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## The memory of mythmaking: Transgenerational trauma and disability as a collective experience in Afrofuturist storytelling

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The Memory of Mythmaking: Transgenerational Trauma and Disability as a Collective

Experience in Afrofuturist Storytelling

by

Jessica Tapley

Thesis

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Thesis Committee:

Christine Neufeld, Ph.D., Chair

Robin Lucy, Ph.D.

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This project deals with heavy topics and traumatic histories. I often discuss personal and collective traumas, racism, ableism, sexual assault, violence, and the legacy of slavery. I hope I have approached these topics with the care, respect, and empathy they deserve.

## Abstract

This project closely examines the relationship between transgenerational trauma, disability, and myth, particularly within Black speculative fiction, Afrofuturism, and Africanfuturism. Through the lenses of critical race theory, trauma theory, disability studies, and feminist theory, I will closely analyze how myth functions across five Black speculative fiction novels. I argue that disability appears as a common thread throughout each of these novels as a unique part of Black history and experience. Disability culture specifically offers community interdependence, a rejection of body and mind binaries, and a rejection of hierarchies in the pursuit of accessibility. I further demonstrate how myth centers racial and disability justice, as myth contains both cultural memory and serves as a communal storytelling experience.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Flying Africans in Space: Flight and Found Family in Afrofuturist Literature.....	12
Chapter 2: Haunted (Re)memory: The Influence of Trauma on Time and Place.....	31
Chapter 3: Mythmaking, Mermaids, and the Middle Passage: Intersectionality and Collective Experience.....	52
Bibliography.....	75

## Introduction

Science fiction and fantasy are important in imagining social justice. The creation of stories in these genres often includes diverse cultures and beliefs, complex technology, historical nuances, and mythology. In addition, these stories require creativity to build worlds and imagine technology. Fantasy often builds worlds that can represent cultures in ways that are imaginative and inclusive. Science fiction can allow a radically optimistic version of the future, especially when we think of technology that can improve people's quality of life and make a more accessible world.

However, one of the challenges in writing an accessible future is that even the most idealized society will never be free from the marginalizing power structures which have shaped it. Creating a story which imagines an ideal future while ignoring the historical contexts of marginalization erases the experiences of (dis)abled and racialized people. Therefore, I am interested in speculative fiction as a space which gives voice to marginalized people. Ytasha L. Womack explores speculative fiction in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, explaining how speculative fiction writers use the genre "to spur social change, to reexamine race, and to explore self-expression for people of color...The black visionaries of the past who sought to alleviate the debilitating system and end the racial divide used these genres as devices to articulate their issues and visions" (124).

Speculative fiction is a broad term which encompasses multiple genres including science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and horror. I would add that speculative fiction does not necessarily have to be any one of these genres, but can combine several of these. Most importantly, speculative fiction is a form of creative literary fiction that often imagines historical or futuristic worlds. Speculative fiction can allow a space for not only imagining, but practicing

and creating a more accessible future, especially when speculative fiction is connected to myth, as an experience of communal storytelling. In this project, I will be using the term speculative fiction because it imagines the future while considering both actual histories and alternative histories. Speculative fiction also parallels Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery, which portrays positive depictions of African diasporic people, speculating what could have been without colonization or enslavement. This is an important and revolutionary concept to show that Black people, despite marginalization, belong in the future. Speculating and revisiting Black history outside of trauma is a radically hopeful concept. In her book, Womack gives an overview of the history of Afrofuturism, showcasing those who started or continued various Afrofuturist art, music, comics, and literature. Afrofuturism encompasses a variety of mediums and genres. I am interested in how myth participates in this endeavor, how it can be a way to connect people to the past, and how it can be used to either tell a new story, or to tell the same story in a new context.

Speculative fiction is a genre which often deals with supernatural and metaphysical elements while simultaneously offering social critique and an exploration of culture and belief. I am particularly interested in the intersection of speculative fiction and Afrofuturism, where speculative fiction can demythologize African diasporic stories and beliefs, often appropriated and compromised under Western contexts. I am interested in Afrofuturist speculative fiction specifically because this is a unique space where myth, spirituality, culture, and science fiction themes can coexist: Flying Africans and spaceships, mythic memory, orishas, communication with ancestors, and time travel. In this project, I will look at several Afrofuturist speculative fiction texts through the lens of feminist theory, critical race theory, trauma theory, and disability studies. In *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger*

*Games*, Ebony Elizabeth Thomas explains how to address the challenges of creating an accessible future. She does this by illustrating the parallels between academia and what she refers to as fandom. She explains:

Analysis of race in speculative fiction should include counterstories that narrate stories from the perspectives of readers, writers, fans, and audiences who are racialized. It is my hope that this counterstorying approach... might serve as a launching pad for further empirical work in reading and literacy of education, as well as illuminate the participatory experiences of people of color as they interact with media of all kinds and engage in the myriad social communities of the digital age. (11-12)

As Thomas engages with fan culture around speculative fiction, I am interested in how myth is also participatory and how retellings engage critically in a similar way. Particularly, myth is a space for social justice. I will specifically be looking at the way myth influences African-American literary canon and Afrofuturist literature. This project is particularly interested in myth as a form of community storytelling, and the ways spiritualities, histories, and stories have evolved and shape shifted.

My reference to demythologizing African spirituality is not to say that myth is not active in the ways African spirituality and culture has presented itself throughout the African diaspora. Myth is crucial in understanding the relationship between African spirituality, history, and storytelling. In each of my chapters, I will be defining and examining myth as a transformation across time and in different contexts and through various genres.

*Midnight Robber* by Nalo Hopkinson is an Afro-Caribbean speculative fiction novel which uses myth to recount the journey of the slave trade and the degradation of the Black body. As a work of Afrofuturist speculative fiction, *Midnight Robber* engages with Afro-Caribbean



history involving the colonization of the Caribbean, the abduction of the main character Tan-Tan by her father when he is deported, and the folkloric elements which survive all of this. I look at the ways Afro-Caribbean myth and cultural stories sustain Tan-Tan, who is traumatized by patriarchal colonialism after she is abducted, displaced, and sexually assaulted. To cope with this, Tan-Tan adopts an identity, inspired by the Robber King, a figure from Trinidad Carnival, who confidently tells ancestral stories. Her identity is named the Midnight Robber, a feminist spin on the Robber King, as her adaptation of this character allows her to use myth in a way that aids her community. In addition to using folkloric elements, Hopkinson uses technology to weave myth throughout the novel, and in a way which is culturally relevant to Afro-Caribbean history; this is a classic example of Afrofuturism. Hopkinson's use of technology is similar to ancestor worship because it is the technology that connects the characters to cultural stories.

*Binti* by Nnedi Okorafor also emphasizes the need to sustain a cultural tradition while moving into the future. The novel features a protagonist, Binti, whose culture Okorafor models on the Himba tribe of northern Namibia. Her journey to Oomza University, which is on a distant planet, presents a coming of age story which explores how one can stay true to one's cultural identity while embracing the opportunities of cross-cultural contact. Whereas I discussed Afrofuturism earlier, Okorafor's novel is important as it is an example of what she herself calls Africanfuturism. She came up with this term in order to explain how Africanfuturism is different from Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism looks at the future through the African diaspora, and often speculates what a future might look like if Black people were not colonized and enslaved. Africanfuturism, on the other hand, specifically looks at the future and centers Africa and specific African cultures first and foremost. As a young Himba girl who emphasizes that much of

her identity is tied to her land, she navigates how to carry her identity into space, and into the future.

I also examine Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, an important novel both as a work of 20th century African-American literature and speculative fiction. As a work of speculative fiction, *Beloved* is a ghost story representing collective and personal histories. The novel is based on the real life story of Margaret Garner, who escaped from slavery into Ohio but was later apprehended after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed. Garner was found to have killed her child to protect them from experiencing slavery. Morrison tells Garner's story through her character, Sethe, who also kills her infant, who then manifests as a violent spirit, Beloved. Beloved is more than just the ghost of Sethe's child though; she represents the personal traumas of characters within the novel, and of the collective traumatic experience of slavery and the Middle Passage. As this novel examines personal, familial, and collective histories, Morrison shows how trauma can be passed generationally. She also shows that there are memories which cannot be healed from or forgotten in the pursuit of community or racial justice, but that communities can share the burden of remembering.

Another novel I discuss, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, is also a speculative fiction novel which explores family history. As a work of speculative fiction which deals involves time travel, the novel rejects the idea that the legacy of American slavery is over. The main character, Dana, lives in California in 1976. However, she finds herself transported to 19th century Maryland, the home of her enslaved ancestors in the 19th century. Dana learns that her travels back to this time and place are to save the life of her white ancestor, Rufus, and therefore, her own ancestry. This novel explores the trauma her ancestor, Alice, endured at the hands of Rufus. Like *Beloved*, the speculative elements illustrate transgenerational trauma. Dana is forced to witness her traumatic

ancestry, but the novel also addresses how Dana's life parallels her ancestors in some ways. This novel is important in connecting those to ancestry which is fractured by trauma, and in remembering those who, in their marginalization and dehumanization, were erased by history.

The last novel I explore is Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*, which also tells the story of those who were meant to be forgotten. Solomon's novel draws on the history of pregnant African women who were thrown from slave ships. However, the novel imagines an aquatic society called the wajinru. The wajinru are the babies of these murdered African women; the babies survive because they were born with the ability to breathe underwater. Their survival also depends on the management of their collective trauma through the work of the historian, who remembers their painful past for them. The main character, Yetu, is the only person who carries this traumatic memory, except for during a ceremonial "remembering" where she shares her pain and history with the wajinru. The remembering is too much for her to bear though, and she seeks to escape this pain by fleeing her community. However, this forces her to acknowledge who she is without her community and to learn how to rely on her community in the sharing of their traumatic history. This is an important novel because the role of the community within the novel parallels the ways authors share stories. By sharing the history outside of the rememberings, Solomon shows how those who experience generational trauma can carry these memories by sharing them with the community. The creation of this novel is, in fact, an example of such a process. Specifically, the book is inspired by an electronic group, clipping, themselves inspired by Detroit electronic duo, Drexciya. Drexciya created this underwater mythology within their music in the 1990s. The experience of collective, evolving storytelling and mythologies through different mediums mirrors the way Yetu shares the history with her community.

I have chosen to look at each of these stories for the ways they portray creating a home or community through found family, for their use of myth as a cultural memory to link fractured generational lineages, and for their portrayal of myth-making as communal storytelling. As I am interested in each of these novels as Black speculative fiction, I notice that disability appears as a common thread throughout each of these novels as a unique part of Black history and experience. Disability culture specifically offers interdependence in community and a rejection of hierarchies in the pursuit of justice and accessibility. Each of these stories references disability—whether in the discussion of mental trauma and physical wounds, transgenerational trauma, chronic pain, and the social component of disability of fractured communities—and explores how each of these elements of disability can be navigated by community interdependence. I argue that related to disability in each of these novels is myth, which are stories that require communal participation.

My project's investment in intersectionality demands that I combine feminist theory, critical race studies, trauma theory, and disability studies as analytical paradigms. The key theorists I have chosen to work with include Gay Wilentz, Michelle Balaev, Sami Schalk, and Ytasha L. Womack. My project is inspired by Gay Wilentz's recognition of the Flying African story in 20th century African-American literature. Wilentz recognizes the role of the Flying African story throughout the African-American literary canon in the 20th century and provides a feminist reading of this story. She emphasizes Black women writers as crucial tellers of this story, and shows how their use of this story has been in telling how women have cultivated a community and created a home which honors African ancestry. The Flying African myth tells the story of the first Africans to arrive in the Americas after surviving the Middle Passage. Rather than be subjected to slavery, the kidnapped Africans escaped by taking flight back to

Africa after arriving in the Americas. In the earliest versions of this story, Africans took literal flight, sometimes growing wings to make the journey home. This story was shared among enslaved people, and has been transformed across the African-American literary canon. This is an important story which has explored themes of homegoing, particularly what it means to go home when home is violently taken from you. Throughout Black and disability literature, creating a home often involves a “found family,” which is often organized around a shared story.

Therefore, I move to discuss the perpetuation of abuse and marginalization generationally. Because of this, I have chosen to engage with Michelle Balaev, who looks at trauma theory beyond an individual experience. She looks at the relationship between trauma and one’s ancestors, and recognizes traumatic patterns as contagious, not confined to a single person or site. Transgenerational trauma is the way in which trauma continues to perpetuate itself generationally. Therefore, I am interested in looking at trauma as disability.

My interest in trauma as disability relates particularly to how Sami Schalk engages with the concept of the bodymind. In disability studies, the bodymind concept is generally discussed as the idea that the mind and body are connected and interdependent. In *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Eli Clare explains, “Body-mind [recognizes] both the inextricable relationships between our bodies and our minds and the ways in which the ideology of cure operates as if the two are distinct - the mind superior to the body, the mind defining personhood, the mind separating humans from nonhumans” (xvi). Schalk specifically emphasizes that people who are marginalized cannot separate their psychic condition from physical being. The idea of the bodymind gives people an understanding of how trauma can be generationally inherited. Disrupting the idea of the mind and body as separate entities, Schalk examines Afrofuturist writing through the lens of critical race theory and disability studies. I am interested in this as

well, but I am particularly interested in the role of myth in Black literature and Afrofuturism, where myth is both an act of community storytelling and cultural memory.

In my first chapter, I explore what the Flying African story has meant throughout history and literature, how it is still at play in Afrofuturist texts, and what this story has meant for communities living at the intersection of race, disability, and gender. Particularly, I look at how this story is mythological in the way it has been represented throughout literature and creates new stories in order to create home when the idea of home is unattainable. In *Midnight Robber*, home is unattainable because Tan-Tan is abducted to a new, unfamiliar, and hostile planet. Flight is insufficient on its own in reaching home. Instead, Tan-Tan must navigate a new world by finding a new identity, attached to her cultural tradition, which aids her community. In *Binti*, flight is the antithesis of Binti's cultural ideal of home, where people do not leave the community. However, sharing her tradition and her mathematical and diplomatic gifts are realized when she takes flight among a diverse crew of University students.

My second chapter complicates the idea of creating home, particularly in a traumatized space informed by generations of trauma. Looking to communities who were traumatized by slavery, I will show how myth is used to create a space for community for those who were racialized and marginalized in degrading conditions. I examine how traumatized people experience time, and how the concept of time travel disrupts the concept of time as progression, a belief which often allows people to shift accountability away from traumatic events in the past. This kind of progression disregards the concept of transgenerational trauma. I examine the way trauma is passed down throughout a generation in Morrison's *Beloved*. In *Kindred*, Butler shows how trauma is passed over a century. I then look to Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*, where trauma is what birthed an entire society. Centuries later, one person carries the weight of history and the

rest of the society is harmed by the repression of those memories. In this chapter, I will specifically examine how myth disrupts this linear thinking, particularly looking to the spiritual journey outlined by the Ki-Kongo Cosmogram. The Cosmogram outlines time as cyclical, and the top half of the cosmogram emphasizes physical embodiment and strength, and the bottom half shows spiritual strength and the ancestors. When looking at time, I would argue that healing from trauma is not a linear progression. I specifically argue that racial trauma is not something which can be healed from or forgotten. I instead emphasize the importance of a shared remembering of trauma, and how myth can honor marginalized people. Healing from trauma is an ableist notion which prioritizes normativity, and also implies that racial trauma is something that can be overcome.

Like my second chapter, which emphasizes myth as a way to remember those whose cultures were taken from them, my third chapter continues this discussion of a communal experience through the lens of disability theory. I will continue to discuss Butler's exploration of disability in *Kindred*, where African myth is at play in connecting Dana to her ancestors and where Butler centers disability justice in her portrayal of characters and makes disability visible. As I continue to make a case for myth being a means of racial justice which connects people to culture and ancestry that was stolen from them, I will show how myth can also be a means of accessibility and a representation of disability communities, since myth is a communal storytelling experience. I show how this is at play with the very creation of Solomon's *The Deep*, and how this plays out in the story when Yetu needs to rely on her community to share the burden of memory, when her community exists as a result of the slave trade. Solomon's novel thus illustrates my project's contention about how the transformative nature of myth can help

individuals and communities navigate trauma that extends throughout generations through the practice of community storytelling.



## **Chapter 1: Flying Africans in Space: Flight and Found Family in Afrofuturist Literature**

This chapter intends to make a connection between the legend of the Flying Africans and flight in Afrofuturist science fiction. The legend of the Flying Africans tells the story of stolen Africans who survived the horrors of the Middle Passage and were brought to North American plantations, but refused to live in slavery, and flew back to Africa. The nature of the word “flight” is important in exploring this story because flight is a means of survival and retreat. The newly arrived Africans took “flight” and escaped America before being subjected to enslavement. The legend also has an element of literal flight too, since the captured Africans grow wings and take flight back to their home. Throughout this chapter, I will be calling the Flying African story a myth, because the transformative nature of the story is crucial to the connection between the legend, the African American literary canon which shows how flight is a symbol for freedom and resistance, and Afrofuturist speculative fiction, where I argue that flight is a means of agency in literature and science.

Gay Wilentz examines the Flying Africans myth as it appears in the African American literary canon, using critical race theory and feminist theory to illustrate how Black women tell a new story when working with the Flying African myth. Their stories emphasize the power of African ancestors. Wilentz frames her literary analysis around the sacred story of a shaman who allows himself to be captured by slavers in order to find his disappeared people. When the shaman arrives at the plantation, his spiritual wisdom is what allows his people to escape slavery. Wilentz writes, “He knows the words which can induce the power to fly, and finding his people as slaves, teaches them what they have forgotten. In the midst of beatings by the overseer, they speak the words remembered, take flight, and return to Africa” (23). The story Wilentz includes is a particularly powerful example that showcases the power of oral literature as resistance. She

explains that through story, the shaman is able to teach people what they have forgotten from the imposition of dominant culture values and with this remembered tradition comes the ability to fly, enabling their escape and return home. In all versions of the Flying African myth, but this story in particular, flight represents an escape from a brutal and unknown land and enslavement, and a return to home. However, the Flying African myth has transcended the legend and the moment in which the event happened, and has shaped other stories about returning home. For the people who were stolen from Africa who did not escape, the Flying African story is a symbol of hope of returning home. Flight therefore becomes a symbol of creating home and a community which is connected to African ancestry despite the violent cultural interruption.

When looking at flight through the lens of feminist theory, Wilentz asserts that when this story is used by men, the story centers failed flight much like the myth of Icarus. Using Ralph Ellison, Ishmael Reed, and Richard Perry as examples, she shows how each of these authors tell a story about trying to fly when they are weighed down by internalized slavery, racism, and double consciousness. In *Montgomery's Children*, Norman's failed flight occurs when there is no one to hear the sacred story of the shaman. While this is a strong example of the power of oral literature, this also emphasizes the fallacy of individualism in the tradition of flight stories. Likewise, Ellison and Reed use the flight symbol in a way that resembles Icarus more closely, where their characters fly too high and too early. This is where Wilentz draws her argument from, claiming that "the issue of failed or successful flight, the implicit or explicit use of the legend, and its function as dead myth or life-giving legend appears to be gender-based" (24). While she does acknowledge that this claim is limited by her reading of the works of these five writers, Wilentz's gender-based reading of Black literature is somewhat binary. While there is

merit in looking at the socialization of men and women in their community roles, especially when that socialization is traumatic, prescribed gender roles exclude a lot of people.

Specifically, Wilentz does not always acknowledge some of the important nuances in the stories written by men. For example, in Ellison's "Flying Home," Todd does what Wilentz describes as taking flight prematurely initially. However, this is not where Ellison ends his story, and he does place a profound emphasis on a community of Black people who come through for Todd. In Todd's initial eagerness to prove himself as equally competent to his white colleagues and commanding officer, Todd crashes his plane into Alabama farmland owned by a white sharecropper. After his crash, however, Todd is supported by two Black sharecroppers, Jefferson and Teddy. This is not an easy acceptance of his community for Todd, who initially looks down on them for their lot in life as uneducated Black people. Todd especially resists them when Jefferson offends him by telling him the story of a Black angel who is "the flyin'est son-of-a-bitch what ever hit heaven!" (Ellison 160) who gets kicked out of heaven because if he was to "keep on flyin', heaven wouldn't be nothin' but uproar!" (160). However, some of the events which are connected with Todd's crash, most notably the hostility from white America, cause Todd to realize Jefferson and Teddy as his community. Before the crash, Jefferson's girlfriend warns Todd that the air force does not value his life as a Black man. After the crash, Dabney Graves, the white landowner, mocks and kicks Todd, and then tells him he has to leave his farm despite his injury and his crashed plane. When Jefferson and Teddy carry Todd away from Graves' land, Todd accepts that Jefferson and Teddy are part his community, despite his initial resentment. Ellison writes:

And it was as though he had been lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of men.

A new current of communication flowed between the man and the boy and himself. They

moved him gently. Far away he heard a mockingbird liquidly calling. He raised his eyes, seeing a buzzard poised unmoving in space. For a moment the whole afternoon seemed suspended, and he waited for the horror to seize him again. Then like a song within his head he heard the boy's soft humming and saw the dark bird glide into the sun and glow like a bird of flaming gold. (172-173)

Not only does Ellison realize the power of community in his story, but he also connects Todd's realization to community with two images of flight: the buzzard, a symbol of death, flying away from the plane crash, and a mockingbird's song which connects Todd to Jefferson and Teddy.

However, where Wilentz's argument is the strongest is in her examination of the ways women are left behind in some stories that are written by male authors, and more pervasively, by white patriarchal systems. Even in Ellison's story, women are left behind; Todd is brought back to "the world of men." Todd's unnamed, off-page girlfriend is the one who warns him that his aspirations to prove himself to white America will never be enough in a racist society.

Wilentz's interpretation of the Flying African myth within the works of Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall also emphasizes women as storytellers, and Wilentz highlights the emphasis Black feminist writers place on the life-giving force of the Flying African myth. Wilentz points out:

Morrison reminds us that the men who flew off would not be remembered had the women not remained behind to tell the tale. In her dedication, Morrison writes: "The fathers may soar/ And the children may know their names." But there is a group missing in the dedication whose presence is overpowering in the novel—the mothers. When the father soars off, there must be someone to teach the children their names. In this novel, it

is the women who have kept track of the names and stories so that the men could soar and the children learn and remember. (30)

She acknowledges that in Morrison's novel, Pilate connects her nephew Milkman to the story of the Flying Africans and how his great-grandfather "left everybody down on the ground" (Morrison 328). She argues that the stories by Morrison and Marshall celebrate the power of African heritage because of the power of their ancestors, rather than Ellison's emphasis on transcendence after failed flight. However, I would argue that throughout these stories, each of the authors emphasize the prevailing theme of the Flying African myth is the emphasis of a community, rather than the individual.

Just as flight appears in African American literature, the theme of flight also appears in Afrofuturist writing based on the common trope of space travel. However, flight in Afrofuturist fiction is more heavily influenced by the Flying African myth in literature, not simply the concept of space exploration. The spaceship conventionally invokes the adventure of exploration and the conquest of space in science fiction, tropes informed by narratives produced in the age of exploration, a period of colonization and empire. Consequently, the image of the ship will have an entirely different meaning for those who were dehumanized by European imperialism. The ship, in the African American imagination then, symbolizes not freedom of movement or territorial mastery, but the traumatic memory of the Middle Passage. Afrofuturism, however, takes the image of the ship and upgrades it.

Afrofuturism combines the cultural and the mythological along with the scientific and technological to prioritize black agency and innovation in technology in response to the historical appropriation and weaponization of science to uphold anti-Black racism. The spaceship, therefore, becomes an update of the Flying African myth. Feminist writers of

Afrofuturist science fiction are doing important work because of their emphasis on community. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha L. Womack explains that what makes Afrofuturism a feminist space is that it values a shared workload, a democracy, a goal of cooperation rather than aggression, and an empowering of marginalized communities (108-109). We see this in the Flying African mythic tradition, transformed by those feminist writers in the African-American literary canon who use the Flying African myth as a way for people to work together to empower and create such a community. Because of this, I will outline the ways the Flying African myth is a foundational myth for Afrofuturist tales. My analysis of Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* and in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti* will show how the Flying African myth has been adopted by Afrofuturist writers. In these works, the myth focuses on the creation of community when home is unattainable.

Tan-Tan, the protagonist of *Midnight Robber*, is sustained by the Afro-Caribbean cultural tradition much like the Flying African myth has been used to tell new stories of community and found family in African American culture. These traditions guide her as she navigates her way through an unfamiliar place, embraces her own role as a mother despite the fractured bond from her own mother when she is stolen from her, and creates a new home with a community she cultivates herself. Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber* begins on the Caribbean colonized and inspired planet of Toussaint, named after Toussaint L'Ouverture who led the Haitian revolution to gain independence from France and Spain and end slavery. The name Toussaint symbolizes the freedom of the planet, which is emphasized at the novel's opening with the celebration of the landing of the Marryshow Corporation ships that brought their ancestors to Toussaint. The Marryshow Corporation is also an important flight symbol. Julian Marryshow was a WWII fighter pilot who revived the Crop Over festival to Barbados decades after the economic

devastation of the Caribbean in WWII ended the annual Carnival celebrations. These celebrations began during slavery as a way for enslaved people to mock slave holders. Following the end of slavery in the Caribbean, they were then used to celebrate abolition. However, Marryshow's revival of the Carnival celebrations occurred after WWII and promoted tourism to Barbados.

These stories celebrated during the Crop Over festivals are also revived in *Midnight Robber*. They include Anansi's web, which is represented in the artificial intelligence in the novel; Jour Overt, which is the street festival; and the Robber King, a persona central to the story and which resonates with Tan-Tan the most; the Robber King persona during Carnival tells grandiose tales of becoming a robber to survive after he is brought to a strange land. Tan-Tan reappropriates this tale, becoming the Robber Queen, and becomes a hero for herself and her community in order to survive. However, Hopkinson's novel takes Tan-Tan and readers away from Toussaint at the start of the novel, and instead focuses on New Half Way Tree, an indigenous space, and a space of the marginalized and othered.

The Flying African myth in classic African-American literature uses tradition and stories of the past in order to survive. Likewise, Hopkinson uses allusions to create new stories from the past, and shows how present stories are shaped and profoundly influenced by historical events which have become legendary. Hopkinson's historical allusions connect our characters to historical figures with her references to Toussaint L'Ouverture, Julian Marryshow, Nanny of the Maroons, and Tubman, "the human bridge from slavery to freedom" (329). Tubman is also the bridge which connects a collective past, including Tan-Tan's past, to the future, the family, and community she cultivates at the end of the novel. Each of these historical figures referenced by

Hopkinson were real people, but their stories have become legendary. Nanny of the Maroons is therefore an important link between the legendary past and a technological future.

Hopkinson illustrates how technology is both feminist and revolutionary with Granny Nanny, as both the novel's technology and the conveyor of tradition. This is a link between technology and flight stories. When Earth Engine 127 colonizes Toussaint, the planet is connected with the web of Granny Nanny, who is named for Nanny of the Maroons. The Maroons were people who fled and fought for freedom from slavery. In doing so, the Maroons created their own communities in the Jamaican mountains. Nanny is celebrated historically as a revolutionary and a freedom fighter. In the novel, Granny Nanny is the name of the artificial intelligence. Instead of being a source of authoritarian disruption of privacy, Granny Nanny is portrayed divinely, as an eshu or an omniscient deity in West African spirituality. As a feminist writer, Hopkinson complicates this though, and is mindful of the ways technology has been used as a tool of oppression.

As a Caribbean writer, Hopkinson would also be mindful of (flight) technology when used in warfare, such as in the American Theater in World War II which devastated the Caribbean. In *Midnight Robber*, Hopkinson explains how much information the Granny Nanny has and its extreme reach in dictating people's lives. However, the purpose of the technology is also to protect and give guidance as both a voice and images in one's mind. Granny Nanny's voice and images, as well as the ways she guides a social order, resemble the guidance and worship of ancestors. For example, the eshu/a.i. projects a mirrored image of Tan-Tan in her Midnight Robber costume, tells her about Belle Starr who was the first woman to play the Midnight Robber, and shows Tan-Tan an image of Carnival on Earth. The a.i. connects Tan-Tan to her cultural past, sparking Tan-Tan's curiosity about the Midnight Robber, and ultimately



empowers Tan-Tan to reclaim the Midnight Robber story and change the character from the Robber King to the Robber Queen. Like the shaman who was able to tell people the words they have forgotten, the Granny Nanny a.i. also brings the story of the Midnight Robber to people like Tan-Tan, who have been marginalized and severed from the story's history.

The Carnival persona which is central to the novel and to Tan-Tan's growth is the Robber King. At the start of the novel, Antonio, Tan-Tan's father, kills Quashee, the lover of Tan-Tan's mother Ione, in a duel. Antonio chooses exile in order to flee from prison. This is the beginning of Tan-Tan's journey from Cockpit County, when she is taken with her father, into her father's exile to New Half-Way Tree, a prison planet and the shadow version of Toussaint. New Half-Way Tree also serves as an analogy of the arrival of stolen and enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, populated as it is by "indigenous" creatures called the douen, stemming from Caribbean folklore. In Trinidad and Tobago folklore, douen are the souls of children who have died. Tan-Tan needs the Robber Queen stories because since she is at the mercy of both this punishing, unfamiliar world and her father, who rapes her multiple times and ultimately impregnates her. When defending herself during the final time he rapes her, she kills him.

Flight, in Hopkinson's novel, begins as both a separation from her home and her maternal family, and as a representation of the the journey of the slave trade which is portrayed as a form of personal and communal disintegration. Tan-Tan's separation from her community begins when she is taken to New Half-Way Tree. Elizabeth Boyle explains this separation, stating: "With such stock spaces in mind, *Midnight Robber* re-imagines both the narrative space of the spaceship and that of the prison planet in terms of the Middle Passage, where the slave body again contemplates the historical fear of disintegration" (84). In moving from an Afrocentric and Caribbean utopia of Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree, Antonio and Tan-Tan experience

disintegration and displacement. For Tan-Tan though, this goes further as she is taken from her home by a patriarchal figure. This disintegration is inherently linked to her sexual agency which is taken from her by her father.

As an Afrofuturist author, Hopkinson uses flight to show the movement of Caribbean culture, stories, and traditions in a way that takes back the trope of the objectified feminine body, particularly when subjected to sexual violence and slavery. The name of Cockpit County indicates control and agency, and makes Tan Tan the pilot of her own flight narrative.

Hopkinson turns the spaceship into a feminist space, the same way the Flying African story became a story of creating home. Shelby Crosby explains: “Once in exile with the douen, Tan-Tan adopts the Midnight Robber persona, traveling to human villages and fighting for the rights of the weak and silenced... By adopting the persona of the Midnight Robber, also known as the Robber Queen, Tan-Tan empowers herself and demands that the human communities on New Half-Way Tree form an equitable society” (188). By using the Midnight Robber persona, she uses a story from her past, to create a persona who can be a savior for her community.

Sexual violence and objectification is crucial to discuss in relation to flight, because a ship is often an objectified feminine body in exploration and conquest narratives. Tan-Tan herself experiences sexual objectification in New Half-Way Tree, noticing “older men who were already casting their eyes at her then fourteen-year-old body” (145). This sexual objectification is the start of her disintegration, especially when Tan-Tan, as the Robber Queen, kills Antonio in self defense. Here, Tan-Tan takes flight by becoming the Robber Queen, and protects herself by separating herself from the trauma of killing her father. This is also an event which results in another flight journey to escape the sheriff and Janisette, her stepmother.

When Tan-Tan flees from those seeking to harm her on New Half-Way Tree, she literally takes flight with a douen named Chichibud, riding on the back of Benta, a packbird who is married to Chichibud. This flight allows her freedom from the violence she experienced at the hands of her father. Hopkinson writes:

The wind sang past Tan-Tan's face. The breeze blew away her tears. The cold, crisp air cleared a little of the fog from her brain. Tan-Tan the Midnight Robber was soaring out above her kingdom, free from thought, nothing to fear. *Sweet chariot, time to ride.* She laughed out loud. But the wind blew the laugh from her mouth and carried it away.

*Antonio dead,* Bad Tan-Tan hissed at her. *You kill he. When you take one, you must give back two.* (174)

Though she escapes, and experiences a moment of sovereignty as she flies over her imagined kingdom, hearing a song of freedom and heavenly chariots, this is also a moment where she, like Icarus, is separated from her humanity as a result of her flight. As an individual, she flies too close to heaven and takes flight from her human community into the alien douen community. This is a clear parallel to Wilentz's claim that flight on its own is insufficient, especially when the flight is taken by an individual or too early in one's journey. I would argue that Tan-Tan's flight journey mirrors Todd's in "Flying Home" by Ralph Ellison most closely. Todd is driven to flight to prove himself and measure up to standards based on his internalized racism, which is traumatic. Tan-Tan also takes flight after a moment of trauma, and this is where she begins to experience her own psychic disintegration, seeing herself as Good Tan-Tan, who can fly close to heaven and save herself and others, and Bad Tan-Tan, with sexual shame, fear of being captured again, and who had to kill in order to survive. Additionally, because Tan-Tan takes home among

the douen, the souls of dead children, her moment of flight also marks the loss of Tan-Tan's childhood.

Tan-Tan's first attempt at finding home and family among the douen community is not sustainable. First of all, her incompatibility with the community parallels that she is pregnant, about to be a mother rather than a lost child. She continues to leave the community to use her Midnight Robber personality in a way that is masculine, individualistic, and authoritarian. This draws harm to the douen community, and results in her exile from them along with Abitefa, Chichibud's daughter. Chichibud demonstrates the damage done by humans, explaining that "since all you tall people start coming to New Half-Way Tree, packbirds only fly at night, and in places where all you can't see" (174-175). Tan-Tan uses the Midnight Robber persona heroically, in a traditionally masculine sense, and this draws attention and brings harm to the douen community and packbirds.

Tan-Tan's trauma is marked by patriarchal violence, which influences how her heroism plays out. When she sees Alyosius being beaten by his mother, she sees her own abuse reflected in this moment. The way she responds to this though echoes her father's abuse. Hopkinson illustrates this, writing, "[Tan-Tan] knew how it felt to cry out so, to beg mercy and get none... Alyosius was hovering about them, asking her to stop, to have mercy. Nobody had mercy on her" (244). Antonio's manifestation of patriarchy is what happens when toxic masculinity is exacerbated by colonial trauma. This trauma is then passed to Tan-Tan, causing her to react violently to Alyosius' mother. The physical and sexual violence her father subjects her to, as well as the separation from her mother, also complicate her own sense of motherhood, especially when she is left pregnant with her father's child.

The last part of Tan-Tan's past that she has to confront is with Janisette, her stepmother, who is seeking revenge against Tan-Tan for Antonio's death. This allows Tan-Tan to face her fear of being captured, and to confront her psychological disintegration into Bad Tan-Tan. Janisette blames Tan-Tan for her own rape, and accuses her of "looseness and sluttiness" (323). Tan-Tan is able to condemn Janisette's complicity in Antonio's abuse since Janisette gave Tan-Tan a weapon to protect herself, and never had the courage to speak out against his abuses. Tan-Tan's confrontation with Janisette also mirrors her own journey into motherhood. When Tan-Tan gives birth, Granny Nanny speaks to Tubman as he's born: "Oh sweetness; this is the hardest part, the last part of labour... I know it feel like your mamee trying to crush you dead, but is only she pushing you out into the world" (327). Before Tan-Tan goes into physical labor to become a mother, she does the emotional labor of confronting damaged motherhood with her stepmother.

When she gives birth, Tan-Tan forms a community in Sweet Pone with her son and her friends, Melonhead and Abitefa. Her found family is inspired by Carnival traditions and her Robber Queen persona who defended the vulnerable. The community Tan-Tan establishes in Hopkinson's novel highlights the importance of folklore for cultural and personal survival through Caribbean myths. At the end of the novel though, the Robber Queen is put to rest into a "grateful slumber" when "[her] Daddy was dead, her baby was alive. Now was time to put away guilt" (326). She instead gives birth to her son, who she names Tubman, "the human bridge from slavery to freedom" (329). Much like Harriet Tubman, who helped people escape from slavery, Tan-Tan's son Tubman was along with her in her flight journey from her father and the cruelties of Junjuh, the human settlement on New Half-Way Tree. Tubman is also a way of bringing the past to Tan-Tan's future. *Midnight Robber* is an example of the Flying Africans story where

traditions are used to sustain a community and bring it into the future. In *Midnight Robber*, tradition and community is preserved through the persona Tan-Tan adopts in her flight journey to save herself and advocate for others in her community.

We also see the value of tradition played out in Nnedi Okorafor's *Binti Trilogy*, which Okorafor has described as Africanfuturism. Okorafor explains that Africanfuturism "is concerned with visions of the future, is interested in technology, leaves the earth, skews optimistic, is centered on and predominantly written by people of African descent (black people) and it is rooted first and foremost in Africa. It's less concerned with 'what could have been' and more concerned with 'what is and can/will be.'" In the *Binti Trilogy*, Okorafor discusses the role of tradition in flight stories but specifically in terms of academia and science. In bringing Binti's Himba cultural tradition to the forefront of space travel, the novel does all of these things. However, Binti also points out that as a Himba student, she is in a unique position since her tribe is described as "obsessed with innovation and technology, but small, private, and don't like to leave Earth" (9). Because of this, Okorafor establishes a dichotomy between space travel where flight is a symbol of agency to a place where Binti can use her unique mathematical gifts, and flight as a symbol of abandoning one's cultural instincts and leaving one's community.

From the start of the novel, Okorafor shows what is at stake for a Himba leaving her collectivist community. Even though Binti is leaving her home by choice, leaving behind the physical Earth is an act of separation from her culture, a potential disintegration. Binti explains, "Our ancestral land is life; move away from it and you diminish. We even cover our bodies with it. *Otjize* is red land" (3). By explaining this, the novel sets up the paradox of Earth and home, and flight and one's own gift. It also asks if leaving one's homeland means becoming homeless. Flight is the antithesis of connection to Earth, which is the conflict Binti must navigate. The

otjize is a clay the Himba cover their bodies with in order to protect themselves from the sun, and when Binti leaves Earth, she brings the otjize with her. This is one way for her to bring her ancestral land, integral to her cultural identity, with her as she takes flight from Earth.

Still, when Binti leaves, she struggles with the isolation of being the only Himba aboard the ship and with the weight of leaving her community behind on Earth. While the otjize comforts her, she also forms a community with people who are culturally different from her, but who share her love of innovation and mathematics. Binti explains, “The ship was packed with outward-looking people who loved mathematics, experimenting, learning, reading, inventing, studying, obsessing, revealing. The people on the ship weren’t Himba, but I soon understood that they were still my people. I stood out as a Himba, but the commonalities shined brighter” (9). While she feels a sense of loss from leaving her community on Earth, she prioritizes sustaining her connection to Earth and because of this, she is able to form a community of friends and found family in her flight to Oomza University. Her friends, Olo and Remi, also sing a traditional song when they miss home in order to sustain their culture in their flight.

Binti also bonds with those who share her ability to tree: that is to imagine the most complex mathematical equations and to split them into smaller numerical fractals. She explains that doing this is what allowed each of them to go to the university, and that when she is with friends who are the best at what they do, they are able to “push each other to get closer to ‘God’” (10). Treeing becomes a divine symbol of flight because it combines mathematical ability, innovation, and creativity, along with the community of students who are culturally different but then brought together in communal flight because of their gifts. The divine association with treeing also parallels the flight journey, particularly to the sacred words the shaman teaches.

Because of this connection to community, the spaceship they are on is a feminist space. The technology of the spaceship further emphasizes this, because the ship is a living creature which is cooperative in their travels. The ship they travel on:

was a magnificent piece of living technology. Third Fish was a Miri 12, a type of ship closely related to a shrimp. Miri 12s were stable calm creatures with natural exoskeletons that could withstand the harshness of space. They were also genetically enhanced to grow three breathing chambers within their bodies. Scientists planted rapidly growing plants within these enormous rooms that produced oxygen from the CO<sub>2</sub> directed in from other parts of the ship. (8)

The flight technology emphasizes agency and cooperation, rather than exploitation and objectification. This ship, with plants growing inside of it that produce oxygen like on Earth, makes the spaceship a home, which further bridges the dichotomy of Earth and flight.

However, while aboard the ship, Binti is traumatically separated from this community when the entire crew is killed in front of her after their ship is hijacked by the Meduse, jellyfish-like aliens. This violent attack happens when Binti is talking to Heru, her friend and first romantic interest, who notices that she has a mathematical code braided into her hair. Binti laments, “But I never got the chance to tell him that my hair was braided into the history of my people. Because what happened, happened... I was the happiest I’d ever been in my life and I was farther from my beloved family than I’d ever been in my life” (11). Her reflection here is a mourning of the history of her family she is separated from, and the mourning of the community on board the ship with whom she was never able to share any more of her history and future. When this happens, the living, breathing ship is violated, and those on board the ship are stolen;



the ship also becomes a place of trauma where people die “on the threshold, between home and future” (11).

Even before the murder of the crew, Okorafor shows how ships have been a symbol of slavery and stolen people to African and African diasporic people. Both of Binti’s parents warn her about leaving for Oomza University. Her mother warns her that “Oomza Uni wants you for its own gain, Binti. You go to that school and you become its slave” (4). Namibia was a place that was traumatized by the kidnapping and trafficking of people during the slave trade. What is revealed by the Meduse after they kill everyone on board the ship is that Oomza University has their chief’s stinger placed on display like a piece of meat, which shows how travel and exploration can be violent and exploitative to marginalized people. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack explains how Octavia Butler “provided a blueprint for how women, particularly women of color, could operate in these skewed realities and distant worlds [and] set the stage for multidimensional black women in complex worlds both past and present, women who are vulnerable in their victories and valiant in their risky charge to enlighten humanity” (110). Butler’s influence on writers such as Okorafor is clear when Binti agrees to help the Meduse retrieve the stinger in an unfamiliar world. However, in order to do this, she becomes part Meduse and her hair becomes okuoko; this circles back to her loss of being able to share her family history through her hair with her new community. However, her hair becoming okuoko also tells her new history where she becomes a diplomat, and where she transforms into a figure similar to the shaman in the Flying African stories, who “knows the words which can induce the power to fly [and] teaches them what they have forgotten. [His people] speak the words remembered [and] take flight” (Wilentz 23). The shaman teaches his people the words they have forgotten that will allow them to fly. Similar to the shaman, Binti

also uses diplomacy to negotiate peace. Binti explains, “I said things that I didn’t know I’d thought about or comprehended. I found words I didn’t even know I knew. And eventually, I told them how they could satisfy the Meduse and prevent a bloodbath in which everyone would lose” (46). The professors agree to return the stinger to the chief, and Binti is able to use her otjize to heal the chief.

Another way in which Binti is like the shaman is that her otjize, which is her connection to Earth when she takes flight, is what protects her from the Meduse when they first kill everyone on the ship. This is because the otjize has healing properties. However, even though Binti is protected when she wears it, and uses it to heal Okwu, a hot headed Meduse who reminds her of brother who she befriends, and the chief whose stinger is stolen, Binti is anxious about her otjize running out, and being disconnected from Earth. A connection to Earth is the antithesis of flight, though flight is what allows Binti to connect with her found family and use her gift at Oomza University. Binti explains: “My otjize from Earth had healed Okwu and then the chief. It would heal many others. The otjize created by my people, mixed with my homeland. This was the foundation of the Meduse’s respect for me. Now all of it was gone. I was someone else. Not even fully Himba anymore” (55). But Binti discovers that her culture is not tied exclusively to a particular place or soil. Binti is able to recreate the otjize when she is at Oomza University from the earth she finds there. This shows that Binti’s culture is more than a piece of land she carries with her and that it has values to others. In the same way that she shares the history of her family with her community, she uses her otjize to heal. Binti does wonder if Okwu will still be her friend if she does not have this connection to home that has the power to heal. Okwu reassures her, “Whether you carry the substance that can heal and bring life back to my people or not, I am your friend” (56). Thus, when she is away from her family, she experiences a

sense of found family. Being able to recreate the otjize at Oomza University is another way in which she creates home when home is unattainable, and on another planet.

Both Hopkinson and Okorafor in their novels emphasize the role of community in flight, and that flight itself, as it was in the *Flying African* story, is not enough. Both Tan-Tan and Binti use their cultural traditions to sustain them. Tan-Tan uses her stories to save herself, and this is further used to aid her found family after her familial structure is traumatized. Binti's tradition is what saves her from diminishing as she leaves her home, and is what literally saves her life and the lives of others. Moreover, this tradition allows her to restore justice and negotiate peace like the shaman who spoke what people have forgotten.

## **Chapter 2: Haunted (Re)memory: The Influence of Trauma on Time and Place**

In the previous chapter, I explored the ways cultural tradition sustains communities and feminist spaces through the lens of the Flying African myth. In this chapter, I intend to complicate this idea of creating a home when trauma is central to space and memory. By doing this, I will explore the transformative nature of myth as a way to remember the legacy of trauma that spans generations. By using myth to navigate trauma, Black feminist writers and Afrofuturist authors can create a space to tell stories which honor ancestors whose lives and dignity were stolen from them and to prioritize racial justice.

Throughout this chapter, I will refer to trauma as an emotional and psychological response to an experience which threatens a person's survival and alters their memory. This response therefore disrupts how a person exists in the world. Michelle Balaev explains this phenomenon: "Traumatic experience is understood as a fixed and timeless photographic negative stored in an unlocatable place of the brain, but it maintains the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups" (151). Trauma rarely stays with an individual person and is often passed socially, historically, and genetically through generations, and because of this I will often distinguish between personal and collective trauma. I will show how myth can be a way to tell stories which guide those who experience such stories to recognize and navigate transgenerational trauma and the patterns which emerge, as myth, like trauma, is transformative across time. Myths are stories which contain memories of a culture, and can be a space where people are connected to their ancestors whose experiences were parallel to their own. This makes myth an especially powerful space when considering the traumatic separation of culture through the African diaspora. Like Binti's otjize, myth carries memories of home and has the power to bring together communities.

Previously, I demonstrated how Tan-Tan's sense of self is disrupted after she kills her father, a response necessary for survival when he rapes her. While the sexual assault and subsequent murder are traumatic events, she experiences a psychological disintegration when she becomes both good and bad Tan-Tan, and is separated from her human community afterwards. Her violence towards Alyosius' mother when she witnesses violence similar to what she has endured is a trauma response, and one which both allowed her to survive her father's rape and precipitated her own psychic disintegration. However, Tan-Tan's trauma does not undergo repression into her unconscious because she recognizes herself as a survivor and a hero to her community, and she sees her resilience in Afro-Caribbean histories and mythologies.

In this chapter, I will examine how trauma resurfaces in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, and *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon, a novel inspired by the mythic world-building of Clipping, a techno and hip-hop group from Detroit made up of Daveed Diggs, William Huston, and Jonathan Snipes. In *Beloved*, Morrison shows trauma in one family, and how it is passed from one generation to the next, particularly from mother to daughter. In *Kindred*, Butler shows how trauma is passed between multiple generations, where the main character, Dana travels back approximately 150 years. She both witnesses and experiences the trauma of her ancestors. On her last trip back, she carries not only the memories of slavery, but she is also physically impacted by slavery when she physically loses her arm. Living in these dual timelines and losing her arm when these trips are over, Dana is both psychologically and physically severed by this trauma. In *The Deep*, a novella that is a reimagination of an album by Clipping, Rivers Solomon shows the trauma of the Middle Passage, where pregnant women were thrown overboard and drowned. Solomon examines the impact of this trauma for centuries. Each

of these novels shows the importance of witnessing and remembering the legacy, the histories, and the memories of ancestors.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* explores forgotten and repressed memories when they resurface as the uncanny. The trauma endured at Sweet Home, the plantation where Sethe and her family were enslaved, is re-experienced through "rememory" in the haunted space of 124. This new dwelling, both in the sense of physical habitation and psychic recollection, is the space of traumatized memory. Michelle Balaev explains:

Novels represent this disruption between the self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories embedded in landscapes that define the character's identity and the meaning of the traumatic experience. The primacy of place in the representations of trauma anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context, and, in fact, organizes the memory and meaning of trauma. (150)

In *Beloved*, 124 is a liminal space which exists between physical freedom and psychological enslavement. Morrison illustrates the tension between these two kinds of freedom in the novel when she writes "Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (120). While those who live in 124 are free from slavery, they are not free from the legacy of slavery and the lasting trauma.

124 is also a liminal space because it is occupied by both those who survived slavery and by the dead. At the start of the novel, Morrison illustrates in her opening lines that the house is a space of traumatized memory, writing "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children" (3). 124 is not only a space for memory to exist, but the very process of memory, which has active fury and physical consequences like shattered

mirrors and hand prints in cake (3). When the boys, reaching puberty, are chased away from the house by these two specific instances, Morrison shows how the women and children specifically are unable to move beyond their trauma. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs says, "What'd be the point [in moving]? Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (6). They are unable to escape this trauma because the memories of slavery, sexual degradation, and physical and psychological torture are manifested through rememory. These memories also have a physical impact on the body. The physical manifestation of *Beloved* represents an intersection of intergenerational trauma and personal trauma where different elements of identity are marginalized. Performances of past traumas are enacted on Paul D's body and remain physically on Sethe's "chokecherry tree" scarring on her back, and also are passed biologically to their children.

Morrison illustrates here how trauma can alter memory through erasure. Baby Suggs observes, "I had eight [children]. Every one of them gone away from me... My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of the bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I can remember" (6). Sethe explains that, like Baby Suggs, she also is unable to remember the two boys chased away by the baby ghost and that "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe. Unfortunately her brain was devious" (6). Sethe then begins to recount some of the memories that resurface; the men who stole her breastmilk by forcing her to breastfeed them, the physical scarring on her back from being whipped, and boys hanging from sycamore trees at Sweet Home. The way these traumatic memories are remembered through the novel is nonlinear, which can be one way of reclaiming the way history is understood.

As Morrison illustrates in these passages, Sethe's children, particularly her daughters, inherit her trauma. Morrison further emphasizes the ramifications of trauma being in the place of the home, making 124 is a haunted place, the epitome of the uncanny according to Freud:

Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. As we have seen, many languages in use today can only render the German expression "an unheimliches house" by "a haunted house." We might indeed have begun our investigation with this example, perhaps the most striking of all, of something uncanny, but we refrained from doing so because the uncanny in it is too much mingled with and in part covered by what is purely gruesome. (13)

The haunting of 124 is the manifestation of the memory of Sweet Home and the trauma experienced there. Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver are socialized to live with the trauma, and their trauma is domesticated. The domestication of trauma combined with Sethe's repression of the events at Sweet Home makes this manifestation of trauma uncanny. In *The Uncanny*, Sigmund Freud explains: "The uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it, and everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition" (15). In the novel, the memory of Sweet Home becomes something more tolerable and even beautiful, although unfamiliar and with attached shame. The repressed memories in the novel manifest as Beloved, the ghost of Sethe's child. Specifically, memories of home and family are juxtaposed with death. The space of 124 is also an uncanny one because it is occupied by Beloved, who carries the legacy of slavery and the Middle Passage.



The first instance of the uncanny, where home and death are juxtaposed, is at the start of the novel. Sethe's baby is a disruptive ghost and the plantation is deceptively called Sweet Home. Sethe's memory of Sweet Home first begins as beautiful. Morrison writes:

Suddenly there was Sweet Home [rolling] itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (7)

In Morrison's novel, Paul D represses his own shame and feelings of dehumanization by directing it towards Sethe. He then tells her there are worse things than slavery. To this, Sethe responds, "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (Morrison 194). Her response to this shows that she is returning her child to death, something foreign but more familiar, or in this case, preferable, rather than to terror that is more absolute.

Beloved experiences a more unfamiliar trauma as she is the embodiment of collective trauma. This is much different from each of the other family members who experience more personal traumas. However, each component of collective trauma is made familiar when Beloved manifests, and this is how collective trauma is made personal. Sethe's psychological trauma is anchored by physical scarring; the chokecherry tree on her back is the physical manifestation of her psychic trauma.

Paul D also experiences physical and sexual trauma while chained with other men and being forced to perform hard labor in Alfred, Georgia. During the time in Alfred, he and the

other men are repeatedly raped. Even though Paul D experiences this with other men, what makes this a private, individual trauma is that he endures the trauma on his own and his trauma is never domesticated and passed down to children, the way Sethe's trauma has. Morrison writes, "It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124, nothing in this world could pry it open" (133). When the tin is pried open by Beloved, the rape he experiences there is recalled and relived. This is significant because even though Paul D is physically free from enslavement in Alfred, he is not psychologically free.

The occurrence of the supernatural assault by Beloved is a moment where he is unable to occupy 124, despite trying to make a home with Sethe. Paul D explains, "I'm a walking man, but I been heading in this direction for seven years. Walking all around this place. Upstate, downstate, east, west; I been in territory that ain't got no name, never staying nowhere long. But when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn't the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life" (86). Much like in the first chapter, where people have struggled to return to home when home is unattainable, Paul D explains that home was unattainable for him for so long, until he finds Sethe. However, with Beloved's occupation of 124 and her effect specifically on Paul D, Morrison complicates the idea of creating home, especially when trauma occupies that space.

Sethe killing her child is a traumatic act for both Beloved and Sethe, and Sethe carries her trauma and Beloved with her. Beloved specifically inherits the collective trauma of slavery. Since she died as an infant, the embodiment and realization of slavery does not happen to Beloved. The collective trauma which psychically manifests in Beloved is brought with her to

124, and haunts Sethe and her family. In fact, *Beloved* is able to recall the memory of the Middle Passage to Denver. Morrison writes, “‘In the dark my name is Beloved... I’m small in that place. I’m like this here.’ She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up. Denver covered her lips with her fingers. ‘Were you cold?’ Beloved curled tighter and shook her head. ‘Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in.’ ‘You see anybody?’ ‘Heaps. A lot of people is down there. Some is dead’” (126). Beloved’s existence in the house, despite her death and despite the fact that she carries the legacy of so many people who were killed, is another example of liminality and the uncanny.

What Morrison examines in this novel is the ways in which trauma must be passed through in order to become free of its grasp. Myth, as cultural and communal memory, is the way to pass through trauma. In *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber explains, “Our stories—part fact, part fiction—shape our past and thus our memory. The fact that Paul D shares Sethe's story makes it bearable. That their collective past can be passed on to Denver brings the burden of healing into focus” (43). By the end of the novel, the trauma is realized and confronted, though “it was not a story to pass on” (Morrison 323). In order for this trauma to not be passed on, Morrison explains, “After they made up their tales shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget... [But] in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise”(323-4). Morrison explains that there is a deliberate forgetting, but her description of the “shaped and decorated” (323) shows a mythic way to tell stories that contain incredible trauma.

Like Morrison, Octavia Butler addresses the cyclical and far-reaching nature of trauma in *Kindred*. The novel centers Dana, a Black woman from California in 1976, who travels

unexpectedly through time and space to her ancestors, living in Maryland in 1819. Butler specifically explores how trauma can extend past a subsequent generation when Dana relives the trauma of slavery, witnessing and experiencing first hand her ancestors' trauma. Like *Beloved*, which confronts revisiting the psychological slavery, *Kindred* directly confronts Dana's ancestral past. Dana's past is traumatic: Her ancestor Hagar is the child of Alice, a Black woman, and Rufus, a white slaveholder who rapes Alice. While Dana is unable to control when she will time travel, she discovers that what pulls her through time is the need to save Rufus's life when he experiences several near death experiences. She is also pulled through time to discover Alice, who dies by suicide when she thinks Rufus sells her children. Dana convinces Rufus to free Joe and Hagar as a way to amend what he has done to Alice.

What's important to note is that without Dana, Rufus would not be alive, despite the fact that he is Dana's ancestor. Whenever his life is threatened, Dana is called back to various moments throughout his life to save him and, consequently, the lives of his descendents and her own life. Dana would not exist if Rufus were to die before Hagar is conceived. This shows that Dana is the product of trauma which she takes accountability for in order to ensure her own birth, and to ensure Joe and Hagar live a free life after Alice's death. However, Butler shows how the actions of one white ancestor who wields power over the lives of those he enslaved also influences Dana, who lives several generations after the initial trauma. This is how Butler begins her exploration of how trauma continues into following generations: showing how trauma is passed down when it is inflicted by people in similar ways. Butler also shows how trauma is passed down generationally through the relationship between Alice and Dana.

Alice's anger towards Dana is a response to Dana's agreeableness to Rufus, which fulfills Rufus' desire for Alice. Dana remarks "how easily slaves are made" (211) when she reflects on

her obedience to Rufus. Her submission and even her likeability fulfill Rufus' desire for Alice, which was unfulfilled before Dana. In "Behold the Woman: The Imaginary Wife in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Brian K. Reed argues that Dana finds herself complicit in Alice's oppression, and points to the ways Alice finds Dana's relationship to Rufus problematic, as her relationship with him makes her an unwitting agent of white supremacy. However, I would add that Dana's acceptance of slavery is an example of her own socialization in both racist societies she inhabits, and her own inherited trauma as Alice's direct descendent.

While Dana is socialized to accept slavery from both past and present timelines, Butler still illustrates the influence of the trauma of slavery in Dana's life in the 1970s. In "Kindred: History, Revision, and (Re)memory of Bodies," Gregory Hampton explains:

Crossing boundaries is at the core of the whole historical or narrative structure of the novel. And although in many ways Dana is dependent on her ancestors, the lives of her grandparents and parents will be determined by Dana's success or failure in a past that she helps to mold. The conceit of *Kindred* is that Dana sees how the bonds of the past become the very means to freedom from her legacy in the present; not only is the past necessary to the present/future, but the present/future becomes the very way or means by which the past acquires its meaning in Dana's life. (108).

However, Alice's trauma seems to be unable to cross boundaries for her own sake. Dana's life is sustained by Rufus' survival, while her life is also profoundly shaped by all of the agonizing and tragic events in Alice's life.

In my discussion of Morrison's *Beloved*, I showed how transgenerational trauma is passed through generationally within a family. This is also at play in *Kindred*. When Alice finds out that her husband, Isaac, had his ears cut off, was beaten, and was sold to a slaveholder in

Mississippi. Instead of being angry with Rufus, Alice is angry at Dana for not letting her die when she is returned to the Weylin plantation and is almost beaten to death. Alice also becomes angry at Dana when Dana tries to warn her that Rufus is planning to rape her, and that Alice can either comply with this, be violently coerced into having sex with Rufus, or run away. Instead of becoming angry with Rufus, she tells Dana that she is a “mammy” and that her job is to help white people keep Black people in line. When Alice finally accepts that Dana has tried to help her, she says she talks to Dana this way “Because I get so mad. I get so mad I can taste it in my mouth. And you’re the only one I can take it out on—the only one I can hurt and not be hurt back” (168). This is a lot like the cycle of abuse, especially since Dana is Alice’s descendent, though she is unaware of this. As I examined before, this shows up in both *Beloved* and in *Midnight Robber*, when violence manifests as a psychological response to trauma when it resurfaces.

When one experiences and witnesses generational trauma the way Dana has, Dana becomes a myth maker because she is connected to all of these family stories and ancestors. Before Dana is transported to nineteenth-century Maryland, she knows her ancestors' names and recognizes them immediately. She feels a sense of love for her ancestors, and those who lived in community with them. She even feels love for Rufus Weylin, the most problematic of her ancestors and a major source of her ancestral trauma, when she meets him as a child. When she first arrives and sees the cabin where Alice’s mother lives, Dana narrates: “These people were my relatives, my ancestors. And this place could be my refuge” (37). Dana does not just feel a sense of love for them but literally finds herself at home with her ancestors. Even with her proximity to Kevin, her white husband who can offer her some safety, Dana talks about working

with those who are enslaved so she can earn her place with them. However, Dana coming into the space of her ancestors, Alice in particular, brings her to the center of their trauma.

The first way this trauma shows up for Dana is in Rufus Weylin's sexual objectification of Alice. He shows Dana that he wants a romantic relationship with Alice and that he has the power to give her an easier life. Alice does not want this relationship with her oppressor, and Rufus then weaponizes those who Alice loves in order to be with her. First, he shows that he is willing to destroy Isaac, Alice's husband, with violence and by selling him further south out of jealousy. He also threatens to beat Alice and force her to have sex with him if she will not compliantly do so. The final act of destruction is when Rufus also sends her children away for a short period of time, making Alice believe he sold her children, as an act of revenge when Alice runs away. This is what drives Alice to her death by suicide.

Dana finds herself inseparable from Alice's trauma. When Rufus first meets Dana as a child, he tells her she could be Alice's mother. Dana is also told by the patroller, "I guess you'll do as well as your sister. I came back for her, but you're just like her" (42). The resemblance is automatically recognized and undeniable. Dana's resemblance is further connected to her ancestors because of their family stories and shared trauma as well. Balaev explains:

The concept of trauma as timeless, repetitious, and infectious supports a literary theory of transhistorical trauma by making a parallel causal relationship between the individual and group, as well as between traumatic experience and pathologic responses. The theory indicates that a massive trauma experienced by a group in the historical past can be experienced by an individual living centuries later who shares a similar attribute of the historical group, such as sharing the same race, religion, nationality, or gender due to the

timeless, repetitious, and infectious characteristics of traumatic experience and memory.  
(152)

Butler shows how Dana would have to survive “everyday humiliations” in order to survive the time and place, and it was not unlike surviving her own present.

Butler’s juxtaposition of the 19th and 20th centuries shows historical patterns. Additionally, she is showing intergenerational trauma as psychically and physically altering. After Alice dies, Rufus assaults Dana and attempts to rape her, showing that Alice’s trauma also belongs to Dana. To protect herself from Rufus, Dana stabs him and he dies still holding Dana’s arm. When she returns to the present, her arm is severed by the wall of her apartment. Dana loses a part of herself physically to the past, even after Rufus loses his control to pull Dana back to his time. Sarah Wood theorizes the loss of Dana’s arm in “Exorcizing the Past: The Slave Narrative as Historical Fantasy.” Wood explains:

Dana is reborn into the present, her knowledge of the past inscribed onto her body. The loss of Dana’s arm indicates not only the disarticulated nature of African American history, but also that the consequences of this are a fractured and disjointed self. Dana has been physically disabled by the past, yet the experience is also curiously enabling as it allows both Kevin and Dana to acknowledge their heritage. Rather than disavowing the complex history that binds black and white America, *Kindred* testifies to the intertwined but often hidden nature of the country’s genealogy whose existence is not confined to the past but whose legacy continues to pervade the cultural consciousness of the American nation. (95)

Dana is physically marked by the slave catchers, and by Tom Weylin when he whips her, and these marks stay on her hundreds of years into the future.



As Wood explains, Butler also speculates how the past shapes white America as well. She first does this by establishing a difference between personal and collective trauma. Balaev clarifies this difference, explaining, “Personal loss can be understood as the lived experience of a traumatic event by an individual. Historical absence can be understood as a historically documented loss that was experienced by a person's ancestors” (152). What Kevin experiences, living five years in the past while only eight days pass for Dana in 1976, is a personal trauma where he loses years from his life. When he returns to 1976 after only eight days, time is disrupted for him. However, Dana also points out how privilege marks white America when she considers Kevin’s displacement in time. Dana speculates:

If [Kevin] was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate life here. He wouldn’t have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. Free speech and press hadn’t done too well in the antebellum South. Kevin wouldn’t do too well either. The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow.  
(77)

When Kevin does return to 1976, he is physically marked: His accent changes from living there, and he physically ages almost a decade.

Dana’s journey to the past connects her to her ancestors' trauma in another way. She travels through time and space to an unfamiliar place, much like her African ancestors endured the Middle Passage and were forced to live in an unfamiliar place, just as far from home. Hampton refers to the first moment when Dana is pulled to the past and finds Rufus drowning. Hampton further explains this connection to the Middle Passage when he claims,

In a much less fabulous manner, Dana's trips to the past can be compared to the middle passage experienced by slaves being transported from Africa to the Americas. Dana begins to feel dizzy and nauseated just before she is transported to a place outside of her home and away from her husband...On June 9, 1976, Dana and her husband Kevin (both writers) had just moved into their new home and were about to begin celebrating Dana's twenty-sixth birthday when her own private middle passage begins" (109).

Dana travels across time and space, and in a similar way, so did those who were taken from Africa to an unfamiliar land and sold into slavery. Where Hampton references Dana's nausea, the important connection is Dana's disorientation from her crossing of time and space. She is just as unable to travel to 1976 California as her ancestors were able to travel back to Africa. She is just as unable to control when she will be transported through time as her ancestors were able to control when they were forced to endure the journey across the Atlantic.

*Beloved* and *Kindred* are important historical novels which remember memories of both resistance and trauma. However, Morrison and Butler have not merely explored historical events, but have used the uncanny and the fantastic to both illustrate and reclaim power held by Black people in their survival when placed in marginalized, degrading, and traumatizing circumstances. The mythic and the fantastic are then used as a way to reconnect to stories fractured by transgenerational trauma. Myth makes healing from trauma that spans generations possible because of the transformative nature of myth across time.

In *The Deep*, Rivers Solomon imagines a magical underwater setting that remembers the stories of pregnant women stolen from Africa, who were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. The setting uplifts the stories of Black people who were killed in the most dehumanizing ways, and whose stories and lives were then forgotten. Solomon's world is not

their own creation, but a transformation of the song “The Deep” by Clipping, a techno/hip hop group made up of Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes. Solomon’s reimagining of Clipping’s work is also an example of story transforming across time since this another version of a shared story. In Solomon’s version of this story, they create the wajinru, mermaid-like descendents of pregnant African women who were thrown from ships. Because the wajinru’s past is too traumatic to be remembered, one person in their society carries the weight of remembering their history. The story centers Yetu, the historian, who remembers for her whole society. However, the role of remembering is so difficult and demanding that it begins to threaten her life. Solomon writes of Yetu’s rememberings of her ancestors: “It wasn’t a story that could be told, only recalled” (31). As the historian, Yetu is able to remember their history and recall it for the rest of the wajinru, therefore sustaining them when they are unable to retain their ancestral memories.

Sharing the “rememberings” with the wajinru also sustains her ancestors who were meant to be forgotten. The ancestors are just as much her people as the living wajinru. Solomon writes: “[The wajinru] living without detailed, long-term memories allowed for spontaneity and lack of regret, but after a certain amount of time had passed, they needed more. That was why once a year, Yetu gave them the rememberings, even if only for a few days. It was enough that their bodies retained a sense of memory of the past, which could sustain them through the year until the next Remembrance” (8). The Remembrance serves as a temporary release of repressed memories. When history and traumatic memories are forgotten, as they are in *Beloved*, rememory becomes activated. The wajinru are also incomplete without the history of who they are, though the pain of remembering becomes too much to live with.

Consequently, Solomon examines the cost of remembering. Like *Beloved*, whose spirit carries the legacy of slavery and who then becomes a scapegoat, like Alice who bears her captor's children, and like Dana who is the descendent of this trauma and is also forced to experience her ancestor's trauma, Yetu also loses much of her own self for the sake of her community. Solomon illustrates this loss, writing, "Yetu's own self had been scooped out when she was a child of fourteen years to make room for ancestors, leaving her empty and wandering and ravenous" (8). This is another example of trauma belonging to women and marginalized genders who are socialized to carry the trauma. Since this comes to Yetu during adolescence, this shows how collective trauma is given to women. Solomon reinforces this gendered dimension by having the wajinru go into a protective mud sphere they call the "womb" when they experience the remembering.

Solomon's association of time with the cycles of the female body in *The Deep* is symbolically close to the Ki-Kongo cosmogram, a Kongo symbol of a spiritual journey and a way of organizing time as cyclical. In *The Deep*, when Yetu experiences the rememberings of the past, time is described as cyclical; moreover, Yetu is able to measure time "based on currents, animal movement, and mating seasons" (7). However, her relation to the passing of time is irrelevant when the rememberings of the past overtake her: when "the rememberings carried her mind away from the ocean to the past. These days, she was more there than here... Yetu was becoming an ancestor herself" (7). In *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*, Robert Ferris Thompson explains the cosmogram's outline of humanity's journey. Thompson explains, "The especially righteous Kongo person will never be destroyed but will come back in the name or body of progeny, or in the form of an everlasting pool, waterfall, stone, or mountain" (109). When Yetu experiences the rememberings of her

ancestors, she is also undergoing the journey illustrated by the cosmogram where she becomes an ancestor.

Even though the cosmogram has been a spiritual symbol before Africa's colonization, the cosmogram is a relevant symbol in the African diaspora, and the cosmogram disrupts the Eurocentric concept of time as linear and definite. Time as cyclical, rather than linear, emphasizes the power of ancestors, and Yetu is responsible for connecting her people to the past. Furthermore, even though historically the stolen African women were murdered by their captors, Solomon imagines a world where their children are not destroyed. The cosmogram also fully encompasses and recognizes the world of the dead. Thompson describes the traits of the *kalunga*, which is the bottom half of the spiral, explaining, "The bottom half of the Kongo cosmogram was also called *kalunga*, referring, literally, to the world of the dead as complete (*lunga*) within itself and to the wholeness that comes to a person who understands the ways and powers of both worlds" (116). The bottom half of the cosmogram's traits "equals midnight, femaleness, south, the highest point of a person's otherworldly strength" (109). In Solomon's novel, this shows up in the history of the wajinru where "triumph and defeat, togetherness and solitude" (34) exist together. What is important in *The Deep* is that these exist together to show how people can survive traumatic histories, and why this is necessary when remembering means continuing to live with physical and psychic pain. However, not remembering takes away their power and allows further exploitation and subjugation.

Yetu's rememberings of the past are traumatic, and as an individual, she cannot carry the pain of these memories. When the memories become too much for her to carry, she flees her community and pushes the memories back to the wajinru. While Solomon examines the cost of remembering at the start of the novella, they also examine what it costs to forget. Yetu feels a

sense of freedom at first when she leaves for her own survival, but she ultimately does not feel the relief she expects. Yetu feels a separation from her people, and laments: “The sea beckoned her, and it pained her not to join it, to be one with it, to feel it all over her. Even though it often hurt, her skin relished the pressure and the feedback. Above the surface, everything seemed so insubstantial and light. She missed being a part of not just the sea, but the whole world. Without the History, she felt out of place and out of time. She missed being connected to all” (83). When Yetu leaves the deep, she leaves her community and the world of the ancestors. Her feeling of displacement from “place and time” is a separation from the lowest point on the cosmogram and is a separation from the spiritual journey outlined by the cosmogram.

Despite the fact that Yetu’s leaving is initially an act of self preservation, she loses her sense of self when she leaves her community. Yetu speculates, “Cut off from [her people], she had trouble making sense of who or what she was. Without them, she seemed nothing more than a strange fish, alone. Absent the remembering, who was she but a woman cast away?” (77). When Yetu explains her role as historian to Oori, a two-legged fisher whose entire family is dead, she explains that her remembering were “holy” (94), but she also describes the forgetting of painful memories as freeing. Oori who has no family is incredulous at this, and says: “I would take any amount of pain in the world if it meant I could know all the memories of the Oshuben. I barely know any stories from my parents’ generation. I can’t remember our language. How could you leave behind something like that? Doesn’t it hurt not to know who you are?” (94). Yetu does feel a sense of loss of her community, but she also experiences desire for the first time, particularly with Oori.

Just as the cosmogram contains opposite sides that are not contradictory but wholeness, Yetu also comes to understand this, when she realizes that “with pain there was life, a chance at change and redemption” (126). When she returns to her community, Yetu reflects:

The burn of salt and the cool flow of water. The warmth she'd felt for Oori and the sadness that had flooded her when she'd chosen to leave. Wanting to see her amaba alive again. Wanting the world to exist, to be more than just a place with a history no one would ever know. These didn't have to be contradictions. She let the multiple truths exist inside her as a way of mediating. It was something that she'd learned to do when dealing with the rememberings, to try to find a modicum of quiet and accept the multitudes inside herself. She never reached calm, nor even a steadiness, but she did it anyway. (142)

In realizing her relationship within her community, and her relationship to her cultural memories, Yetu is fulfilling a spiritual journey that matches the pattern of the cosmogram. Much like Morrison and Butler, who use magic to remember the stories of ancestors who are marginalized and forgotten by history, Solomon shows how remembering is painful, but remembering is also what sustains her community. However, Yetu is not to remember these stories on her own. Her community now remembers the traumatic history of their first mothers and Yetu, like the shaman, is able to teach them how to remember and live with the knowledge of their painful history. Much like in the stories which draw from the stories of the Flying Africans, the rememberings should be shared communally.

Yetu's role as historian who shares the history with her people is an act of sharing these, and her rememberings allow the wajinru to go on. Morrison shows how the trauma of slavery is also carried in the memory of Sethe's dead daughter, which also is a remembering of Margaret Garner, who actually did kill her daughter to protect her from slavery. Sethe is not the only one

to carry the trauma of *Beloved*, she has a community, particularly with Paul D, to share these painful memories with her. In *Kindred*, Dana also remembers and experiences the pain of her ancestors. As a witness of history, Dana saves her ancestral line but realizes her family's stories were meant to be forgotten by the organization of history as linear. In remembering those who were traumatized by slavery, these writers emphasize the role of community in preserving these stories and memories. The creation of home in each of these novels is not necessarily a place, but the community of people who share these stories.



### **Chapter 3: Mythmaking, Mermaids, and the Middle Passage: Intersectionality and Collective Experience**

In each of the literary works that I have examined in the previous chapters, we see the embodiment and literalization of the psychological wounds of slavery and racism play out across generations. Despite the collective disabling trauma of slavery and its violent legacy, disability is most often viewed as an individual experience. Alison Kafer explains, “Despite the rise of disability studies in the United States, and decades of disability rights activism, disability continues to be seen primarily as a personal problem afflicting individual people, a problem best solved through strength of character and resolve” (5). When disability is thought of in this context, disabled people are ignored, and their rights surrounding equitable access and social justice are decentered in favor of searching for ways to cure or fix the disability. However, chronic disabilities have no cure and the concept of healing a disability is both ableist and pathologizing.

As I uncovered in the previous chapter, grief surrounding racial trauma is not something which can be healed from. Just as disability cannot be overcome, the goal of racial justice is certainly not to overcome centuries of inflicted trauma. The question then becomes how one can comprehend the experience of disability or racial injustice. Efforts to address the experiences of disabled people, both narrative and sociological, have often been inadequate. In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder explain:

Like [other] identity-based areas of inquiry, disability studies challenges the common ascription of inferior lives to persons with physical and cognitive differences. Yet this relationship to multicultural studies is a discomfoting one. As feminist, race, and

sexuality studies sought to unmoor their identities from debilitating physical and cognitive associations, they inevitably positioned disability as the “real” limitation from which they must escape... In all of these cases, biological inferiority had to be exposed as a construction of discursive power. Formerly denigrated identities are “rescued” by understanding gendered, racial, and sexual differences as textually produced, distancing them from the “real” of physical or cognitive aberrancy projected onto their figures. (2-3)

Mitchell and Snyder go on to highlight how this is at play within the disability community as well. Disabled people are expected to pass as non-disabled which minimizes the appearance of their physical limitations. However, disabled people who are not able to conform to ableist ideals as successfully are further marginalized.

This is what makes the efforts to address the experiences of people with more visible or debilitating physical or intellectual disabilities inadequate. Kafer explains that typical exercises intended to simulate the experience of disability for able-bodied people by temporarily impairing their mobility vision are very limited as exercises in sympathetic imagination (Kafer 5).

Disability justice does not require understanding what living with a physical disability is like so able bodied people can feel sympathy. Disability justice instead begins with centering disability rights and listening to disabled people.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will investigate the intersection between the disabling legacy of slavery from the perspective of disability studies, exploring how Afrofuturist authors move past the sympathetic imagination, moving into storytelling which creates space for racial and disability justice. As stories which belong to the community, I argue that myth is also important to disability, particularly in terms of accessibility. First, I will be examining the role of Igbo myth in *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, which summons Dana to her ancestral community in order to

save her family lineage. Then, I examine how Yoruban myth and the history of the Middle Passage is at play in *The Deep*, which has been transformed across media in Afrofuturist work.

In examining the intersection between race and disability, the concept of the bodymind will be central to this chapter and is crucial in understanding transgenerational trauma and disability. The bodymind concept rejects binaries, emphasizing the interdependence of the physical and mental. In *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Sami Schalk explains:

The term *bodymind* is particularly useful in discussing the toll racism takes on people of color. As more research reveals the ways experiences and histories of oppression impact us mentally, physically, and even on a cellular level, the term *bodymind* can help highlight the relationship of nonphysical experiences of oppression - psychic stress - and overall well-being. While this research is emergent, people of color and women have long challenged their association with pure embodiment and the degradation of the body as unable to produce knowledge through a rejection of the mind/body divide. Bodymind provides, therefore, a politically and theoretically useful term in discussing (dis)ability in black women's speculative fiction and more. (5-6)

Like Schalk, I will be exploring the bodymind in Afrofuturist texts in this chapter, as well as connecting Schalk's ideas to the collective experience of disability. I relate this specifically to disability's role in myth making, a collective storytelling experience. I have explored the ways myth has been a means of racial justice, as old stories are told in new contexts and can connect people to culture and ancestry. One example of this is the Flying Africans story, first told orally when Africans were first enslaved, then told throughout the African American literary canon, and then again in Afrofuturist texts. The Flying Africans story emphasized the importance of

community. Another example of where the concept of the bodymind appears in Afrofuturism is in Nalo Hopkinson's *Midnight Robber*. With Granny Nanny, as the AI technology and nanotechnology in the characters' bloodstream, Hopkinson disrupts the idea of a body and mind divide. The Granny Nanny technology is also what allows Tan-Tan to access mythological and cultural stories, particularly the story of the Midnight Robber.

Black disability history is unique in the acknowledgment of the collective nature of disability, where disability results from the physical and psychological traumas experienced by a community. Slavery, first of all, is central to trauma and disability in Black history because of its violent production of physical disabilities and bodily disfigurement. However, as a community, enslaved people also experienced social disability where family and community structures were fractured. Schalk explains:

Slavery, which was justified through recourse to ableist discourses, was a traumatic and often lifelong experience for black people that physically produced disability through hard labor, malnutrition, violence, and lack of effective medical care and psychologically through fear of physical and sexual violence, disruption of families and communities, and general inhumane treatment. Extreme scars, missing fingers, missing ears, and mishealed bones were all likely impairments resulting from enslavement. Even free blacks were not protected from this threat due to poor free labor situations, racial violence, and the constant threat of reenslavement or false enslavement. (44)

The concept of disability was also ideologically weaponized to justify slavery by making disability a symptom of racial inferiority. One example of this is "drapetomania," a fictional diagnosis invented by Samuel A. Cartwright which pathologized the flight of enslaved people

from their captors (Samuels 40). This also perpetuated the idea of the simple-minded, happy slave who was overtaken by the urge to escape slavery.

Disability was also used to dehumanize enslaved people. In *Beloved*, when the slave catchers come to 124, they do not distinguish people from animals. The schoolteacher sees Sethe just after she kills Beloved. From the perspective of the schoolteacher, Morrison narrates: “The woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she’d gone wild due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run” (176). The schoolteacher characterizes Sethe’s running away from the work she had to do as “wildness”, and describes her as a “mishandled creature” like a horse. However, the beating is not the sole moment that traumatizes Sethe. The schoolteacher is one of the characters who causes Sethe the most pain, humiliation, and grief as a mother when he steals her breast milk. With the schoolteacher character, Morrison explores the dehumanization of Black people in her contemporary slave narrative, and shows how this dehumanization served to justify slavery.

Because of this dehumanization, both through ableism and racism, authors of traditional slave narratives often wrote to appeal to the sympathetic imagination. These narratives pleaded the humanity of Black people to a mostly white audience. Ellen Samuels explains:

[In order to recuperate] the black body from a pathologizing and dehumanizing racism that often justified enslavement with arguments that people of African descent were inherently unable to take care of themselves - in other words, disabled. Thus we find throughout nineteenth- and twentieth-century narratives and scholarship an emphasis on wholeness, uprightness, good health, and independence. (30)

Authors of traditional narratives were forced to navigate difficult racist and ableist societal structures, claiming personhood through ideals of health and ability. Contemporary neo-slave narratives such as *Beloved* or *Kindred*, while fictional, offer alternative representations of slavery. The neo-slave narrative does not attempt to convince a mostly white audience of the humanity of Black humans nor does it seek to gain credibility with an audience determined to discredit Black voices. The goal of the neo-slave narrative, according to Sami Schalk, is “to recover or discover aspects of slaves’ experiences that were not included in traditional slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives therefore, use history to (re)construct experiences of slavery and affectively (re)connect contemporary individuals in ways that the less literary, nongraphic, and highly pragmatic traditional slave narratives often cannot” (36). Using historical records, authors of neo-slave narratives prioritize representing what the experience was like, examining power, and centering the experiences of marginalized people. Schalk argues that, unlike the traditional slave narrative, the neo-slave narrative has more opportunity to openly talk about the oppressive nature of slavery and its relation to disability, as both Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler do in their novels.

As speculative authors, Morrison and Butler are interested in turning away from realism and genres that need to prove their believability. According to James Olney in “‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature”: “The lives of the [slave] narratives are never, or almost never, there for themselves and for their own intrinsic, unique interest but nearly always in their capacity as illustrations of what slavery is really like” (51). The neo-slave narrative centers the experiences and lives of these narratives. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, neo-slave narratives like *Beloved* and *Kindred* also contain elements of the fantastic to uplift the lives of those who lived in these circumstances. These fantastic

elements are influenced by different cultures and spiritualities. These elements therefore do more than perform for audiences, but reclaim the experiences as their own and connect with audiences whose lives parallel the stories. As a result, these particular neo-slave narratives intersect with myth, which uses cultural stories to connect readers for their own self-determination. They are stories which can speak to everyone, but belong first to Black people.

Having determination in one's own story is also central to disability. While disability narratives can be particularly valuable in eliciting the empathy of able-bodied/minded readers, true disability justice begins with the centralization of disabled people in their own stories. As Mitchell and Snyder point out, "Disability occupies a unique identity that must navigate the terrain between physical/cognitive differences and social stigma" (3). Disabled people want to see themselves represented in stories for their own sake. Their stories do not exist to perpetuate ableist ideals of individual character strength. Similarly, narratives about slavery and literature which educate people to be anti-racist are useful in anti-racism work. However, this also asks Black people to recount centuries of systemic racism often to demonstrate the validity of these experiences. Making a case for one's humanity is degrading, and performing this in narratives for abled audiences requires emotional labor and, often, reliving trauma. However, myths do not exist to make a case for humanity. While myths can inspire people to be more empathetic, provoking the sympathetic imagination is not the sole purpose of myth, as I have argued. Myth-making exists for those who live in the community, who have already lived a particular experience, or existed in a particular identity.

Distinguishing sympathy from empathy is therefore important. Sympathy, which is a distancing from pain, establishes hierarchies. Empathy requires one to connect to one's pain and acknowledge that experience as familiar, and even inseparable from one's own. Myths, whether

in neo-slave narratives or in Afrofuturist fiction, do not exist to recount trauma or to appeal to a sympathetic imagination. They are stories which can connect people by allowing a place of accessibility and justice. Where empathy requires connection and action, myth is also active in establishing connections, particularly among people and between past and present. Afrofuturist authors are therefore interested in myth as a place of transformation in storytelling. Myth allows space for those who were racialized and does not require performance or to make a case for one's humanity.

Both racialized and disabled people have to negotiate the stereotypes that developed from past efforts to make a case for their humanity. The supercrip stereotype, for example, places expectations on disabled people to prove their right to humanity by associating disability with special abilities. The problem with this supercrip trope is that it treats disability as a deficit which requires something extra from a person in order for their life to be valuable to an ableist society. The supercrip trope, which does not center the lives of disabled people, is also an area where the emphasis on overcoming obstacles through individualism is most played out. This is relevant to Black history, as Janell Hobson points out when she observes that “the strong black woman parallels the ‘supercrip’” (194). Hobson examines the way society celebrates Harriet Tubman for her resilience as a strong, Black, disabled woman, and how she is often mythologized since her skills in navigation and survival seemed magical given that she was illiterate (193-194). These stories celebrating how she overcame racist and sexist structures often ignore her as a person who experienced chronic daily headaches and uncontrollable sleeping spells as a result of her epilepsy. When her disability is mentioned, it is used to show her overcoming systems of oppression in a way that shows racism and ableism as things one can overcome by virtue of



one's character. Hobson challenges the idea of Harriet Tubman that portray her as a stereotype of a strong Black woman though, and asks:

What would it mean to rescue Tubman from her iconic status and situate her within her embodied experience of relentless pain and illness?...This becomes an arduous struggle in recognizing Tubman as a vulnerable figure and not just a strong black woman.

Moreover, her work toward the healing and caring for those who were ill or disabled does much to challenge the more popular stories of Tubman's gun-toting leadership on the Underground Railroad. (201)

Hobson's point is important for understanding Black history and disability studies as a collective experience where interdependence is prioritized, rather than focusing on an individual experience that must be overcome or healed from. I would also argue that such a representation of Tubman can often create an ableist binary which positions strength and triumph against community and disability. This binary fails to recognize Tubman's strength. Tubman's strength exists in a compassionate and collectivist sense where she repeatedly risked her life to aid a community to freedom.

As I discussed in the previous chapters, myth is a way to connect displaced people to cultures and can be used as a way of creating a home through community. I would also argue that this is the case for disability culture, where myth-making might cultivate community amongst disabled individuals, and those who have other marginalized intersectional identities. This is something that was very difficult to do in slave narratives, as Morrison writes in "The Site of Memory." According to Morrison,

The American slaves' autobiographical narratives were frequently scorned as "biased," "inflammatory" and "improbable." These attacks are particularly difficult to understand in

view of the fact that it was extremely important, as you can imagine, for the writers of these narratives to appear as objective as possible--not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage, or by calling the reader names. (187)

The persistent presence of disability in Afrofuturism relates, I would argue, to the presence of disability in first hand accounts of slavery, particularly the traditional slave narrative. In traditional slave narratives, disability is a result of racialized violence. Harriet Jacobs' disability occurred from hiding in an attic, Harriet Tubman suffered a closed head injury from an overseer hitting her on the head, and Frederick Douglass acknowledges and describes the physical disability of slaves and his own scars from whips. However, despite the presence of disability, disability remains unnamed in specificity, and disability remains a marginalized facet of one's identity. According to Schalk,

In the antebellum period, a slave narrator could not, within the discursive limits of that sociopolitical context, make a claim to rationality, morality, and citizenship while also claiming disability. Since disability and intellectual and moral capacity were viewed in opposition, even if an author had a disability it would not be represented in a traditional slave narrative as central to their personhood or experience. (38)

Despite the marginalization of the racialized and (dis)abled, disability remains prevalent in narratives. Many of those who produced slave narratives were disabled in some way, whether from mental or physical trauma, because slavery is a violent institution and fleeing from and speaking out against slavery heightened the risk of violence. An intersectional approach between critical race theory and disability is crucial to my argument, particularly when thinking about how ableist images and stereotypes were used to racialize Black people. Sami Schalk also explains how the dehumanization of Black people was rooted in ableism, particularly in terms of

mental and intellectual ability. The goal of the slave narrative often was abolition and many of those who wrote slave narratives, prioritized the humanization of Black people who existed in dehumanizing conditions. This was in response to the ways Black people were dehumanized through stigmas associated with mental illness and cognitive disabilities associated with intellectual and moral inferiority (Schalk 42). This dehumanization was then used to justify their enslavement through ableist pursuits. Therefore, one's experience as a disabled person, whether physical, cognitive, or intellectual disability, was further minimized and erased.

In order to plead humanity to audiences who benefitted from their dehumanization, health ideals, and the ability to "heal" from slavery, were prioritized. Schalk explains that Butler was profoundly aware of this in her ending of *Kindred*. While people were determined to not believe the accounts of enslaved people, Butler also acknowledges this when Dana says of her trips to the past and the trauma that occurred there, "If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane" (264). Schalk argues, "[At the end of the novel], Dana acknowledges the nonrealist nature of her experience and how claims to sanity or able-mindedness in contemporary culture are dependent on rationally explained experiences understood as real... Disability studies scholars argue our culture tends to narrativize disability, wanting a story and explanation for nonnormative bodyminds" (55). In Schalk's reading of *Kindred*, she demonstrates how Butler's use of Dana's disability rejects this: Dana's amputation, reminiscent of a traumatic war wound, happens on the way back to the future and is fantastic and somewhat unexplainable, and its occurrence in the past makes Dana always disabled, making a narrativization of disability impossible (Schalk 50). I would add that because Butler rejects this, Butler is able to write a story featuring (dis)ability more complexly and that she uses myth to do this.

Octavia Butler researched the disabilities enslaved people would have had and we see this with characters like Isaac who loses his ears when he tries to escape with Alice. Butler also includes Carrie, who is nonverbal and devalued as a result of her disability. Sarah, Carrie's mother, explains, "Marse Tom took my children, all but Carrie. And, bless God, Carrie ain't worth much as the others 'cause she can't talk. People think she ain't got good sense" (76). Schalk explains that Butler's inclusion of Carrie "emphasizes how nonnormative bodyminds were devalued and mistreated in slavery" (48). With these characters, Butler makes disability visible in *Kindred*, drawing attention to disabilities present in traditional slave narratives. For example, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass explains how his cousin Henny's hands were injured when she fell into a fire, and how she is mistreated as a result. Douglass writes:

[Master Thomas's] cruelty and meanness were especially displayed in his treatment of my unfortunate cousin, Henny, whose lameness made her a burden to him... I have seen him tie up the lame and maimed woman, and whip her in a manner most brutal, and shocking... He seemed desirous to get the poor girl out of existence, or at any rate, off his hands... Upon a pretense that he could do nothing with her, (I use his own words), he "set her adrift, to take care of herself." Here was a recently converted man, [holding] able bodied slaves who, in freedom, could have taken care of themselves; yet, turning loose the only cripple among them, virtually to starve and die. (162)

Like Carrie, Henny is devalued, punished, eventually neglected, and meant to be forgotten because she is not monetizable. With Carrie, Butler makes sure disabled people are not forgotten.

Through Dana's time travel, Butler also uses myth as a place of access to save her ancestral line and to "touch solid evidence that those people existed" (264). Remembering their

lives is an act of resistance. The community experiences the worst marginalization when everyone is sold after Nigel burns down the Weylin plantation to cover up Rufus' death after Dana kills him in self defense just before she leaves for the final time. Even though Rufus is gone, they are dehumanized when they are sold as property. This also fractures the community since people are not kept together when they are sold.

Myth is at play in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* in the fantastic nature of the story through time travel which rejects a linear narrative, a quality we have seen in my earlier discussion of African spiritual traditions like the cosmogram. African myth may also be at play more directly in *Kindred*. In "Phantasmic Reincarnation: Igbo Cosmology in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*," Stella Setka explores Dana's resemblance to an Igbo figure, the *ogbanje*, which is described as "a spirit being capable of traveling between worlds and known as the *born-to-die* or *spirit child*" (Setka 94). The *ogbanje* is a trickster figure, a child which is born only to die, and therefore torments the mother. This figure appears in works across African and African diasporic literature. Beloved is commonly viewed as an *ogbanje*, as she dies as an infant and then manifests later, and torments Sethe and Paul D, reminding them of their worst memories from slavery. As we see in *Kindred*, Dana's presence as one of Alice's descendents torments Alice as she is a figure who "comes and goes," which is the Igbo translation of the word. Specifically, as the *ogbanje*, Dana is able to access two worlds in a way that allows her to connect to her cultural heritage. Setka explains how myth is at work, explaining,

*Kindred* evokes the ideological and spiritual capacities of the Igbo *ogbanje* as a means of connecting its protagonist to the moment of slavery. The novel restores Dana's connection to the slave past by adapting *ogbanjism* - which includes the ability to travel between worlds - as a literary trope that permits her movement across time and space, a

journey that the reader experiences mimetically. Dana's ability to transgress these boundaries raises important questions about the way that the remembrance and reconstruction of the traumatic slave past informs how individuals relate to their cultural heritage and, more broadly, how readers relate to historical experiences on which they potentially may not lay a cultural claim. (97)

Butler is using this story in a transformative, mythological way which connects Dana to her cultural past. I also would argue that Butler brings Kevin, Dana's white partner, and readers who may not have a cultural connection to slavery, into the past using this myth as well.

However, while empathy is at play for Dana and Butler's audience, Setke also highlights the *ogbanje's* more destructive nature in relation to Dana in order to show the complicitness of Dana and Butler's audience. Setke writes:

While Dana does not outwardly resemble the *ogbanje* in temperament, she does model the *ogbanje's* tendency to privilege its own self-interest at the expense of others. Yet her willingness to preserve the life of an often sadistic slaveholder and her complicity in the rape of Alice serves a deeper symbolic purpose as well: it forces Dana to acknowledge the idea that...the trauma of slavery has made us all kindred, and just as Dana is complicit in Alice's rape, we all are complicit in the perpetuation of slavery's racist underpinnings in contemporary cultural and political institutions. (105)

In order for Dana to exist, she has to preserve Rufus Weylin's life, even though he is Alice's oppressor who traumatizes her to the point where she dies by suicide. In this way, the *ogbanje* spirit is at play in the novel.

Setke acknowledges that Dana is simultaneously empathetic and complicit, as most people who live on indigenous land that was built by the exploitation of Black people are. This is

myth actively connecting people to community and culture, and using the self-interest of the *ogbanje* to subvert self interest and individuality in a way that elicits empathy. However, to add to Setke's point, I do not see Dana's temperament as being the only aspect which sets her apart from the *ogbanje*. *Kindred* is still a story where the myth is used as a means of preserving a community rather than the individual, even when a community suffers at the hand of white supremacy. First of all, Dana is marginalized under slavery; and we see the ways Weylin also breaks down Dana's will by forcing her to work in the field at the mercy of a brutal overseer. While Dana has some privileged interests to protect—particularly in terms of education, her proximity to the power wielded by white men, and the fact that she was not born into slavery—she is both racialized and (dis)abled by the same power structures which marginalize Alice, and she experiences this marginalization within both time periods. Just as people from Africa were stolen to be made into slaves, Dana also is made into a slave. Secondly, and more importantly, Dana is not only trying to save herself. She is attempting to save her family lineage and her ancestral community. The cost to save the ancestral community is high. At the end of the novel, the community is fractured and everyone is sold, except Nigel, Carrie, Joe, and Hagar. But, Dana's visit to the past is what allows this story to be remembered, even if only by Dana and Kevin. Her trip to the past is also what allows her to save the lives of Alice's children despite what happens to Alice.

Butler's novel suggests that myth is a means of accessing the space of the ancestors and preservation of what is lost, and myth is also a means of accessibility. Schalk also explains that myth is important in speculative fiction because it allows for people to examine power dynamics. Myth can be a way to celebrate or mourn what is lost in the present time, rather than focusing on healing. Schalk writes:

Speculative fiction allows us to imagine otherwise, to envision an alternative world or future in which what exists now, like the ability to live on the moon or interact with gods, is suddenly real. For marginalized people, this can mean imagining a future or alternative space away from oppression or in which relations between currently empowered and disempowered groups are altered or improved. (2)

For the rest of this chapter, I will be exploring how this is at play in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*, where Yetu leaves her community to better understand her own role in her community as the historian with a unique understanding of her history. However, in grappling with her community's non-reciprocal dependence on her, Yetu's story teaches the reader about the need for communal interdependence.

*The Deep* is a story that engages with the concept of the bodymind, and challenges how histories are shared among a community. This concept applies to Yetu, (dis)abled as a result of transgenerational trauma. Solomon writes:

Most of the time, Yetu kept her senses dulled. As a child, she'd learn to shut out what she could of the world, lest it overwhelm her into fits. But now she had to open herself back up, to make her body a wound again... Yetu closed her eyes and honed in on the vibrations of the deep, purposefully resensitizing her scaled skin to the onslaught of the circus that is the sea. It was a matter of reconnecting her brain to her body and lowering the shields she'd put in place in her mind to protect herself. (2)

Myth, defined as shared communal stories, is what sustains the community. Without knowing their history, the waijinru have no substance. However, remembering the history on behalf of her community is traumatic to Yetu. This balance between remembering one's history and living with pain is complex and difficult to manage as a community. However, Solomon imagines what



it means to rely on myth as community where everyone shares the knowledge and the burden of history.

The first challenge is that while I have argued that myth is a way to summon community and cultural knowledge, myth can be conservative in nature for precisely the reason that it can tell the same story over and over again. Specifically, this is the case when myth is paired with history. If things are done as they always have been, cycles of trauma, marginalization, and abuse perpetuate, which is what is done to Yetu as the sole historian. Solomon demonstrates, “[Yetu] couldn’t determine which was worse: the pain of the ancestors or the pain of the living. Both fed off her” (29). Both her community’s history and her own particular role cause pain. Yetu, who is called the historian rather than storyteller, shaman, or myth-maker, shows how myth and history working together can conserve the status quo. Yetu being the only person in her community to understand the history of the wajinru almost makes the history a narrative, not a myth. Myth is used to make new stories because while the stories are communal, they are also transformative.

Unlike the historian who is the single carrier of history, myth is not meant to be authoritarian or individual; myth is an experience of collective storytelling. Solomon’s novel, as the third iteration of a myth created by other Black storytellers in other mediums, models this process of collective storytelling. The original mythology was created by Drexciya, an electronic musical group made up of James Stinson and Gerald Donald in Detroit in the 1990s. They created an underwater Atlantic world inhabited by the Drexciyans, warriors who were descended from the pregnant women thrown from slave ships into the ocean. They built this mythology through raves and concerts, but the mythology was also expanded on through art by illustrators

Frankie Fultz and Abdul Qadim Haqq, who created a Drexciyan graphic novel called *The Book of Drexciya*.

The next iteration was by Clipping, the electronic group made up of Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes. Their 2019 album “The Deep” is what inspired Solomon’s novel. Ytasha L. Womack explains how Afrofuturist music is an example of myth being a space of transformation, much like Drexciya has been a collective experience. She explains: “Whether through lyrics or inspiration, new technologies in music, or shock-and-awe performances, the idea of music and in some cases black identity and gender identity evolved... There are no barriers in Afrofuturist music, no entity that can’t emit a rhythmic sound, no arrangements to adhere to, no locked-in structures about chorus and verse” (56-57). The world of *The Deep* and its continued evolution also pushes boundaries and creates new stories. Clipping explains that the passing of this story is much like Yetu’s rememberings shared with the waijinru. Clipping writes:

Yetu’s painful remembering might be seen as an allegory for the painful process of adaptation that Rivers has accomplished by retelling a fictional, but nonetheless consequential, story of white supremacist violence... Experiencing these works requires labor - something like that of an archaeologist who’s discovered multiple texts about the Drexciyan civilization and is tasked with assembling a picture of that civilization. We ask a lot of our readers and listeners. (162)

Just as Solomon shows how Yetu should not be the sole historian to carry the ancestral trauma, the collective, created world of *The Deep* also relies on a community to experience the mythology of the world to remember.

The aquatic world of the waijinru, Afrofuturistic merpeople, is also connected to Yoruba spirituality. These spiritualities have become mythic in the way they have transformed across

time and place. Specifically, in Yoruba spirituality, mermaids are orishas. An orisha is a spiritual manifestation of the god Olodumare. Robert Ferris Thompson examines Yemoja, the river orisha, and how her story has transformed as a result of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, showing the transformation on a ceremonial fan. He explains that Yemoja transformed into Yemaya, the goddess of the ocean, when “a certain river goddess had become dangerously angry” (75) and that “vengeance, doom, and danger also lurk within the holy depths of the rivers where the goddesses are believed to dwell” (73). However, before the slave trade and before she traveled with those who were captured, the river is also where life comes from. Thompson explains that her power is “used against the human arrogance of Western technocratic structures” (75). Yoruba spirituality, in a mythic way, transforms across history. In the western hemisphere, where the diasporic history is inextricably influenced by the slave trade, Yemaya, the goddess of the sea, is celebrated by Santeria, particularly in Cuba. One way of honoring her is by “the tossing of sacrificial flowers into the breakers of the sea” (79), which also symbolically honors those who were lost during the Middle Passage.

Yemaya was transformed by the pain of African people and her anger at their exploitation. Like Yemaya, the wajinru live at the bottom of the ocean. Unlike Yetu, the wajinru’s understanding of history is limited and is purely ceremonial. However, like Yemoja, they experience pain as a moment of transformation, where they become warriors, like Yemaya, when they see violence being driven by greed. The wajinru, when faced with the history for the first time without the guidance of the historian, respond in a way that is destructive and kills many of the wajinru, and also puts the community of two-legs who cared for Yetu at risk. However, Yetu learns to “join [the wajinru] as they experienced [the History]. Just like with the Remembrance, she could guide them through the remembering so it didn’t overtake them with

such violence. They could bear it all together... Could they live out their days all sharing the memories together?" (148) Much like Drexciya's mythology which is a collective experience of creativity, Yetu also learns to share the histories with her community so she is not crushed beneath the trauma and so her community is not left to suffer without direction. Their created mythology resembles the Yoruba mythology, particularly the story of Yemaya, which transforms and shape shifts across place and time.

In each of these tellings, the trauma is never forgotten and healing from the trauma is not the priority. As Schalk points out, this is very difficult to do in traditional slave narratives where "the desire to demonstrate suffering without being reduced to such suffering in a traditional slave narrative depends on keeping the possibility of recovery, healing, and redemption (through the ending of slavery) open and viable" (38). This is something Yetu also struggles with in *The Deep*. Solomon writes, "Yetu wanted people to remember how she remembered. With screams. She had no wish to transform trauma to performance, to parade what she'd come to think of as her own tragedies for entertainment" (10). Yetu has no desire to paint the trauma as beautiful, or something from which she can be healed. The wajinru lack the memory of what happened to their foremothers, but they are still a traumatized group from events that were centuries past. As I discussed in my previous chapter, one does not need to be conscious of the memory for the memory to cause pain.

However, carrying the trauma is difficult as Yetu in her role as the historian is impaired by the weight of the ancestral pain she must bear. When she swims above water to escape her psychic suffering, she is detached from the rememberings, but she also becomes physically impaired. Solomon writes, "Yetu's will thrived where her body faltered. The only thought on her mind was go, go, go. Forward, never backward. Flee. The place she'd gone from was a world of

pain, and there was no distance she could swim where that past wouldn't haunt her" (65). As she swims to the surface, "she became more and more lightheaded. She wasn't sure she was breathing properly, or at all. Water glided over her gills, but it was different water than what she was used to" (67). In this foreign place where she is free from psychic pain but physically disabled, she is taken care of by two-legs. This is where she learns that her community must also carry the knowledge of the remembering, and that while being disconnected from her history allows her to feel a sense of freedom, this freedom disconnects her from her community. She speculates:

The future, too, was dark, if there was a future at all. The hurt that coursed through Yetu as she imagined a futureless world rivaled the pain of the remembering. Could it really be that there was a version of the w/orld where everything would be eradicated? Gone? She imagined how it felt when the History left her, the freedom of it, but if freedom only brought loneliness, emptiness, what was the point? Nothingness was a fate worse than pain. How long would it take for Yetu to become ravenous for something to fill the hole the way other wajinru did? (125)

Leaving her community and meeting Oori is what allows her to learn this, especially because Oori is someone without a community, a family, or a history. Oori says, "I would take any amount of pain in the world if it meant I could know all the memories of the Oshuben. I barely know any stories from my parents' generation. I can't remember our language. How could you leave behind something like that?" (94). While Yetu experiences transgenerational trauma, her connection to community, though imbalanced, allows her to belong. She can, and does, learn that she has to share the pain with her community though. Oori experiences not only personal trauma, but grief at losing her family and all of her ancestral memories. Oori is a connection to those who

do not have a cultural connection to a specific place or people due to the slave trade, and Solomon shows that those who have a connection, like Yetu, even if it is fraught with pain and trauma, are able to share this with their community. Yetu speculates:

For so long, the wajinru hadn't felt like living creatures to Yetu. Just a mass that fed off her rememberings for their own benefit. But like Yetu, they were their own people too. They'd not asked for the emptiness any more than Yetu had asked for the History. Amaba had said it herself before the Remembrance: they were cavities. Oori had felt that way too, robbed of her people's past. It shouldn't be that way, and it wouldn't have to. Yetu would search every last remembering of History until she found a way to free her people from this cursed relationship of wajinru to historian, but first she needed to take the rememberings back on. (145)

Meeting Oori teaches Yetu that home is not lost to her, and also shows her how she can rely on a community. When Yetu returns home, she does not return to the same home as before, where she alone carried the pain of her community. Instead, like the shaman of the Flying Africans, she returns to her community and teaches them what they have forgotten through repression. With her unique understanding of living with centuries of trauma, Yetu guides her community to both remember their history and understand how to live with this knowledge.

At the start of my first chapter, I began my discussion with flight as a way to flee violence and to return home. While the top of the cosmogram shows a sense of physical strength, this is not sufficient on its own and is not sustainable, particularly when home has been violently stolen and there is not a home to which to flee. However, in each story I have analyzed in this project, these characters have made home and cultivated a community, even in the most conflicting, devastating, or degrading contexts. I conclude this project with swimming,

underwater, and the bottom half of the cosmogram, which is the space of the spirits and ancestors. Revisiting these stories and histories, seeing how they have transformed, whether that transformation occurs through folktales, memory, spirituality, music, folktales, storytelling, or literature, is what allows people to connect to a community and create a home when these places are unreachable.

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