everyday people should be central to the historical stories that we tell.

In *Kindred,* Rufus Weylin, a central White male figure in the novel, is given the opportunity to educate himself with the amount of time that he is exposed to the thoughts and opinions of Dana, his great-great granddaughter. Tom Weylin, Rufus's father, raised Rufus with very specific views of how the enslaved Black people who live on their plantation should be treated.[28] Dana realizes early on in their interactions that one day Rufus will grow up to be like his father, that it "would happen some day in at least one

way" (Butler *Kindred* 68). Rufus is still young when the novel opens, making it feasible for Dana to educate and shape his opinions of the enslaved people that he will one day own. Her education of Rufus begins during their second interaction, with her refusing to allow him to call her a "n****r", telling him "you [Rufus] do me [Dana] the courtesy of calling me what I want to be called" (Butler 25). Playing a part in his education from a young age will hopefully allow Dana to mold Rufus. She shares with him part of her twentieth-century, post-Black Power Movement feelings about being treated as a nameless person from the beginnings of their relationship. Sharing her reaction to the name that Rufus calls her differentiates Dana from the enslaved people whom Rufus knows, and it also teaches him that Dana is a human with thoughts and feelings. Making this distinction emphasizes how vastly different their respective time periods are, but the fact that Rufus calls her a demoralizing name so easily also serves as a reminder that not that much has changed between time periods.

Over time, it becomes apparent that Rufus is too weak, too human, to resist the racist economic system that grants him unlimited power and privilege as a White male with property. Dana points out early on in her time traveling that, as a woman, she was "the worst possible guardian for him–a black to watch over him in a society that considered blacks subhuman, a woman to watch over him in a society that considered women perennial children. I would have all I could do to look after myself" (68). Nineteenth-century thinking, as Dana points out, makes it dangerous for women and enslaved people to exercise personal agency, preventing these groups of people from acting of their own volition.[29] As Rufus grows older and rapes Alice, an enslaved Black woman whom Rufus owns and claims to have affection for, Dana points out how smart

Joe, one of the children that he has with Alice, is. Up to this point, Rufus has not thought of Joe as his child or considered that he should take any kind of paternal pride in the upbringing of his children, possibly because "He had spent his life watching his father ignore, even sell the children he had had with Black women. Apparently, it had never occurred to Rufus to break that tradition. Until now" (231). In Dana's mind, there is still potential here for Rufus to become a good father figure. But, because it takes someone like Dana to point out these places in which Rufus falls into the trap of nineteenth-century thinking, Rufus neglects to make progressive changes to his thoughts and actions as Dana would want him to do. Over time, as Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out in her seminal *Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and History* (1991), Rufus becomes "the nightmare of unrestricted white male power" which also "shows the natural progress of a white male enjoying rarely challenged legal and social hegemony" (42). Although Dana's faith in reason and Rufus's basic humanity gives her hope that he can be changed and that he will not fall prey to his own shortcomings, he cannot escape the other male models that he grew up with, like his father. Like Haley's Tom Lea, Rufus is unable to change and become a decent, principled person. The "saga of an American family" that Butler tells is vastly different from the heroism and inner strength displayed by Haley's Chicken George and Tom. Rufus is human, not a hero, unable to overcome his own biases and prejudices.

Reading *Kindred* as civil rights literature brings attention to Kevin, Dana's husband and a White man who, once trapped in the past and separated from Dana, engages in abolitionist activity. Kevin does not have the same kind of perspective on Dana's time travel that she does. Instead, as Kubitscheck discusses, Kevin has a choice

when it comes to interacting with the nineteenth-century history that he observes–he can either choose to directly interact with history, or he can choose to remain a bystander to it (42-43). This becomes apparent when he makes the comment to Dana that he would like to go west because he wants to "see how much of the Old West mythology is true" (Butler *Kindred* 97). To Kevin, the past is still the past; it is still a part of the "mythology" that makes up American history. Unlike Dana, he does not have to be concerned with how his twentieth-century present is being affected. Dana responds to Kevin's thoughts about traveling with disgust: "That's where they're doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!" (97). Kevin is not concerned with how he is going to be treated, nor is he yet concerned with how those around him are being treated because he has choice and autonomy granted by the social construction of race and gender in the nineteenth century. He can move about in the nineteenth century without worry, generally, but at some point, he will need to choose whether he wants to confront history, as Dana must, or choose to ignore it.

Kevin's presence in the novel emphasizes the conditions under which people change, as seen with his understanding of history and slavery. His relationship with Dana most noticeably changes when he journeys to the past with her. He takes on some aspect of the White male patriarchal leader, albeit unlike Rufus or Tom Weylin. Kevin assumes multiple roles at this point: the role of a slaveowner, a nineteenth-century educated man, and Dana's husband. Kevin quickly ingratiates himself with the Weylin household, proving that, although he does not have much knowledge of the time period, as a White man, his story will be believed much easier than any story that Dana fabricates. When he gets left behind for what amounts to five years, he has no choice but to confront history,

eventually revealing to Dana some of the horrors that he witnessed, such as a pregnant woman being whipped until she miscarries and dies (191). Yet, when Kevin comes back to the 1970s,[30] his role reverts back to simply being Dana's husband, meaning that he can leave behind his role as abolitionist in the past. As he tells Dana, "somehow, I've got to fit myself back into nineteen seventy-six, if I can" (193). He might be physically changed because his body shows the scars of the violence of the world around him, but Kevin can choose to move on from his experiences in the past rather than allowing them to influence his attitudes and actions in his present. He suggests a communal responsibility and awareness of how and when people change. Kevin's experiences demonstrate the complexities that come with advocating for civil rights by suggesting that Whites have a responsibility and moral obligation to consider how their ancestors were affected by slavery. How does a person deal with having ancestors who bought and sold living human beings? How does a person deal with the emotional repercussions of knowing that their ancestors likely participated in an institution that treated Black people so cruelly? These are questions that Kevin, now that he has confronted history, will have to navigate. He will have to choose which philosophy he would prefer to utilize in the 1970s now that he has experienced race violence for himself. It is possible, then, to conceive of Kevin becoming an activist in the 1970s, continuing the work that he began in the 1820s. In this way, Kevin embodies a throughline of civil rights activism from the antebellum era to the post-1965 era.

Butler continues the use of male characters to portray an everyday people's story by complicating our understanding of various resistance strategies. Early on during her interactions with Tom Weylin, Dana notices Luke's disregard and hatred for Tom

Weylin: “The black man gave him a look of disgust that would surely have angered him if he had seen it” (65). There is a thinly veiled anger in Luke, much like the “1960s feelings” that Butler was dealing with while she was writing (Kenan 497), or the anger expressed by the young man who sparked Butler’s creative interest. Luke has the potential to become a leader of an uprising on the plantation, should he choose to, which is part of the reason that he is later sold by Tom Weylin (138). Luke is torn between inaction and passivity–becoming the embodiment of the shame felt by the people of Butler’s generation, such as the young man she met in her literature class–or violent action. Enslaved people, or people like Butler’s mother or the grandparents that Butler’s classmate referred to in his anger, were *not* complacent. Luke’s presence in the novel speaks to the frustration and shame that Butler acknowledges as an impetus for writing *Kindred*. Being violent for an enslaved Black man could mean rebellion, as was Nat Turner’s choice in 1831, which would also mean risking his life. Instead, the fictional men in Butler’s neoslave narrative chose to do what was necessary to survive for their children and wives, even if they did not want to accept their roles in that way.

Through Luke, Butler creates a throughline between generations of Black men. Luke has specific views for how the enslaved people should treat their White masters, particularly the amount of disregard an enslaved person should have for any orders they are given. While his son Nigel is still young, Luke tells him, “Don’t argue with white folks . . . Don’t tell them ‘no.’ Don’t let them see you mad. Just say ‘yes, sir.’ Then go ‘head and do what you want to do. Might have to take a whippin’ for it later on, but if you want it bad enough, the whippin’ won’t matter much” (96). Luke is wise enough to exercise some caution–do not let your anger overtake your rational thought–but at the

same time, Luke gives advice that would resonate with any enslaved person–do not lose your autonomy. When Dana is about to go upstairs with both an injured Rufus and an indifferent Tom Weylin, Luke gives her a few words of advice:

> "You watch out," said the black man softly as I started after them.
> I looked at him, surprised, not sure he was talking to me. He was.
> "Marse Tom can turn mean mighty quick," he said. "So can the boy, now that he's growing up. Your face looks like maybe you had enough white folks' meanness for a while." (68)

While Luke might be filled with anger, he also understands that other people, particularly women like Dana, need to be protected. He recognizes the signs of violence–although it should be noted that any bruises that Dana has do not have time to heal properly since her first couple of visits to the past take place in such quick succession–and knows who around him is likely the cause of that violence. The presence of Luke in the novel demonstrates how, as a part of the older generation on the plantation, he suffers from violence, but does not actively advocate for himself or others, beyond reminders like the one he offers Dana. Luke makes Butler's vision of civil rights "harder" because he both demonstrates an awareness of the nonviolent direct action for which civil rights leaders like King advocated. Luke's insistence on acting as he chooses and generally quietly revolting against being enslaved makes the nonviolence supported by iconic civil rights movement leaders more understandable. At the same time, though, Luke is aware that his quiet resistance can and most likely will provoke a violent reaction, which is what eventually gets him sold further south. Even if he is not being actively violent in what the Weylin's would consider his "insolence," Luke still insists on action.

Nigel, Luke's son and Rufus's childhood friend, is yet another everyday male figure on the Weylin plantation who complicates the consensus narrative's top-down

narrative while prompting discussion of various resistance strategies. Nigel, having learned from Luke at a young age how to exist on the plantation by doing what he wants, vacillates between the nonviolent persistence his father might have wanted and the obedience the Weylin's would have insisted on. Nigel learns from a young age, like many children on southern plantations, about slavery. At one point, Kevin and Dana observe children playing at slavery, and even objecting to how much they are "sold" for. This type of "play" was not uncommon (99). As Nigel grows older, he learns how to navigate his relationship with the new overseer, Jake Edwards, who frequently oversteps his role when the Weylins are not around. Nigel learns to stand his ground while not stepping outside of the role that Edwards expects him to fill, blending the philosophy of his father with societal expectations of slaves as submissive. His tone with Edwards changes with each interaction, at first "placating – 'I'm just doing what Marse Tom told me to do.' Finally threatening – 'Marse Jake, you put your hands on me, you go' get hurt. Now that's all!'" (182). Taken together, Nigel clearly understands the hierarchy of the plantation but at the same time is also knowledgeable enough to understand that, as he grows older, the hierarchy and the relationships change for him. Nigel embodies the thinly veiled anger of his father, tempered by an awareness of societal expectations.

Nigel gives voice to the everyday lives of Black men, ultimately presenting the bottom-up (rather than top-down) version of history for which Dowd-Hall advocates and the contributors to Armstrong's volume demonstrate via civil rights literature. After Dana is finally forced to kill Rufus because he attempts to rape her, Nigel is the one who covers up for her. Nigel comes to the attic where the attempted rape and Rufus's death takes place, and he is clearly shocked when he comes across the scene: "'Dana, what. . . ? Oh

no. God, no!'" (260). Rufus's death means that the security of the hierarchy that Nigel is familiar with on the plantation is gone. In addition to that, though, Nigel is the one who is left behind to cover up Rufus's death, yet he is left out of the historical record, along with his wife Carrie, their children, and other people on the plantation. Because of Nigel, Dana's presence in the past is not revealed and no one is obviously blamed for Rufus's death. Nigel's presence as the most level-headed person on the plantation who recognizes the line between Black and White spaces, inhabits a specific place on the plantation. He knows how to pick his battles and bide his time, by any means necessary. He is not complacent, nor is he shameful.

The ways in which *Kindred* conceives of Black men as everyday people makes the novel worth considering as civil rights literature. White men have autonomy and choice in Butler's novels, while Black men navigate worlds in which they have little to no choice. Reconsidering how the novel navigates choice or lack thereof suggests another way in which these novels make civil rights harder. The primary way, however, is by foregrounding Black women as warriors for freedom.

Black Women as Survivors and Warriors for Freedom

To read *Kindred* as civil rights literature means focusing on bottom-up models of leadership, including models of everyday women. Butler centralizes the stories of Black women, working to recover the stories that might otherwise be lost to time, as Elizabeth Anne Bealieu's study *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-slave Narrative: Femininity Restored* (1999) maintains. In her 1997 interview with Rowell, Butler states that she had originally started writing *Kindred* with a male protagonist, but "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–the rules of submission, I guess you would call them–before he was killed for not knowing them because he would be perceived as dangerous" (Rowell and Butler 51) Butler goes on to distinguish between her choices for protagonists: "'The female main character, who might be equally dangerous, would not be perceived so. She might be beaten, she might be abused, but she probably wouldn't be killed, and that's the way I wrote it. . . . That sexism, in a sense, worked in her favor'" (Rowell and Butler 51). Butler, then, created various female characters who are representatives of everyday life on the Weylin plantation, women who were present, even if history does not remember them.

While Dana is the protagonist of *Kindred,* Butler develops other female characters who are representative of female models of bottom-up leadership. Both Sarah and Carrie are enslaved, the mother and daughter living on the Weylin plantation for the majority of their lives. Sarah takes care of the cooking for the big house when Dana first appears on the Weylin plantation; over time, Sarah takes over more household responsibilities, especially as Margaret Weylin's mental state declines. Sarah has had three of her four children sold away from her, leaving her with only Carrie, her mute daughter. Sarah hides her thinly veiled anger, much like Luke, but never acts on it, making it "amazing that [Tom Weylin] was still alive" (76). Dana does not provide a flattering image of Sarah at first, describing her as

> the kind of woman who might have been called 'mammy' in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-n****r, the female Uncle Tom–the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could

> stand to lose, and who knew as little about freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. (145)

Portraying Sarah in this manner shows Butler directly critiquing those who would have held Sarah in contempt in the 1960s. Sarah would have been considered someone who seemingly does very little to upset the status quo of the 1960s; she makes no radical attempts to make changes to life on the plantation or to run away with Carrie to the north. Up to this point, in fact, Sarah has given up everything during her life as an enslaved woman. Her children are gone, and she has been forced to take care of a household that is not her own, yet she has not gone mad or resorted to actions, such as running away or murder, that might entail her being sold south. Instead, Sarah is courageous and makes sacrifices that harm her physically, emotionally, and mentally so that her one remaining child will stay with her. Sarah might be "held in contempt" for her actions in the "militant nineteen sixties" when she, in fact, is a role model for surviving oppression with her integrity intact.

Sarah is the fictional ancestor to those who over a century later had to experience the harsh realities of daily life as Black people living in America. In her examination of the grassroots movements connected to the Black Power movement, "Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power" (2006), Rhonda Y. Williams maintains that the women who participated at the local level identified specific problems and local political leanings which encouraged progress in housing, racial equality, and education, eventually making it possible for organizations and other members to fight for equality (102). In areas such as Baltimore, Maryland, for example, Williams contends that "The black women who did express such a focus [on the recognition of marginalized groups in

politics] recognized the power of race as a factor in Black people's lives alongside gender, economics, and even residency. But they also argued that people – as human beings – deserved the basic necessities of survival to secure better, more fulfilling lives" (102). Telling the stories of two everyday enslaved women contributes to a bottom-up version of history which refuses to exclude the voices of enslaved women who resisted while living as close to "normal" lives as they could. Kevin and Dana are witnesses while in the past. Important to my discussion of Dana and what history records is the fact that while in the past, both Dana and Kevin are writers and observers of the lives of women like Sarah and Carrie. When Kevin and Dana return to the 1970s, they find it difficult to write down their experiences and memories,[31] yet something drives them to put what they have witnessed on paper so that these stories of resistance and survival, these women, are not forgotten.

Quietly enduring and finding ways to maintain dignity becomes an aspect of these women's lives. At one point, Carrie reassures Dana of her Blackness when it becomes difficult for Dana to remember her objective after she does not allow Rufus to die by drowning in a puddle of water while sick. Carrie makes a movement as if wiping dirt off her face and has to take Dana to her husband Nigel for Dana to understand: "'She means it doesn't come off, Dana,' he said quietly. 'The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are'" (Butler 224). Unlike Dana, Carrie experiences the daily realities of living on the plantation, and she endures it all silently, not able to speak or make a sound. Carrie's simple gesture toward Dana's skin color serves as a powerful reminder–it is a sign of solidarity between them. Both women are Black and enslaved (although Dana's situation is very different from Carrie's). Dana

should find strength enough to resist falling into despair about being enslaved while in the nineteenth century and being forced to endure her experiences in the past because other women, like Carrie, also must endure slavery and find ways of resisting with no option or hope of escape. The gesture and its meaning are a reminder of identity and pride, something integral not only to the civil rights and Black Power movements but also to the centuries-long struggle for equality and rights.

Beyond demanding justice and equality, the struggle for civil rights included Black identities–and in the case of women like Carrie, Black *women's* identities–and calls for these women to be recognized and celebrated. Frances M. Beal's essay, "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (1970), a contribution to Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman,* theorizes that Black women are the most oppressed minority group in the US, arguing that they "can be justly described as a 'slave of a slave'" (168). She suggests that each member of society, but especially Black women, have to

> develop a high political consciousness. . . to understand how the System enslaves us all and what actions we must take to bring about its total destruction. Those who consider themselves to be revolutionary must begin to deal with other revolutionaries as equals. And as far as I know, revolutionaries are not determined by sex. (176)

Carrie's action serves as an important reminder to Dana that she *is* Black. That aspect of Dana will not change. The action is an act of solidarity and resistance, much like a Black fist, clenched and raised in the air in defiance. Carrie's action is a symbol of power, one meant to remind Dana that she can bring change to the plantation and to some degree to nineteenth-century thought regarding the humanity and identity of enslaved people, although it might be dangerous to them all.

Women find ways of resisting and surviving. Portraying the everyday ways in which these fictional female characters continued to survive and lead their communities creates an inclusive version of history, one which includes the voices of women and ultimately creates a fuller, truer, and more useful narrative of the civil rights struggle. Including women like Sarah and Carrie reminds us of their presence, placing them alongside other prominent (male) leaders of the movement. Excluding these women means forgetting their existence and doing a disservice to their memory.

The Visuals of *Kindred*: The Graphic Novel and Hulu Series Adaptations

Butler's novel demonstrates the brutality of slavery in connection with the struggle for civil rights, particularly in connection to the men and women who took part in the resistance. By creating such an intense reminder of the American past, Butler generated a novel which came to play an influential role on the American popular mindset. The novel would become the basis for both a graphic novel and a Hulu television series. When thought of as civil rights literature, both the graphic novel and the television series emphasize for viewers the impact of making creative changes to Butler's originating story.

The graphic novel adaptation of *Kindred* (2017) provides visuals which make Butler's original novel all the more gut-wrenching. While creating the graphic novel, Damien Duffy and John Jennings made specific creative decisions which not only help the reader follow the jumps in time period but also help to emphasize the vibrancy of the past. Time and place are immediately highlighted in *Kindred* as being "different" because of the use of color: the slave past, set in Maryland, is very vibrantly colored while the

present, set in Los Angeles, is rendered in dull sepia tones. While speaking on a panel at the Chicago Humanities Festival in 2017, Duffy talks about how their creative processes allowed them to take a unique approach to portraying Butler's time travel:

> Normally when you have flashbacks in comics or movies, TV shows, usually the past is kind of drained of color, monochrome, or like sepia-tone, um, sort of like mimic old printing processes or film. Um, but we wanted to flip it, where the 1970s, which is the present day for the characters, was done in this kind of muted maroon color, and then the past is colored in a very bright vibrant palette. ("Octavia E. Butler's Kindred" 23:20-23:49)

The choice to change colors was intentional, as Duffy states: there is a theme of history, the past, being more vibrant for Dana and Kevin than the present. Duffy recognizes how, for these characters, the past seems more "real," as in "you're in constant danger. Even if you're not, whoever you are, like, if you break a leg, it's not like there's excellent medical care coming around the corner" ("Octavia E. Butler's Kindred" 24:03-24:12). The choice to change colors does indeed suit the needs of Duffy and Jennings, but it is perhaps more important to think of the implications that this color change might have for the modern reader as well. Thinking of the graphic novel as participating in the tradition of civil rights literature enables it to be considered a valuable "verbal artifact" which helps readers to "emplot" any narrative of the struggle for civil rights (Metress 140). The re-publication of Butler's neoslave narrative as a graphic novel emphasizes for the modern reader that the past is a vibrant, living entity which still affects the present. Without overstating the case, it should be argued that the re-publication of Butler's neoslave narrative as a graphic novel, now targeted to a young adult audience, reminds readers of the importance of learning about the nation's past, the "hard history" that shapes what is learned in the classroom and passed down through social memory.

Throughout the graphic novel of *Kindred*, Duffy and Jennings bring visuals to Butler's conversation about the everyday people who took part in the struggle for civil rights. Because of the nature of graphic novels, however, they compressed some of the narrative, meaning that some of the characters do not play as much of a role in Dana's story as they do in the original neoslave narrative. Luke, for example, appears very few times in the graphic novel. When he does appear, though, his expression and thoughts are very telling. As in the original neoslave narrative, Luke seems to be fully aware of his situation as an enslaved man. When he appears in the cookhouse while Dana is familiarizing herself with everyone there, Luke is unhappy, at best. While Dana attempts to make small talk about the food and where she comes from, Luke emphatically states that "[Tom Weylin] don't want no n****rs 'round here talking better than him, putting freedom in our heads. Like we so dumb we need some stranger to make us think about freedom" (*Kindred* 79). In this situation, Luke comes across as angry; he has a scowl on his face and his shoulders are drawn inward, and his tone comes across as pretty clearly sarcastic. During the nineteenth-century, the line of thought expressed by Luke was not uncommon: according to the owners of the enslaved, enslaved people should not think about or even want their freedom because they should be happy with their treatment. And yet, Luke, and later on his son Nigel (146), think about their freedom, or lack thereof, frequently, going so far as to "[follow] the star" to freedom. Luke's presence, in this moment, reminds contemporary readers of only some of the anger that many Black men experienced during the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, Luke also shows restraint in his anger because he does not react violently to his White oppressors. Like many other enslaved men, Luke cannot take action in his anger because he could easily be killed for running

away or acting out of place. While Luke cannot take action, his descendants can, and Duffy and Jennings remind readers of that.

Throughout the *Kindred* graphic novel, Duffy and Jennings amplify the importance of secondary female characters such as Sarah and Carrie. Each of the characters has a very specific physical appearance, ranging from a more gender ambiguous appearance for Dana[32] to what might be considered more traditional clothing for the enslaved people and the Weylins. Sarah, when she is present in the scene, is made central to each frame, with her round face and white head covering. As in the neoslave narrative, Duffy and Jennings distinguish the importance of Sarah as the housekeeper of the Weylin plantation: "Sarah ran the house in Margaret's absence. She spread the work fairly, managed efficiently. . . so of course she was resented by slaves who made every effort to avoid jobs they didn't like" (144). Dana's narration goes on to remind us that in another time period, however, Sarah might have been considered a coward, a "'mammy,'" and "In the militant 60s, she'd be an idea held in contempt" (144). This unflattering image of Sarah, though, clothed in a work dress and apron, is quickly juxtaposed with her being more capable of handling the realities of life in the 1820s than Dana is. By the next panel, Sarah is telling Dana to go help out someone else while she tends to Alice's wounds (144). Duffy and Jennings provide an image that clearly sets up the contrast between Sarah and Dana. While Dana in the 1970s might be considered a progressive woman, potentially a feminist who stands up for herself and others, she is not equipped to live life in the 1820s, as Sarah is. Dana does not have to deal with the bloody realities of slavery while living in the twentieth century but taking care of other people's injuries is part of Sarah's daily life. By reminding readers of the strengths of both

women, Duffy and Jennings show readers how women have been participating in the struggle for civil rights for centuries.

Four years after the graphic novel's release, Hulu premiered a television series based on Butler's novel, *Kindred* (2022). Critics have labeled the series with different adjectives, including "'thrilling' but 'uneven,' 'provocative' yet 'skimpy'" (Andrews-Dyer). The series itself has undergone some major storyline changes, presumably to appeal to a contemporary audience. The series expands on the contemporary storyline, which has been extended into the twenty-first century, something that Mike Hale argues creates an "odd shift in which the most dire threats to Dana and Kevin seem to exist in the present rather than in the violent, disease-ridden slaveholding past" ("Octavia Butler Comes to the Screen"). Kevin (Micah Stock) and Dana (Mallori Johnson) are not married in this adaptation; instead, their relationship is the result of a one-night stand. Additionally, instead of Dana's mother only being mentioned in passing as in the novel, she becomes a major character in the television series. The creative license used by the creators of the show seems jarring for fans of both Butler's original novel and the graphic novel.

While Butler's novel focuses primarily on Dana and Kevin's experiences in the nineteenth century, the television series brings Dana's extended family into the story. Dana's Aunt Niecy (Eisa Davis) and Uncle Alan (Charles Parnell) play an important role in her story. Both characters are representative of people who have worked hard and clearly have expectations that Dana will too, as seen with Uncle Alan quickly questioning her ability to buy a house "without a job" ("Dana" 6:05-6:07). Bringing Dana's extended family into the storyline changes how contemporary viewers might see her. In Butler's

novel, Dana is married to Kevin and otherwise considers herself alienated from her remaining immediate family. When she journeys between time periods, there is very little chance that someone, like her cousin, would come to check on her and would see her obvious visible injuries. By expanding the influence of her remaining family members in the story, as the new series does, contemporary viewers are given more of a sense of how dangerous Dana's time in the nineteenth century could be—should she not return home, there would be someone who would worry about her going missing. Viewers cannot help but wonder, however, if Dana's family would contribute her going missing to time travel, which is highly unlikely, or to the dangers of being Black in America, a significantly more likely response.

Like the novel, the television series emphasizes Dana's agency. While in the nineteenth century, Dana impacts the lives of both the enslaved and the Weylin family because of her knowledge and education. In the novel, Dana quietly teaches Nigel, who is the same age as Rufus, how to read. This eventually includes Carrie as well. The miniseries underscores the importance of Nigel learning to read. At one point, Luke, Nigel's father (Austin Smith), stops what he is doing and implores Dana to teach Nigel to read: "Help make him about as smart as you seem to be" ("Celeste" 42:57-42:59). He has tears in his eyes as he asks. Dana silently nods in response. By calling attention to the lack of education that Nigel has compared to Dana's own abilities to read and write, the creators of the show remind audiences of the vast differences between time periods. Nigel has no access to education because of his status as an enslaved person while Dana, a woman in the twenty-first-century, has few limitations on her access to education.

The television series attempts to retell *Kindred* for a modern audience, focusing on the interactions between White and Black people as a way to demonstrate change or the lack thereof. It is almost unavoidable for the contemporary viewer to not recall instances of publicized police brutality and contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, particularly as they watch police demand entry into Dana's house—even going so far as to break down her front door—and walk through her home without invitation. This scene is intercut with Dana's privileged, White neighbors, "howling caricatures of white paranoia and privilege" (Hale), who are standing outside of Dana's house and telling Kevin's worried older sister that "one of their associates is very violent and there may or may not be drugs involved" ("Alice" 23:54-23:59), making clear assumptions about what is going on in Dana's home. Throughout the series, Dana's neighbors have observed Dana's house from afar, never fully getting to know her or what she is experiencing; they simply judge from the outside or from behind the curtained windows of their home. Portraying the White neighbors in this manner, as nosy and intrusive people, solidifies for the viewer just how much has not changed for Black Americans in the US, even almost sixty years after what we consider the end of the civil rights movement.

Conclusion

Like other civil rights literature, *Kindred* is a warning and a reminder–Butler advises readers, particularly those of the 1970s when the book was first published, to look to the past to understand the present. *Kindred* is fascinating based on its general premise—a Black American woman traveling through time, meeting, living with, and working alongside her ancestors only to be pulled back to her present each time. At the same time,

however, the premise is alarming because it reminds readers of just how little has changed for Black Americans, even after the end landmark legislation and court decisions in the mid-twentieth century ending Jim Crow and guaranteeing civil rights. Butler's neoslave narrative, the graphic novel, and the television series each present opportunities to confront hard history and reflect on how we remember and understand the civil rights movement.

Conclusion: Stories and History: The Continued Cognitive Hold of Civil Rights Literature

During the first episode of the recently released Hulu series based on *The 1619 Project*, Nikole Hannah-Jones's voice is heard while images of protests from the canonical civil rights movement and the more recent Black Lives Matter movement flash on screen. Hannah-Jones emphasizes for her viewers just how integral the role of Black Americans has been to socio-political progress across the course of centuries: "Black American freedom struggles have laid the foundation for every other modern rights struggle" ("Democracy" 49:19-49:26). She goes on to assert that "the very people who were never supposed to be a part of our democracy have played the most pivotal role in creating it" (59:00-59:07). Going as far back as the early twentieth century, protests surrounding race have shaped the progression of women's rights and gender equality, including marriage equality. By highlighting how important the role of the struggle for civil rights is, Hannah-Jones asks her audience to reconsider what they know about American history. This foundational movement is no longer its own, separate entity, but the backbone of progress made over the course of centuries.

This project has examined how neoslave narratives such as Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* challenge the consensus single-story narrative of the civil rights movement. When read as civil rights literature, these texts prompt us to think of the civil rights struggle as having deep roots in a slave past and extending well beyond 1965. The fact that each of these texts has been adapted multiple times, suggests that with each adaptation, these stories expand their presence in the American popular consciousness. These stories maintain a

deep cognitive hold on their audience by insisting that these stories be reflected on and reintroduced to American society in different ways, particularly though pop culture avenues such as made-for-television movies, miniseries, and graphic novels. Each time these stories are revisited and rewritten, they reshape how Americans perceive of the civil rights movement.

One example of how the field might continue to grow is the active efforts to recover the stories of various participants in the civil rights movement. The National Public Radio (NPR) podcast, *Fresh Air*, featured an episode about the work being conducted by Margaret Burnham, a law professor at Northeastern University. Her work, *By Hands Now Known: Jim Crow's Legal Executioners* (2022), recovers the stories of Black Americans killed during the Jim Crow era, their deaths left uninvestigated and not remembered outside of their immediate families. During the conversation, Burnham addresses the avoidance of talking about these murders in Black communities and the fact that many Black American families moved after family members were killed, contributing to the number of Black people who moved north during the Great Migration. She points out that the deaths of Black people at the hands of White supremacists and the population shift of the Great Migration are "interrelated, interconnected phenomena" which shows "the development of African American communities in the North as connected with their roots in the South, and the affect and relationship between migration and violence" ("Law Professor Unearths"). In the conversation, Burnham highlights the importance of looking beyond the stories that we frequently tell, looking to the example of the racial structure of southern buses predating Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956). According to Burnham's research, women and men faced violence

from armed bus drivers throughout the Jim Crow era. Yet, Black women would "form a collectivity there" and resist in nonviolent ways, such as talking about the White riders while sitting in the back of the bus or by "sassing" or "cursing" the bus driver, which Burnham found out through an examination of the Negro Transportation File from the National Archives ("Law Professor Unearths"). All of this happened long before Rosa Parks made headlines for taking a stand. The point here is that Burnham's work demonstrates that there are gaps in the stories that we tell. The stories that have a strong cognitive hold on us, like the stories that we tell about Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat or Martin Luther King Jr.'s speaking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C, are not always complete. They are frequently the ones that make their way into our memories, lives, and politics. As a way of responding to these incomplete stories, this dissertation has shown how the stories that we tell frequently exclude thinking of the struggle for civil rights as a centuries- long struggle. When the struggle for civil rights is considered a "battle" which is ongoing, it is possible to draw a throughline across centuries, from as early as 1619 to the present day.

Furthermore, works like this dissertation and Burnham's book demonstrate a concern for what Dowd-Hall considers the "political uses of the past." Burnham's book, for example, demonstrates how Jim Crow legislation supported the exclusion of Black Americans from certain spaces. This same tradition of utilizing political legislation to support contemporary alterations or abolishment of prior legislation continues today, as seen with *Shelby vs. Holder* (2013), which ruled that parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were unconstitutional ("The Shelby County Decision"). By declaring these parts of the Act as unconstitutional, the Supreme Court declared that discrimination based on skin

color no longer occurs in the US, particularly in places where discrimination was commonplace, such as in Alabama. Even though this is a very progressive stance for American politics to take, suggesting that there is no more discrimination has monumental implications. Accepting the assertion that there is no more racism in the US, it is the intent of this dissertation and other projects like *The 1619 Project* or the SPLC to expose audiences to other versions of history that should be remembered, as bottom-up histories do. When we turn to literature like the neoslave narratives considered in this dissertation to further understand history, we can see that more people (both men *and* women) participated in the struggle for civil rights, nationwide, and for *centuries*.

When we think about where the field of civil rights literature might go from here, it seems apparent that the field will have to consider other ways in which literature helps to demythologize the civil rights movement and its progress into the twenty-first century in order to continue working for a fuller, truer narrative. The field could expand through the inclusion of other genres which were not included in Armstrong's *Cambridge Companion*, as has been suggested in this study by reading neoslave narrative as civil rights literature. The field could also expand through an examination of how specific contemporary authors demythologize the movement, such as the work of Colson Whitehead. As Armstrong suggests in her Introduction, Americans still face a civil rights crisis, with the question of equality always changing, especially when viewed "through the prisms of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other intersecting subjectivities" (Armstrong 4). It seems inevitable that scholars will have to consider how civil rights are changing and challenged over time, particularly as those changes are reflected in literature.

The first enslaved people who arrived in what would become the US in 1619 probably could not have imagined all that their descendants would be able to achieve over the following four hundred years. When forcibly brought to the shores of what would become US, these first enslaved people knew only that they faced violence and atrocity, never knowing that the struggle for freedom and equality would continue for generations, their stories becoming the impetus for something greater.

NOTES

[1] I use the word "canonical" here and throughout my study intentionally. In other places throughout this study, I also refer to the "classical" civil rights movement. Both forms of wording refer to the period of time that is traditionally taught in the American school system as the Civil Rights Era, taking place from 1954 to 1965. "Canonical" or "classical" can also refer to events that have been popularized in American memory, such as the March on Washington, and specific leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr.

[2] In general, one aspect to consider of the civil rights movement is how students and young members of political activism groups sought to make Black histories more accessible. Groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized Freedom Rides, frequently working closely with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to achieve their goals. By the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s, however, the idea of nonviolence as a philosophy was, according to Tracye A. Matthews, "becoming obsolete" (230). Young people, such as Stokely Carmichael, would prefer to act, becoming frustrated with the "limitations of hard-won legislation, especially its failure to ensure economic gains and tackle seemingly intractable forms of southern and northern forms of racism" (Matthews 230). Students in universities demanded learning about their own histories, and as Lisa Yaszek observes, "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" (1054). Students and the New Left wanted history made from the bottom up, which would mean

privileging voices and histories that had previously been excluded, such as slave narratives (Rushdy 4; "The Importance of the Slave Narrative Collection"). After the publication of John Blassingame's *The Slave Plantation: Life in the Antebellum South* (1972), which began the process of recovering the narratives of enslaved people, albeit mostly of men, new slave voices were given narrative authority, complicating our understanding of history. The stories of enslaved people gained prominence as Black American-specific history and literature classes became popular on college and university campuses. Slave narratives were brought back into prominence with edited editions such as the decades long work completed by Jean Fagan Yellin. In 1987, Yellin recovered Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, establishing its legitimacy after Blassingame had declared it fiction (McCaskill 456).

While prominent civil rights leaders of the 1950s and early 1960s largely advocated for nonviolence to make change, in reality, groups used various combinations of methods. Many civil rights groups, such as the CORE, SNCC, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), collaborated to achieve access to education, voting, and public accommodations and spaces amidst the resurgence of White supremacy groups, primarily the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). During the classic 1954-1965 phase of the civil rights movement, armed resistance also took place. The Deacons for Defense and Justice (DODJ) protected areas of Louisiana beginning in 1964 (Wendt 146); the Tuscaloosa Citizens for Action Committee (TCAC), formed in 1964, worked for the protection of its Black citizens in both the city of Tuscaloosa and outlying rural areas (150). Groups such as the DODJ, according to Simon Wendt, helped to "enhance [the nonviolent strategy's] effectiveness at the local level" (158). Other

southern communities also developed their own methods of protection, relying at times on sounding specific patterns on car horns to pass through neighborhoods without harm. Importantly, Wendt notes that women also played an important role in the protection of their homes from the KKK, with women across Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana sleeping with guns and axes (156). Each of these groups, relying on various means of resistance, worked in tandem with nonviolent protests and demonstrations. Nonviolent direct action, although embraced by popularized movement civil rights leaders, like King,[2] was often used to provoke a response, creating at times a cause and effect like relationship. Historians like Wendt demonstrate an awareness that the viewpoint of Butler's classmate, and other people like him, was inaccurate. Instead of viewing the relationship between the civil rights movement and BPM as one methodology (nonviolence) replacing another (violence), the movement as a whole, as a struggle for civil rights, spanning centuries used a variety of methods and strategies to push America towards making change

[3] Frequently, enslaved Black Americans were not able to write down their own stories for themselves, so they told their stories to abolitionists, amanuensis, and/or friends so that their stories could be published, often as abolitionist propaganda (Smith, Andrews, Olney).

[4] See Delmont *Making Roots* for a close analysis of the relationship between Alex Haley and Malcolm X while they worked on Malcolm's autobiography.

[5] See scholars like Barry Beckman for further discussion of Gaines' awareness of the southern Black experience with particular regard to the oral tradition of the South.

[6] It should be recognized that Frederick Douglass was not murdered. Other popularized civil rights leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968), Malcolm X (1965), and Medgar Evers (1963) were all assassinated. Ned is a composite of all these men.

[7] Jimmy's nickname is given to him by the community. Upon his return on "Termination Sunday," it becomes obvious that Jimmy has changed once he attends church with those he grew up with. The elders in the quarter assigned him the messianic title of "The One" (Gaines 211) because, as Gaines through Miss Jane warns, "'People's always looking for somebody to come lead them. Go to the Old Testament; go to the New. They did it in slavery; after the war they did it; they did it in the hard times that people want call Reconstruction; they did it in the Depression–another hard times; and they doing it now'" (211).

[8] Ned's biological mother, Big Laura, is murdered during a raid by White patrollers after the end of the Civil War. Even though he might not consciously realize it, Big Laura is one of Ned's first models of leadership—she protects Jane from being beaten and raped by a man who is a part of their group traveling north. Big Laura soon dies while protecting herself and her infant. At the time, Ned is hiding with Jane in nearby bushes (Gaines 21-25). Big Laura carries with her a flint and iron, which enables her to start a fire at each nightly stop; these stones are passed on by Jane to Ned after Laura's death (24-25).

[9] In 1955, the Scarboro community in nearby Oak Ridge, Tennessee, integrated Oak Ridge High School and Robertsville Junior High, a year before Clinton High School in Clinton, Tennessee integrated. Eighty-five students were bused to both schools. None of

the students experienced violence as seen in other early instances of integration (Thomas, Simms, and Winnett).

[10] The reference to the "little children" could also refer to the four Black girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing in September of 1963, although this would also be a slightly anachronistic reference as Miss Jane, for the purposes of Gaines's novel, is telling her story in 1962.

[11] The character of John Brown helps to situate the novel within an abolitionist approach to the freedom struggle. John Brown, the historical figure, led a rebellion on Harper's Ferry, Virginia in 1859, sparking fear of slave rebellions among southerners as Nat Turner's insurrection had twenty-eight years earlier, and concerns about an approaching divisive war from northerners (Bordewich). Brown's insurrection had one important goal—to give freedom to enslaved people, firmly situating Brown within an abolitionist tradition. Unlike Frederick Douglass, who preferred rhetorical argument, Gaines's reference to Brown firmly cements Miss Jane's story in a more radical abolitionist movement.

[12] Brown's assumption that he can change her name provides a couple of additional insights into their relationship worth considering as well: He assumes that he has the authority to change her name without prompting because the name automatically has an association for him with slavery (without asking her if she's fine with him giving her a new name). There is also the association of his wife or significant other with the name "Jane" which suggests that he views Jane in a patriarchal and possibly sexual manner. Being an African American female meant during the era of slavery meant often being t viewed as sexual object). This name change, although ripe with its own contentious

meanings, also demonstrates Gaines replicating some of the rhetorical moves made by slave narrative authors. According to the individual studies conducted by Olney, Foster, and Andrews, in a nineteenth-century narrative, it was common to find that a slave narrator would take on the last name of a benefactor they encounter once they arrive in the North.

[13] Another way of thinking of the location of the movement as continually in flux, continually moving outside of the borders of the geographic South, particularly as Black Americans began to migrate off their former plantations, when possible. Gaines makes civil rights harder by never allowing Miss Jane to leave the South. Jane continually insists that she needs to continue to the North. Her movement throughout the state of Louisiana is circular, with her eventually "returning her to where she began, the plantations of Louisiana, and her circuitous movement back to her origins dramatizes Gaines's concept of freedom and progress" (Babb 85). Jane highlights the movement that came with the freedom struggle post-Civil War, particularly as suggested by the hunter she and young Ned encounter in the woods. The hunter tells her that she is not the only person on the move. In response to her question about whether any of the former slaves he encountered were going to Ohio, he tells her that "'They was going everywhere… Some say Ohio, some say Kansas – some say Canada. Some even said Luzana and Mi'sippi'" (Gaines 46). Migration north or west was common after the end of the Civil War, as former slaves looked for work and began to settle down in communities where they could, hopefully, create their own values, laws, and communal goals (Hahn 334). The concept of migration and emigration seemed like feasible ways to establish racial and cultural identity, continuing to escape the persecution that formers slaves faced while

remaining in the South. The fictional Jane Pittman represents just one of the thousands of former slaves traveling around the country in this era, embodying a sense of hopefulness that migration or emigration would allow the formerly enslaved a new sense of their own identities and their place in America. While embodying this hopefulness, Miss Jane's story also tells the tragedy of other Black Americans, those who returned to the South looking for lost or sold family while also telling the story of those who were not able to migrate out of the South after slavery's official end.

[14] Cicely Tyson's career further grew because of her insistance on participating in the production of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.* Many reviews of the film focused on Tyson's acting, which "was also the result of the film's use of a single heroine across a century to suggest what mattered to black history" (Feldstein 161). The film also "reinforced [Tyson's] reputation as an international celebrity who had the authority to represent a certain type of black woman from the past in a certain type of way" (160).

[15] Giovanni's review of the film is a response to a negative review written by Stephanie Harrington, who openly admitted to failing to read the novel before watching the television film as well as not fully paying attention to the film. See Harrington for her full review of the film.

[16] Pauline Kael's review for *The New Yorker* finds that the film emphasizes "a sense of moral complexity–of a redressing of the balance, of justice at work within the mythology of popular culture" ("Cicely Tyson Goes to the Fountain" 263). Kael also states that it is "through knowing Jane Pittman [that] you feel closer to a recognition of black experience in this country; at an ironic level Jane's story is the story of how it takes a hundred and ten years to make an activist out of an ordinary black woman" (264). Kael's commentary

on the film lends itself to a certain perspective of Black experience—the "irony" of how long it takes to make one Black woman an activist is not an irony: it's a sad reality. Kael's comment suggests an underlying resistance to understanding the purpose of Miss Jane's story. It does not take a century to make an activist, but it does take a century to detail the memories and experiences of a woman like Miss Jane, a woman whose story is well-worth listening to.

[17] One such show is Henry Louis Gates's *Finding Your Roots*, which helps Black and White American celebrities trace their family histories ("About the Series").

[18] Although the 15th Amendment in 1870 gave Black Americans the right to vote, the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 helped guarantee these rights, and yet legislation still targeted Black Americans. Government officials received *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* also known as The Moynihan Report in 1965. Ironically, the document leaked to the public on the one-year anniversary of the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 (Greenbaum 3). Written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan for both President Lyndon B. Johnson and the Department of Labor, the report linked parenthood in Black American families to crime. Moynihan's central, enduring, and infamous contribution to the discussion about race and racism essentially blamed Black people and their "family structure" for inequality: "The evidence – not final, but powerfully persuasive – is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for the vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated" (Moynihan 3). While the government seemed to be making strides to address inequality with the creation of programs such as

Head Start, Medicaid, and Medicare (Greenbaum 2), Moynihan offered a different and audacious interpretation–because African American families rely on a matriarchal structure to raise children, men raised in a matriarchal household are ill-suited to become workers. Moynihan could not statistically prove this, and he admitted as much. Instead, he mentioned that "During the early years of the 1960s, black male unemployment declined and welfare enrollment by black women increased" (Greenbaum 4). The Moynihan report perpetuated stereotypes of Black American family life, one which linked slavery to the supposed instability of stable Black American families in the 1970s.

[19] The specific name the griot Haley consulted varies across sources. Norell refers to "Kebba Kanga Foana, griot of the Kinte clan" (112) while Delmont refers to Kebba Foana Kinte (*Making Roots* 49).

[20] Before *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974) premiered on television, Cicely Tyson brought to life the role of Rebecca in the 1972 adaptation of *Sounder,* which eventually gained her an Oscar nomination (Tyson 315-23).

[21] Details of Haley's plagiarism case can be found in Norrell (183-98).

[22] Genre also became an important part of the conversation around *Roots*. Critics questioned the labels surrounding the novel, notably Haley's use of the term "faction," or a "mixture of fact and fiction" (Delmont *Making Roots* 58), or, as explained by Haley, "a novelized amalgam" (885). Moore also discusses the lack of scholarship on *Roots,* stating that

> whatever the theoretical troubles one may have distinguishing between fiction and fact, and whatever one thinks of the made-ness of any history, one may at least concede that Haley's 'amalgam' made it then, and keeps it still disciplinarily impossible for historians to accept *Roots* as History; and that they will wait until

> some future point, when the history of the American 1970s is written, to read *Roots* not as a history proper, but as a historically symptomatic text. (7)

According to Moore, the complication of fact versus fiction in Haley's novel is more a response to the historical context in which Haley wrote the novel than anything else. As Nikki Giovanni states in her review of the made-for-television film of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974), the film brought "the realities of the sixties" to the television screen, asking audiences to reconsider how they think about Black history (D17), this time through the eyes of a one hundred-ten-year-old woman. In much the same way, Moore claims that *Roots* is a "historically symptomatic text," meaning that the novel and both miniseries encourage both Black and White audiences to (re)engage with Black history.

The television series makes matters even more complicated, as Delmont points out, because producers at ABC claimed that "the production was based on a true story while billing the series as an 'ABC novel for television'" (Delmont "Why America Forgot Roots"). ABC continued to perpetuate confusion by labeling it a "'novel for television'" as well as docudrama, which allowed "blending fact and fiction into a soap opera package" (King 72). Admittedly, the blurring of genre surrounding *Roots* leads to confusing and misleading expectations surrounding the text and miniseries. While those who encounter the novel and adaptations may want to pin it down, the inability to easily categorize either novel or both miniseries suggests an undeniable fact—history is faction, no matter who writes it.

[23] Although not the focus of this chapter, I would like to acknowledge the women in Haley's novel. Frequently, these women are excluded from scholarship on the neoslave

narrative. Even though they are not commonly acknowledged, it cannot be denied that they are present in the novel because they have to be there—everyday life could not and would not go on without them. When thought of as civil rights literature, *Roots* prompts us to question methods of leadership which privilege males as well as the idea of the messianic figure. Each of the everyday women of Haley's novel—Bell, Kizzy, Matilda, and Georgia—all lead by example, taking risks and promoting the general welfare of the family. These women remain a constant background presence for each of Haley's main male protagonists, suggesting that these women and their bravery are leaders to be remembered as we work for Dowd-Hall's "more progressive, more robust, and *truer* story."

[24] Throughout his life, Haley had money problems, frequently asking for advances from publishers (see Delmont). Additionally, upon his death, family members blamed the stress of debts, "'financial abusers,'" and a hectic public speaking schedule for Haley's heart attack. To settle remaining debts, most of his materials, notes, and manuscripts were auctioned off (Harrison).

[25] During an interview in 2016, Gossett Jr. discussed the famous scene and how it affected him emotionally after Vic Morrow (who played Ames the overseer) apologized to both Levar Burton and Gossett Jr. before filming. Gossett went on the explain: "'All of a sudden, he [Morrow] did this part so fluently. And me as Fiddler, I'm looking at LeVar, who is my new friend, and I also looked at Kunta Kinte, and all of a sudden it morphed back and forth, from LeVar to Kunta Kinte. . . . All of a sudden it was the realest thing. I knew that whip was made of felt, but I got very emotional'" (Dockterman). Gossett Jr. continues by explaining his famous improvised line: "'For some emotional reason, I

looked up at Vic, and I looked up at the whole scene, and I said, "There's gonna be another day. You hear me? There's gonna be another day". . . . Alex [Haley] was on the set, and he said, "It was very prophetic and I wish that I had written it that way"""" (Dockterman).

[26] The 2016 remake of *Roots* offers a more nuanced and detailed version of Juffure. From the very opening of the 2016 remake, the CGI reconstructed village of Juffure appears partially stripped of the Edenic image that Haley created in his neoslave narrative and which was shown in the 1977 adaptation. The 2016 remake resituates the village and the role that it played in the slave trade, providing a brief image that slaves had in the Mandinka village before the influx of Europeans. Haley's voice continues to narrate this history, emphasizing the changes that happened to the slave trade once Europeans arrived: "Some Mandinka were corrupted by European guns and gold, creating a violent market for slaves. But the many Africans who fought European plundering suffered brutal reprisals" ("Night One" 00:01:40-00:01:51). As Haley's voice narrates, the camera follows a ship transporting slaves and several men on horseback following the boat alongside the river. Slaves are first observed by Omoro Kinte (Babs Olusanmokun) and later on by Kunta Kinte (Malachai Kirby). Making both Omoro and Kunta witness to the slavery going on around the village and along the river highlights the importance of violence to the adaptation's message, reminding audiences, as the neoslave narrative does, that slavery was not uniquely located in the colonial American South. Rather than leaving the village as an idyllic location unmarked by slavery, the Juffure of the 2016 remake becomes rich, vibrant, bustling city with various nefarious individuals, such as the Koro family slave traders.

[27] Besides being part of the overall point of this dissertation to discuss how the civil rights movement took place outside of the American South long before and after the 1950s and 1960s, Jacquelyn Dowd-Hall points out that various pieces of legislation throughout the country prevented African Americans from living in acceptable housing (1242-43). Los Angeles, the center of the Watts Riot, passed legislation to prevent desegregation and rezoning of schools as well as housing legislation which spurred African American frustration anger and frustration leading to the Watts Riot. See Theoharis "Alabama on Avalon" for a detailed discussion.

[28] When Dana travels to the past, she ends up at the Weylin plantation. She eventually finds out that this plantation will be owned by her great-great-great grandfather, Rufus Weylin, the accident-prone little boy she saves from drowning on her first trip into the past. The plantation is located in Maryland, which in 1815 is still a slave state (Butler 26-27). Similar to Haley's *Roots*, providing a secondary location for the past generations of Dana's family demonstrates that family history, like "American history," is complicated and not always what it seems. Indeed, her time travel cements slavery as a throughline—while in the past, Dana must deal with being both Black and a woman in the nineteenth-century as well as the effects of her ancestors owning enslaved people. In Dana's present, she still must deal with the contemporary consequences and ramifications—both physical and emotional—of slavery. While those wounds heal over time, Dana still has to navigate what her family's participation in slavery means for her. When Rufus first tells Dana that she is in Maryland, she is hopeful, not because she knows where she is but because she thinks that she is still in her present of 1976 and will be able to get in contact with her remaining family living in Maryland since "I had relatives in Maryland–people who

would help me if I needed them, and if I could reach them" (27). But, once Rufus tells her the date, Dana's reaction becomes more complicated: Dana's family legally owned slaves, which Dana was not even aware of until her time traveling begins (28). Suddenly, Dana has to navigate what her family's participation in the institution of slavery means for her, both in her current (precarious) present of the 1800s and when she returns to her "real" (relatively free but still precarious) present of 1976.

[29] See Frances Smith Foster's preface, "In Respect to Females. . .": Differences in the Portrayals of Women by Male and Female Authors" for an in-depth discussion of the portrayals of women in Black American literature.

[30] Butler pays particular attention to time periods as she challenges the way we typically think of the freedom struggle and mid-century phase of the civil rights movement. *Kindred* immediately provides a time marker, telling the reader that Dana's time traveling has been happening for over a month, since her birthday on June 9, 1976 (Butler *Kindred* 12), with her final trip to the nineteenth-century ending on July 4, 1976. Butler extends the movement through the early nineteenth-century and up to the influential year of 1976, the bicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, an action which guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to only certain parties, notably White men. The choice of end date seems intentional, challenging the idea that the struggle ended with King's death in 1968 while reminding readers of the larger context for the freedom struggle with roots in our nation's founding documents. Additionally, the choice to change the date to 1976 underscores not only the irony of the American bicentennial but allows her the distance between the beginnings of and the height of the Black Power Movement. As civil rights activist, politician, and educator

Mary McLeod Bethune states in her speech entitled, "Open Doors," given in 1936 to tactfully address White audiences utilizing the metaphor of open and closed doors for Black American citizens,

> Theoretically, to be an American citizen implies that every American citizen shall have life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness without anyone else's let [permission] or hindrance. Yet, these rules do not apply equally to the Negro as [they do] to the white man. There are many doors that are shut against the Negro, but all of these are not barred. They may be opened with tact, skill, and persistence. (16)

Centering her novel around July 4th, decades after Bethune's speech, Butler highlights the fact that while many people like Bethune had been working for the rights of African American for decades, not much has changed. Butler's *Kindred* attempts to open doors by making the connection to a larger context of the freedom struggle while also centering on challenges of the 1960s and 1970s.

[31] The graphic novel version of *Kindred* further emphasizes the violence of the early nineteenth century. Dana is often subjected to the same violence as other enslaved people. The neoslave narrative of *Kindred* provides a specific image of Dana's previous interactions with violence. She makes the comment that she is not used to seeing violence firsthand: "I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs 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" (Butler 36). In the graphic novel, the violence becomes that much more visceral, accompanied by images of a Black man's naked body tied to a tree, tears streaming down his face (*Kindred* 43). It is likely that every twentieth and twenty-first century reader can imagine a scene that they have seen on television that evokes a specific memory of violence described in that moment, such

as the scene of Kunta Kinte's whipping for refusing to say his slave name in the 1977 version of *Roots*. But, accompanying Butler's words with specific images like the ones in the graphic novel evokes a more visceral, painful reaction that is unescapable, unless the reader chooses to avoid confronting history by closing the book. Butler mentioned in interviews that she toned down the violence that she portrayed in *Kindred* (Kenan); the graphic novel reminds readers of that.

[32] While creating their graphic novel version of *Kindred*, Jennings and Duffy made specific choices about the appearance of Dana: while they were originally going to go a hyper-realistic route with their drawings, they ended up changing their style slightly, which allowed them to also "crib" some of Butler's personal appearance to create Dana's image. As Jennings notes, there is a degree of gender ambiguity because "in the book, she gets mistaken as, to be a man, um, quite often, so instead of thinking about how in Octavia Butler's work sometimes she does push back against this kind of gender norm and, like, presentation" ("Octavia E. Butler's Kindred" 12:49-13:12).

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