The Heterotopia of Flight: Resisting the Domestic

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The Heterotopia of Flight: Resisting the Domestic

by

Sarah Elizabeth Davis

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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Abstract

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Advisor: Dr. Carrie Hintz

The familiar image of a woman fleeing danger is a well-worn convention of heroine-centered fiction, a plot device inevitably resolved when the heroine is returned safely to her home and family. This dissertation proposes a new reading of that narrative by asserting that rather than serving as a space of protection, the home poses the greatest threat to an individual’s autonomy. If we understand the domestic as a space in which bodies are ordered and, more specifically, gendered, classed, and raced, the trope of flight from the domestic can be read as an act of resistance to subjugation. This act is both strategic and symbolic. Since individuals in flight must eventually return to a regulated domestic space, the act of flight is significant not only for what it achieves, but what it represents. The passage of flight creates a liminal in-between space, described by Michel Foucault as a “heterotopia,” that serves as an embodied critique of social, political, and literary attempts to control bodies through domesticity.

This dissertation explores how British Gothic and Sentimental novels of the eighteenth-century popularized the narrative trope of flight from an imprisoning domestic space. It then demonstrates how this trope is subsequently reinterpreted in the genres of nineteenth-century slave narratives, nineteenth-century African American fiction, twentieth-century neo-slave
narratives and science fiction. The trans-temporal focus of this project establishes a path of influence between these genres. This study will survey Gothic novels by Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, Sentimental fiction by Charlotte Lennox and Frances Burney, narratives of slavery by William and Ellen Craft, Harriet Jacobs, and Hannah Bond, and will conclude with readings of postmodern fiction by Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler.
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Introduction

AND is neither one thing nor the other, it’s always in between, between two things; it’s the borderline, there’s always a border, a line of flight or flow, only we don’t see it, because it’s the least perceptible of things. And yet it’s along this line of flight that things come to pass, becomings evolve, revolutions take shape.¹

—Gilles Deleuze

One walked out from that almost perfect wall, spitting at the firing squad. What difference did it make whether the firing squad understood, or did not understand the manner of one’s retaliation or why one had to retaliate?²

—Gwendolyn Brooks, Maud Martha

At a critical moment in Gwendolyn Brooks’ exquisite novella Maud Martha (1953), Maud’s quiet dignity is being tested. Throughout the text, she has excused the preferential treatment her parents show her lighter skinned sister, Helen. She has absorbed the blow of a racial slur uttered in a beauty parlor. She has watched Santa Claus ignore her daughter in a shopping mall. Maud Martha endures the “scraps of baffled hate” conjured by these trials and retreats to her imagination, where she envisions an escape from the dreariness that invades her carefully tended world. But on her first day of work as a domestic worker in the Burns-Cooper household, she is scolded “as if she were a child.” She vows to herself, “I’ll never come back.”³

Maud deliberates over whether she should attempt to explain the reasons behind her decision, summoning the image of a doomed prisoner, spitting at a firing squad. “What difference did it

³ Brooks 162-3
make,” she asks, before reminding herself, “Why, one was a human being.” Maud Martha questions if it is possible to convince others of her humanity, if they cannot conceive of it on their own. She wonders: does an act of resistance have meaning, even if the end result is still the same?

I have always been haunted by this text, and the beauty of Maud Martha’s interiority. She searches for elegance in the ordinary, as in dandelions and clean nightgowns. She wants life to be quiet, and clean, polished, and civil. When the reality reveals itself too often as dingy and undignified, she takes flight in her fantasies, and dreams of an imaginary New York City, or a home in which beauty is cherished. Brooks’ work repeatedly raises questions of Maud’s agency, and how she negotiates “grayness” in the form of poverty, racism, sexism, and monotony. Maud is rooted in a domestic reality that at times threatens to suffocate her, and yet she continues, through tiny gestures, to construct an alternate space of empowerment.

*Maud Martha* might seem like an unusual point of reference for this project. The narratives I will discuss in this study are for the most part stories of dramatic events. Maud Martha is persecuted by a mouse; Sethe, of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter. Yet in the stillness of Maud Martha’s Chicago kitchen, Brooks enacts a meaningful dialogue about how space is threatened, how identity is restricted, and what strategies are available to create a liminal period of agency.

This dissertation explores how the space of the domestic functions as a space in which individuals are ordered and oppressed, rather than protected and nurtured. I have found that in literature with an emphasis on the domestic, a pattern emerges in how protagonists, primarily

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4 My consideration of the domestic invokes the process of domestication, through which subjects are “tamed,” and subjugated.
women characters, respond to this restrictive ordering by taking flight. This study details how flight from the domestic can be read as a narrative trope in five distinct genres of literature. Furthermore, this project will explore how the passage of flight itself, and not the destination of flight, creates a unique, liminal space in which one might enjoy a greater degree of autonomy and creativity. The act of flight serves as an embodied critique of the imprisoning domestic.

However, as Michel Foucault writes in “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” a singular act, a “practice of liberation, is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society” (282-3). Flight does not achieve liberation; rather, it is a “practice of liberation.” This emphasizes the individual’s active process in constructing a separate space of autonomy, made possible by a moment of transition. Those who flee oppression often exchange one form of domination for another. Flight acts as a momentary respite, in which bodies in motion may access a greater degree of agency. In these texts, I’m interested in how the act of flight creates a separate space, or “heterotopia,” as described by Foucault in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” that allows individuals to exist in a state of fluid or suspended principles of social ordering. This unique state works both to reflect and critique the society, and offers a glimpse of an alternate vision.

In Writing beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers (1985), Rachel Blau DuPlessis examines the modes through which women writers are able to subvert restrictive narrative structures. In eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts, the only
endings available to heroines were either “successful” (marriage) or “judgmental” (death). DuPlessis argues that as a result, the preceding action of the text, in which a female protagonist demonstrates agency through her participation in a courtship plot or the adventure of a quest, seems at odds with the static ending. This only served to reinforce that for heroines of these novels, “quest for women was thus finite; we learn that any plot of self-realization was at the service of the marriage plot and was subordinate to, or covered within, the magnetic power of that ending” (6). DuPlessis demonstrates how writers, inhibited by politically or historically dictated endings, find ways to “write beyond the ending” or implement “the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative” (5).

This dissertation identifies one of such strategies in the narrative trope of flight. DuPlessis asserts that the apparent contradiction between these plots and endings reveals a critique of how forms of political oppression are embedded within narrative structures. She writes, “the quest part of the plots at the center of these books propounds something that the marriage plot with difficulty revokes: that the female characters are human subjects at loose in the world, ready for decision, growth, self-definition, community, insight” (14). I’m intrigued by her use of the phrase, “human subjects at loose in the world,” as a means of characterizing figures in flight. If one is “at loose,” it implies that one was tethered to a fixed structure, and is now free of it. (Or at the very least, has “stretched the leash.”) And though they are “loose,” they are still “in the world,” they must still adapt to certain material conditions during this “finite”

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period of the narrative. Finally, in this state, female characters are emphasized as active “human subjects.”

This project explores the narrative trope of flight as it has evolved over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and demonstrates a path of influence through the works of authors in five genres. While I believe this reading of flight has the potential for even broader applications than this study, I want to establish how these specific genres in particular have constructed and transformed this narrative trope.

The structure of this project is divided into two sections. The first half focuses on depictions of flight in eighteenth-century British Gothic and Sentimental novels, and nineteenth-century American slave narratives. Flight in these texts is literal—individuals flee immediate, urgent threats and must physically remove themselves from dangerous situations in the hope of either delaying persecution, finding temporary sanctuary, or at best, achieving freedom. In Gothic fiction by Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, and Sentimental fiction by Charlotte Lennox and Frances Burney, women flee patriarchal oppression and the threat of rape, inheritance theft, forced marriage, and sometimes death. In African American slave narratives by William and Ellen Craft, Harriet Jacobs, and Hannah Bond, authors depict autobiographical accounts of their flight from slavery in the United States. While I do not intend to equate fictional narratives of patriarchal oppression with historical accounts of chattel slavery, I will compare how the authors of these texts make use of flight as a narrative trope through methods specific to each genre. In each text, individuals flee an imprisoning domestic space that seeks to order their bodies according to sex, race, and class. The period of flight serves as an embodied critique of the society they flee, and must inevitably rejoin. The flight of Gothic and Sentimental heroines ends in marriage, as women are reabsorbed within patriarchy, while fugitive slaves
escape bondage only to be subjected to discriminatory laws and treatment in the North. At the conclusion of the texts, both sets of protagonists experience only a conditional or “burdened freedom,” as described by Saidiya Hartman.6

The second half of this project examines how American authors Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler reinterpret flight through the lens of a twentieth-century postmodern political consciousness. Through the genres of neo-slave narratives and science fiction, these authors articulate contemporary concerns about race, gender, power, and identity. In doing so, they reference the conventions of flight from Gothic and Sentimental fiction as well as nineteenth-century slave narratives. At the same time, Morrison and Butler signal a departure from earlier forms as they reinterpret the significance of flight from bondage through a broader historical lens. Written at the end of the twentieth century, these texts reflect a climate of discrimination and oppression that is not implemented by one institution, but an entire systemic political structure. They propose that the imprisoning domestic extends beyond the walls of the home, to the boundaries of the nation state. Morrison and Butler question what forms of flight are available when the threat is more abstract. What is the significance of earlier forms of flight if liberation has been revealed to be illusory? Rereading earlier depictions of flight through this lens shifts the emphasis from what the act of flight achieved to what it ultimately signifies.

Reading the act of flight as a heterotopia, or a space of liminal agency, constitutes a revision of our understanding of the function of flight within these genres. As a result, I believe this reframing of flight has the potential to reveal new readings of traditional narrative structures, and direct the interpretations of future expressions.

Chapter 1: Fictions of Flight

‘Gendering’ takes place within the confines of the domestic, an essential metaphor that then spreads its tentacles for male and female subjects over a wider ground of human and social purposes. Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which in turn, situates those persons it ‘covers’ in a particular place.\(^7\)

—Hortense Spillers

The image is a familiar one: a beautiful woman, her heart pounding, races through the darkness of a subterranean tunnel. Or a mysterious figure runs blindly into a forest, more fearful of what she leaves behind than what she faces in the shadows ahead. This well-worn convention of Gothic fiction, the heroine in flight, provides readers with its obligatory thrill; a young woman fleeing the threat of an earthly or unearthly menace (sometimes both) while the narrative hastens its way towards the resolution of this conflict. But the significance of a heroine’s flight goes beyond accomplishing her escape from the immediate danger of a forced marriage, attempted rape, or financial divestment by a tyrannical father figure. The act of flight serves as a narrative vehicle to facilitate the transversal of spatial, temporal, and political borders.

Similarly, another popular genre of the eighteenth century, the Sentimental novel, is known for its popular portrayals of heroines in flight. Instead of supernatural visions or villainous tyrants, women in these novels flee the domestic threats of undesired marriages and

\(^7\) Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17.2 (Summer 1987) 72.
financial entrapment. Yet while the landscape and passages of flights may vary between these genres, their shared fixation on the female in distress and in flight reveals the unique experience of these heroines in the movement from one state to another. This transitory passage imbues the texts with both literal and symbolic movement between fixed states, and as a result, a heroine in the process of flight becomes a liminal figure, temporarily caught between states of being.

Liminality, a concept originally coined by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his 1908 publication *Rites de Passage*, describes the characteristics of cultural rituals. Within a specific culture’s rite of passage, van Gennep identifies three stages: separation, margin, and aggregation. According to van Gennep, in the process of transitioning from one stage to another, individuals experience a temporary separation from society and are thus “liberated from their former structural identity.”

Over the last forty years, following Victor Turner’s seminal essay “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage” (1967), which extended the scope of van Gennep’s earlier work, literary scholars have used liminality as a means of characterizing spaces, figures, and actions according to their quality of “in-betweenness.” Turner focused on van Gennep’s intermediate liminal stage, stating that this transition created a state of “in-betweenness.” This could be represented by a symbol, a space, a character, or a rite of passage in which a figure is temporarily detached from an existing social structure or hierarchy, thereby potentially facilitating expressions of creativity and individuality which were previously restricted. Through this, “liminality generates or at least symbolizes a kind of undifferentiated creative energy.” In this energy, Turner speculates, "we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure”

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I suggest that even before she even takes flight, the eighteenth-century literary heroine is already a liminal figure. Positioned at the threshold between adolescence and adulthood, she is a young woman on the verge of reaching maturity, yet she is recognized as neither child nor adult. Underlying physical threats to her person are social threats; she is denied participation in any courtship rituals through which she might explore her own maturation and sexuality. These social ceremonies, as constructed within a heteronormative, patriarchal social order, traditionally prepare a woman for her gradual transition to married life, and the responsibilities of becoming a wife and mother. Any attempts to circumvent this ritual, either through forced marriage, imprisonment, or sexual assault, only serve to magnify the heroine’s status as a figure caught between stages of development. Her flight reinstates this ritual by allowing her the chance to engage with her environment, make decisions, and even select her own mate. When she resumes her place in the existing social structure at the end of the novel, she does so as a woman and not as a child.

The act of flight thus functions in part as a rite of passage in the development of the heroine. In flight, she removes herself from circumstances which are not only physically threatening but would deny her the opportunity for individual growth. The heroine’s liminality is reinforced by her temporary sojourn outside of the governance of familial authority. Within these texts, flight does not accomplish the safety of the heroine; rather, it only serves to delay her inevitable return to subjection. Yet from the moment she takes flight, a heroine enters into a singular state of liminality which affords her the autonomy she is denied within a Gothic or

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Sentimental framework of hegemonic patriarchy. Sarah Gilead explains how through this, her “liminality generates or at least symbolizes a kind of undifferentiated creative energy through which …‘we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure’” (183-4).10

The period of flight not only signifies an alternate temporal existence, but a spatial one as well. I would suggest that the passage of flight itself creates an alternate space, existing in between socially regulated spaces, in what Michel Foucault refers to as a “a kind of counter-site,” or a “heterotopia.” Foucault first introduced the concept of heterotopia in the 1966 preface to his publication, The Order of Things, later published in 1984 by the title, “Of Other Spaces.”11 According to Foucault, heterotopias are “Othered” spaces that exist in the margins of society, which he explains are usually inhabited during periods of “crisis” or “deviance.” They are “defined as sites which are embedded in aspects and stages of our lives and which somehow mirror and at the same time distort, unsettle, or invert other spaces” (Johnson 790-1). He describes utopias as “sites with no real place,” which either represent society in an idealized, or inverted form. Alternately, even though heterotopias “are outside of all places...it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”12 In occupying this crucial space on the periphery, heterotopias serve as “cultural mirrors that focus, reflect, and invert all other sites composing the social formation.”13 I suggest that the passage of flight creates a heterotopia, an alternate site that both mimics and subverts the conventions of the socially governed spaces of the flight’s origin.

12 Ibid, 46-49.
and destination.

In “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault explains that all heterotopias are characterized by six defining features. First, they must exist in all cultures, in a multitude of forms, often situated as a place for individuals in either a state of crisis or deviance. The boarding school serves as a removed site in which children experience the “crisis” of adolescence, whereas a prison or psychiatric hospital houses individuals deemed deviant by society. The second principle states that the meaning of a heterotopia can alter over time just as, in the example cited by Foucault, the location of a community’s cemetery moved from the center of town to the periphery, reflecting shifting cultural attitudes towards the dead. The third and fourth characteristics concern the possibility for the juxtaposition of multiple sites in one space (such as a theater) and the containment of multiple periods of time in one space (as in a library or museum). The fifth principle notes that there are specific rules of entry and exit that demarcate a heterotopia as a unique space that cannot be accessed arbitrarily.

Finally, the sixth and most important feature is that it must have a specific and defined function in relation to other spaces. A heterotopia can “create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory,” thus offering a nuanced means of critiquing culture. It may also “create a space that is Other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled,” a heterotopia of “compensation” rather than “illusion” (Foucault *Spaces* 8). It is this last principle that I believe is most relevant to categorizing flight as a heterotopic space.

I posit that the physical act of flight can also be considered a spatial phenomenon, since it is, essentially, a set of evolving positions and relationships to other spaces. A figure in flight is continually defined according to where he or she is *not* located, creating an alternate space out of
perceived absence. There is significant presence in this absence, and the passage in flight becomes a chain of signifiers, denoting, alternately, both absence and presence; where one is, and where one is not. Foucault explains this confluence of presence and absence in a heterotopia by likening it to the phenomenon of a mirror:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface...that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. . . . The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal. (Foucault Spaces 3)

In this sense, the movement of a figure in flight is constantly defining his or herself in relation to a series of ‘real’ spaces, and in doing so, creates an alternate space, or heterotopia.

At the same time, even spaces of alterity are still subject to conventions of the “real” order; therefore heroines in flight must ultimately negotiate both an adherence to and rejection of the social principles of the time. These passages of flight as represented in the Gothic and Sentimental novels of the eighteenth century can be read either as heterotopias of “illusion,” or “compensation.” According to Foucault, certain heterotopias “perform the task of creating a space of illusion that reveals how all of real space is more illusory, all the locations within which life is fragmented” (Foucault Spaces 6). The heterotopias formed by Gothic flight demonstrate this phenomenon. In a Gothic text, flight occurs on the outskirts of society; heroines flee into
forests, tunnels, caves, mountains. Religious sanctuaries are compromised by their allegiance to a patriarchal order; therefore a heroine is only safe in complete withdrawal from civilization. Her act of flight exposes the illusory omnipotence of patriarchal superiority because it is an act of defiance—it is temporarily disruptive—and asserts the individual’s right to contest the authority of a ruling party and to demonstrate her own will. It also exposes the myths of feminine passivity, helplessness, and dependence by creating a space in which female heroines are able to act and survive on their own. It reveals their true capabilities in a way “real space” could or would not, and thereby exposes the illusion of patriarchal righteousness, the myth of feminine weakness. While the social order is not ultimately disrupted by this challenge, and the heroine resumes her position of subservience, she is permanently shaped by her experience, and returns to the old order with an altered perspective.

The acts of flight portrayed in the Sentimental fiction of the eighteenth century, which I will address later in this chapter, occupy a different geographical terrain. While Gothic heroines purposefully keep to the periphery of society, Sentimental heroines flee directly to urban areas. This experience creates a heterotopia of “compensation,” described by Foucault as “the function of forming another space, another real space, as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill-conceived, and in a sketchy state” (Foucault Spaces 6). This space attempts to replicate the values and rules of society, but in a more concentrated construct. As a result, the artifice of not only the recreation, but the original structure of the “real” system is exposed. Because the Sentimental heroine is essentially hiding in public, her actions are subject to more scrutiny than the Gothic heroine in flight, and she must maintain a hyper-regulated performance of propriety in order to assimilate without attracting notice. While she does enjoy a greater degree of autonomy due to her liminal state as a figure in flight, she must replicate expected
mannerisms and behaviors in order to avoid exposure. This compensation then reveals the artificiality of those very rules and rituals; at times her behavior may even exaggerate the conventions of social behavior she means to emulate. Sentimental heroines in flight may occupy the same physical space as other inhabitants of the “real,” but they are not accountable to the same system of codes. As I will detail later, this passage of flight causes a “reordering” of social regulations in its unique state as a heterotopia.

Though unusual, the categorization of flight as a heterotopic space reflects the progression of heterotopia studies since Foucault’s first utterances on the subject over fifty years ago. The notably broad principles have made room for a wide range of interpretations by scholars in such fields as literature, art, and political theory. In a recent article titled, “The Geographies of Heterotopia,” Peter Johnson’s survey of the current state of heterotopia studies addresses concerns regarding the usefulness of heterotopia as a theoretical concept and possibilities for future scholarship. Whereas some scholars, like Kevin Hetherington, have argued that the primary function of heterotopic sites is to “produce another ‘mode of ordering,’” and are “characterised by combining new aspects of social control and expressions of freedom,” other authors such as Arun Saldanha and David Harvey see heterotopias as sites of resistance: “essentially oppositional,” and a “critique of existing norms,” respectively (Johnson 791-5).

Johnson admits that many scholars in the field tend to exaggerate the centrality of heterotopian studies to Foucault’s body of work, while others criticize the ever-expanding list of sites deemed heterotopic in recent studies, thereby rendering the term too general or malleable to be of substantive use. However, Johnson ultimately contends “the concept of heterotopia introduces a

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starting point for imagining, inventing and diversifying space.”  

And while scholars such as Benjamin Genocchio have questioned whether the expansiveness of Foucault’s defining principles of heterotopia make it impossible to distinguish between that which can be argued as heterotopic and that which cannot, I would return to Genocchio’s own original characterization, that “heterotopia is more of an idea about space than any actual place.”  

By this definition, the concept of heterotopia offers a different way of thinking about movement through space, and the social, political, and literary implications of narrative flight.

**Gothic Flight**

The Gothic novel became a feminine substitute for the picaresque, where heroines could enjoy all the adventures and alarms that masculine heroes had long experienced, far from home, in fiction.  

—Ellen Moers

The flight of a Gothic heroine traverses the full landscape of the Gothic universe: castles, tunnels, forests, ruins, abbeys and convents. These spaces function alternately as prisons and sanctuaries, as the movement of the protagonist from one space to the next in turn spurs on the action of the narrative, making the domain of flight just as significant as the act. The Gothic’s focus on such structures as castles, churches and convents, often in “ruinous states, harked back to a feudal past, associated with barbarity, superstition and fear.”

Heroines commonly flee these sites and their oppressive laws. In “Flight of the Heroine” (2007), Fred Botting argues it is

15 Ibid, 800.
18 Fred Botting, Gothic (London: Routledge, 2013) 2.
for this reason that women in Gothic novels flee to “the ruins and forests that are uncharted places of darkness and danger… free from the restraints of law.” ¹⁹ This movement from a space governed by the patriarchal order of family or church to a space seemingly free of restrictive hierarchy creates a temporary respite for the Gothic heroine in which she is able to experience autonomy. It is short-lived, for the resolution of the text ultimately depends upon her return to society to accept her place as wife and mother. Botting suggests that in Radcliffe’s novels, in “leaving the security of privileged domestic space, the female protagonists … are supposed to learn, especially in the encounter with the violence and corruption of the outside world, of the advantages of family life” (Botting Gothic 176). However, I would argue that the texts reveal that the true source of violence and corruption threatening gothic heroines originates within the home, not outside of it.

Scholars of gothic fiction have written extensively on different forms of heterotopia found throughout the genre, focusing mainly on the unique physical symbolism associated with the Gothic landscape. Fred Botting explains in “Power in the Darkness: Heterotopias, Literature, and Gothic Labyrinths” (1993) how cemeteries, ruins, and labyrinths provide rich subjects for the study of Othered spaces. ²⁰ These heterotopias “contested the limits of society” by “marking a shifting relationship to natural and supernatural worlds in which the orders of the past remained only as phantoms of the present” (246). Botting points out that Gothic literature’s incorporation of medieval settings and practices as heterochronies (spaces of different time periods), “were


perceived as a direct challenge not only to neo-classical aesthetics, but also to … Augustan manners, opinions, and society” (247). Finally, Gothic texts revive and reconfigure familiar Romance narratives, a “blending which … marks an attempt to reconcile the unreal spaces of the romances with the reality of recognizably human social space” (248). By examining the fluidity of the spatial, temporal, and literary codes of the Gothic, we may consider how subjectivity is formed through the movement between them.

A psychoanalytic reading of Gothic codes might suggest that “the focus in the Gothic is on the heroine’s mind: … her travels and her adventures can be seen as journeys into the self … the mysterious castles that imprison her and the sublime landscapes on which she gazes can be interpreted as projections of herself” (Spencer 193). Yet while Spencer asserts that in the Gothic, “women are always represented as persecuted, deprived of power, and imprisoned, yet the places which confine them often protect them too,” I would suggest a different interpretation (194). The Gothic offers a series of possible asylums to persecuted women, and yet these sanctuaries only serve to further imprison and confine. This speaks to a larger societal structure of institutions which serve to extend protection to the politically powerless, and in turn, further oppress and limit the scope of their mobility. The only time women are truly empowered in the Gothic text is when they are in motion, between states of confinement. There are no protective spaces in which a woman is not confined, for the very contract of protection demands a woman’s submission to the dominance of a father/husband figure, resulting in the legal, social, and sexual surrender of her autonomy. Gothic flight allows a heroine to assert her own will against the authority of a strict patriarchal figure, and as a heterotopia of illusion, exposes the vulnerability of his power.
The Castle of Otranto

Escape is not security, although it is related to the desire for security. Escape will not make you less vulnerable, although escape is based on a belief that you can become invulnerable.21

—Claire P. Curtis

Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764), credited as the first Gothic novel, begins with a ruined wedding and a devious plan. Following the mysteriously sudden death of his son Conrad on the day of his nuptials, Prince Manfred schemes to divorce his own wife and marry his son’s grieving betrothed in the hopes of producing an heir and retaining the throne he has usurped. However, the maiden Isabella’s refusal to comply incites the chain of events which follow, locating the central tension of the novel within her act of resistance. Isabella’s escape from Manfred also originates the archetype of the persecuted Gothic heroine in perpetual flight, paving the way for countless literary heroines to follow in her footsteps.

Isabella’s flight refutes the authority of the father over her own will. Manfred, acting as her guardian, and later her own father, Frederic, both seek to exploit her in order to further their own financial and sexual conquests. Under their “protection,” she is expected to obey, yet through her flight from the castle and its domain of patriarchal control she assumes an autonomy legally and socially denied to her. She realizes she must flee the castle when her safety is compromised by Manfred’s determination to marry her, and thus protect his claim to the throne by establishing a new line of succession. Isabella flees initially in order to reject Manfred’s physical advances. In doing so, she refuses to acknowledge his parental and masculine authority.

Manfred enjoys temporary legal guardianship of Isabella during the tenure of her engagement to

Conrad, a custodial relationship granted by her own father, Frederic. Within the constructs of propriety, and in Frederic’s absence, Isabella has few options. She may either accept the temporary guardianship of Manfred, or else turn to the “fatherly” protection of the church. However, the implication that she has been made vulnerable to these threats by the absence of her own father is false; when she is finally restored to his care, she is once again endangered. The pervasive system of male authority forces her to go beyond its bounds in order to exercise her own will. Isabella renounces patriarchal custodial claims of first her fiancé’s father and later, the sanctuary of the church, in order to protect herself.

As Prince, Manfred governs the domain of the castle, and all subjects within it. The threat he poses to Isabella is both sexual and financial; his interest in maintaining control over the estate lends urgency to his lust. The immediate threat to Isabella, the rape of her person, represents, on a smaller scale, the larger employment of female bodies to ensure male lineages and control property. According to this system, Isabella would serve as a passive vessel through which Manfred’s ambitions are achieved. Within the confines of the castle, as his ward and his subject, she has no means to refuse Manfred, except by removing herself from the space that renders her powerless, and to seek sanctuary elsewhere. Significantly, Isabella does the unthinkable: she resists. She denies Manfred’s authority over her person and she takes flight, creating a heterotopic site of resistance, thus negating her “father’s” omnipotence.

Gothic heroines must remain in motion because there are no sanctuaries free from patriarchal governance. The very spaces in which endangered heroines might hope to find refuge (such as churches, convents, and abbeys) are subject to the same laws from which the heroine flees. While they deceptively offer a physical space in which to hide and seek peace, they also profess to shield her character and virtue from any false imputations. Heroines in flight are not
only vulnerable to acts of sexual aggression. A young woman in flight risks tarnishing her reputation, since it will be assumed that she is assisted by her lover. However, convents and abbeys cannot protect a heroine in flight, because they are governed by a strict religious order, rooted in patriarchy, which ultimately demands the heroine’s full submission to a different father/husband/master.

Ellen Moers suggests that “the Gothic castle, however ruined, is an indoor and therefore freely female space” (216). I disagree, since in the Gothic, the castle is a space strictly governed by men. I posit that alternately, the Gothic heroine must seek sanctuary in the tunnels, caves, and forests of the novel. These act as liminal spaces which exist on the margins of patriarchal control. Not only do these spaces denote transition, but they can also be read as yonic symbols of feminine power. In order to escape male tyranny, heroines flee to womb-like structures beyond the domain of patriarchal governance. The transient nature of these spaces emphasize that only in the actual process of flight, in the space *between*, is a woman able to maintain any degree of autonomy.

In flight, Isabella enjoys a greater degree of agency. Her flight is initially reactive, but the process demonstrates her ability to create and intuit a new space for self-definition. In the crucial moments of Manfred’s first advance, Isabella takes advantage of a supernatural spectacle to facilitate her escape, leaving a distracted Manfred frozen in place. She methodically reviews all points of egress from the castle and takes action: “in this resolution, she seized a lamp that burned at the foot of the staircase, and hurried towards the secret passage” (27). This process of deliberation is significant; it contradicts characterization of her flight as a blind, erratic panic. Isabella derives comfort and courage from her rationality. Her journey through the underground tunnels, beneath the castle, appears to put her beyond Manfred’s reach.
While most readings of *The Castle of Otranto* attribute Isabella’s escape from the castle to the assistance of Theodore, a fellow prisoner within the castle walls, it is misleading to believe he achieves what she otherwise could not. Their exchange upon meeting demonstrates Isabella’s agency even in her own “rescue:”

‘Alas! said the stranger, what can I do to assist you? I will die in your defence; but I am unacquainted with the castle, and want’—‘Oh! said Isabella, hastily interrupting him, help me but to find a trap-door that must be hereabout, and it is the greatest service you can do me; for I have not a minute to lose.’ Saying these words she felt about on the pavement, and directed the stranger to search likewise … ‘That, said she, is the lock, which opens with a spring, of which I know the secret. If I can find that, I may escape.’

Isabella remains fully in control of her own flight. She has no time for chivalric speeches; she is all method, and action. And it is *she* who unearths the trap-door: “she touched the spring, which starting, aside discovered an iron ring. Lift up the door, said the princess. The stranger *obeyed* …” (emphasis mine). Rather than deferring to Theodore to lead her to safety, Isabella commands him to follow *her*. In fact, the rest of this section, which reveals the pursuit of Manfred and thus the necessity of urgency, demonstrates Isabella’s natural authority. She makes her escape and directs Theodore to do the same. Yet he lacks Isabella’s knowledge of the door and is unable to comply, leaving him to be recaptured by Manfred. Characterizations of his role as rescuer purposefully misread the text; from the moment they meet, Isabella dominates, and if not for his ineptitude, would have rescued *him*. Ultimately, his “rescue” consists of merely delaying Manfred’s advance, allowing Isabella’s flight to continue unimpeded.

Construed as drastic and unexplained, Isabella’s flight perplexes the other characters in
the text. Her motives and facility are quickly attributed by Manfred to Theodore, a strange young man newly arrived at the castle. Though he witnesses her initial escape, he cannot conceive of her ability to act independently, demanding of Father Jerome, “Who is the youth that I found in the vault? He must have been privy to Isabella’s flight: tell me truly, is he her lover?” (52). His willful misunderstanding of the situation works on multiple levels. To him, Isabella cannot act as her own agent; she does not have the authority or the self-possession to do so. A more self-serving narrative is that she has clearly yielded to the influence of another man. Publicly, this fiction reinforces his position that Isabella needs Manfred’s “parental” protection to shield her from this young man, or more importantly, from herself. Reducing Isabella to either child, victim, or whore, he constructs her flight as an act of reckless disobedience and shame.

Isabella understandably rejects the church as a suitable place of refuge, and her attempt to secret herself in the woods is interrupted by (significantly) the interjections of Theodore and her father Frederic, who soon wield their authority in the act of “protecting her.” Trapped into returning to the castle, Isabella is once again subject to the law of the father, and expected to submit to Manfred’s will. Even though her own father has reappeared, he uses his authority to barter Isabella’s interests for his own. Frederic’s intervention only places her in greater danger. Left on her own, Isabella demonstrates that she is quite capable of survival.

Isabella’s flight, while it sadly does little to substantively alter her relative position of vulnerability to Manfred and Frederic, does, however, transform her point of view. She demonstrates a shift in perspective when she chafes at the ignominy of her father’s betrayal, and rejects long suffering Hippolita’s misguided attempts to comfort her by claiming, “It is not ours to make election for ourselves; heaven, our fathers, and our husbands, must decide for us” (91). Though she once summoned her father’s will to protect her from Manfred’s corruption, she
realizes now that she was mistaken. Her vehement statement, “No madam, no; force should not drag me to Manfred’s hated bed,” is markedly defiant (91). This implies that should Frederic sanction her marriage to Manfred, she would not comply; she will not obey. It strikes me as incredibly significant that Isabella does not accept this. It is clear that Frederic does not act in her interest since, “restored to his custody, she is his to “bestow,” and he “is content to waive his claim” (97-8). Likewise, Manfred is only too eager to offer up Matilda so that he might “obtain all he wished by holding out or withdrawing his daughter’s charms, according as the marquis should appear more or less disposed to cooperate in his views” (100). Isabella’s flight has not altered either prince’s perceptions of her; she returns to the same world she fled. However, the passage of flight has significantly transformed her own world view, by exposing the contradictions in patriarchal rule.

If we read Isabella’s flight as a heterotopia of illusion, the alternate space created by her liminality exposes the contradictions in the existing social and political power structure. While she initially flees to preserve her chastity, she resents the methods she must take in order to do so. When her own virtue and safety are threatened by the very figures entrusted with her protection, Isabella sees her true vulnerability, not just as an orphan, but as any woman within the system as a whole. However, her flight reveals not only to the reader, but to Isabella herself, her own ability to thrive, and act on her own authority. Her resourcefulness in braving these trials negates the presumption that she must rely upon the protection and guidance of a male guardian for her own safety. Furthermore, the integrity of the established order is shaken when Isabella demonstrates her resistance, and sets in motion events that expose corruption within the kingdom. The patriarchy remains undisturbed, but men are exposed as dependent upon women to preserve and maintain their power through their lineages. Her flight serves as both a site of
resistance, in which she rejects the authority of Manfred and denies his claim, and as an example: her understanding (and thereby the reader’s understanding) of her position in society is altered as a result of the experience. If, as Peter Hetherington explains, “heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternate way of doing things,” Isabella’s flight offers up this alternate reading of her potential position in this small community (Hetherington viii). Although she ultimately returns to this system, subject to its oppressive demands, Isabella demonstrates confidence in her own judgment, leaving her incapable of viewing the antiquated and unjust mandates of the castle in the same way ever again. However, Isabella is not a fully fleshed out figure. While pivotal, her role in the novel accounts for only a small portion of the text. It would be Ann Radcliffe, Walpole’s Gothic successor, who would expand the form into what we now consider to be a complex literary genre, capable of conveying psychological introspection, social criticism, and of course, delicious narrative suspense.

Ann Radcliffe

Celebrated for its adherence to conventions devoted to the fantastic, the Gothic novel isn’t generally read as a bildungsroman. Yet even though it is characterized by supernatural elements, ancient ruins, medieval law, exaggerated villains, idealized heroines, and the terror of the sublime, these exotic features are still managed within a familiar context: a family, a home, a courtship. The Gothic novel introduces a seemingly safe space—a home, a family—only to then abruptly dismantle the order and comfort of its security. Ann Radcliffe’s novels, with their deliberate focus on young female protagonists, can indeed be read as coming of age stories, in which heroines must negotiate the transition to adulthood amidst these threats. Throughout a
range of circumstances, Radcliffe’s female characters flee their homes, families, and surrogate families in order to survive. Because Gothic flight compels a heroine’s flight from family and home, she must exist independently to confront these threats on her own, be they supernatural or patriarchal, and thus evolve into a more individuated character. In this respect, the heroine of the Gothic novel shares many similarities with that of the Sentimental novel, which I will discuss later in this chapter. The sentimental heroine must also navigate the crucial liminal stage between adolescence and adulthood without the guidance of strong parental figures. Of course, the literary trope of a protagonist coming of age independently through a series of trials is hardly uncommon. What strikes me is why these heroines in particular experience this stage of development while in flight. How does flight facilitate this growth, and how does the very act of flight shed light on the restrictive structures that suppressed individual growth in the first place?

The Gothic exposes the myth of the nurturing family. In her novels, Ann Radcliffe depicts flight as an alternate space in which heroines may recognize their individual capabilities separate from a family unit that works to compromise their agency. Through this heterotopia of flight, Radcliffe’s heroines escape immediate danger and further their own individualized growth. Although temporary, this stage is critical. Even though these young women will ultimately rejoin the oppressive circumstances which initially threatened them, their passage of flight serves as an embodied critique of hegemony.

Not all scholars agree that the movement of the heroine in Radcliffe’s novels is directed away from the family. In “Ann Radcliffe and the Conservative Gothic,” (1982) David Durant describes Radcliffe’s pattern of establishing her heroine within an idyllic family situation, which

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22 The supernatural in Radcliffe is usually explained by human circumstances, but much of the suspense is generated by the perception of possible supernatural causes.
is subsequently compromised through betrayal or tragedy. According to Durant, the primary movement of the text is the heroine’s quest to find her way back to a family unit. Until she can effect this return, she is forced to endure the uncertain chaos of isolation, symbolic of Radcliffe’s condemnation of Romantic individualism. There is much to dispute in this reading of Radcliffe. I would alternately suggest that Radcliffe’s “family unit” represents the greatest threat to women in her novels, because of its rigid adherence to patriarchal codes of control. This is precisely what forms the foundation of the Gothic narrative’s underlying terror. The home and the family work to deny young women seeking self-determination.

In fact, Radcliffe pointedly satirizes the familiarity of the Gothic trope of heroines fleeing fathers. In *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), she introduces the comedic storyline of a second young woman in flight, pursued by her father’s agents. The ensuing farce when one fleeing heroine is mistaken for another is Radcliffe’s humorous take on the trope. However, the joke that in any given Gothic forest, numerous young women can be found fleeing their families, reveals a larger recognition of the home as a credible site of danger. Instead of rendering the flight of these women preposterous, Radcliffe signals that in Gothic fiction these threats are systemic and not limited to one particularly cruel family.

Furthermore, Radcliffe thwarts her heroines’ attempts to replace their former home unit with surrogate families by destabilizing the bonds connecting parents and children. The happy resolution at the end of each text reflects the expectations of the reading public; “order” is restored, and each heroine achieves happiness in marriage. This is unsurprising. What bears further examination, is the process through which the heroine arrives at this rote reinsertion into

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a patriarchal family unit. How does her flight critique the stability of this resolution? In “Renegotiating the Gothic” (2000) Betty Rizzo writes of Gothic heroines:

> Cast upon their own resources with no paternal or uxuorial guide, they express curiosity and investigate; they speculate on their discoveries; they theorize; they act without consultation rather than plunge for protection into a man’s arms. For the gothic heroine, getting out of danger hinges on understanding herself, her situation, and the nature of her adversary.²⁴

This crucial period offers a young heroine the chance to manage conflict on her own, which can only be facilitated by her detachment from the family structure.

**A Sicilian Romance**

The joy she now felt, on finding herself thus unexpectedly at liberty, surpassed, if possible, her preceding terrors.²⁵

——Ann Radcliffe, *A Sicilian Romance*

As in *The Castle of Otranto*, Julia, the heroine of Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), flees her home in order to escape a forced marriage. Decreed by her tyrannical father, the Marquis of Mazzini, the match would unite Julia with the Duke de Luovo and permanently part her from her love, Hippolitus. Julia’s flight from the castle, and the efforts on behalf of the Marquis and Duke to recover her, comprise the controlling focus of the text. The path of Julia’s

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flight takes her deep into the mountainous forests of the coastal shore of southern Italy, as she escapes the familiar Gothic structures of castles and abbeys. By making Julia’s flight such a focal point of the text, Radcliffe presents a compelling argument for the necessity of individual action in the face of tyranny. Furthermore, her flight reveals an alternative order in which a young woman may act upon her own will, and reject the prescribed role she is expected to inhabit. Albeit a temporary state, the fleeting demonstration of her agency critiques the family’s culpability in suppressing female autonomy.

Like Isabella’s act in The Castle of Otranto, Julia’s flight is ultimately compelled by an oppressive, paternal authority. Yet Radcliffe intensifies Julia’s familial conflict by suggesting that more is at stake than a union to a man she abhors. In the company of her father, Julia is robbed of the ability to speak; his pronouncement of her arranged betrothal to the Duke de Luovo literally stuns her into silence: “She sat motionless—stupefied and deprived of the power of utterance” (126). Only moments earlier, Julia had been consumed with the ecstasy of new love, exulting, “Absorbed in the single idea of being beloved, her imagination soared into the regions of romantic bliss, and bore her high above the possibility of evil” (52). Radcliffe presents a clear binary: in the creative process of fantasy, Julia’s thoughts enjoy infinite freedom, whereas under the reality of her father’s dominion, she is rendered mute and immobilized. Within this family unit, under the authority of her father, Julia is incapable of having a voice and will of her own. Deprived of an effectual maternal advocate, Julia must remove herself from his influence in order to exercise her own will. Significantly, Julia’s actions will enable her to rescue her imprisoned mother, long believed to be dead.

Julia’s flight ends the rule of her father’s tyranny and signifies a critique of a family model which permits the symbolic death of women in patriarchy. Ruth Bienstock Anolik
suggests in “The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode” (2003) that even though the persecuted maiden has become a familiar Gothic trope, the true victimized women are the mothers. In nearly every Gothic text, the mother is either dead or imprisoned. It is useful to consider how heroines emerge in contrast to their immobilized, passive predecessors. The decisive acts of Isabella in The Castle of Otranto, Julia in A Sicilian Romance, and Adeline in The Romance of the Forest offer a sharp contrast to the despairing passivity of their mothers in those texts. Anolik suggests the motif of the imprisoned or deceased mother is a literalization of the legal precepts of coverture and primogeniture (26). Both systems worked to legally erase the public identity of women. Anolik explains, "under the system of coverture, the woman's legal identity was ‘covered’ by that of her husband. She underwent a civil death and forfeited all rights to possess property, custody of her own children, and indeed, herself" (26). 

Primogeniture, the law which determined that all property would be inherited by the firstborn son, "effectively erased the female presence from the line of property transmission" (Anolik 32). According to Anolik, if a wedding brings about a woman’s public death, then the Gothic trope of interrupted weddings demonstrates how the young heroines are resisting their own legal erasure. This analogy can also be applied to the ceremony of taking religious orders, likened to a spiritual wedding, which also divests a woman of a legal identity and financial property. Anolik concludes, "In literalizing legal and economic structures the Gothic mode allows for a demystified and thereby skeptical reading of such structures, encouraging readers to see the horror implicit in seemingly mundane systems of oppression" (34). Repeatedly, Gothic heroines flee vows of marriage and holy orders. In doing so, they postpone their inevitable political erasure by creating an alternate space in flight.

Julia’s decision to escape signifies a rejection of her father’s authority while creating a
heterotopia of illusion. Radcliffe explicitly frames the act as a justified response to tyranny. Hippolitus invokes language reminiscent of John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*, when he insists Julia should “fly … from the authority of a father who abuses his power, and assert the liberty of choice, which nature assigned you” (140). If, under natural law, an individual was justified in rebelling against a tyrant who did not serve his interests: “his will, the rule; and his commands and actions are not directed to the preservation of the properties of his people, but the satisfaction of his own ambition, revenge, covetousness, or any other irregular passion.” This would imply that Julia is justified in defying the order of a father/king who abuses his power, and asserts tyranny over his subjects (family). According to these terms, Ferdinand and Hippolitus argue, one must resist, rebel, and flee. Considering Locke’s views on paternal order, the connection between father/dictator is easily found; this situates Julia as an independent subject, deserving of the same natural rights as any other individual. Radcliffe suggests she has the right to resist parental tyranny, and must do so by fleeing the dominion of her father’s reign. This justification for rebellion asserts Julia’s rightful claim to autonomy, and her efforts to find a space in which she may exercise this power.

Significantly, Julia effects her own flight, independent of her would-be masculine protectors. Julia successfully flees the castle, without the help of her brother or lover. Instead, she is assisted by her servant, Caterina, and the women make their escape together. Julia feels the immediate influence of her action when she recounts, “‘I soon breathed the air of freedom again. But the apprehension of being retaken was still too powerful to permit a full enjoyment of my escape’” (172). [Emphasis mine] The implication is that her freedom is still tenuous and her

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27 Ibid, Chapter XVIII.
relief is marred by the threat of imminent recapture. However, I would posit that this line offers an alternate reading; Julia admits taking pleasure in the process of flight, and it is only her fear of recapture that prevents her from reveling in her newfound autonomy. She experiences the same exhilaration again, when, after eluding near capture, realizes, “the joy she now felt, on finding herself thus unexpectedly at liberty, surpassed, if possible, her preceding terrors” (172). Radcliffe stresses Julia’s elation, rather than a sense of relief, or release. Her act of flight signifies more than her immediate removal from danger; it is a creative process, and an act of individuation.

In flight, Julia demonstrates the independence and competence denied to her within patriarchy. As a liminal figure, she exists in an in-between state where she may explore alternate expressions of subjectivity. Turner describes this as a period in which "we may catch glimpses of that unused evolutionary potential in mankind which has not yet been externalized and fixed in structure” (Turner Ritual Process 128). On the run from her father’s control, Julia exists in an alternate, transitory state. While the territory she traverses is still very much a part of the world she flees, her constant state of movement creates a relational limbo in which she is able to explore a more flexible expression of identity. However, the heterotopia of her flight must still operate within the confines of a real social order; it does not create an entirely new paradigm. Therefore, Julia understands that even though she has rejected the authority of her father, she must still conform to general rules of feminine propriety. The alternate space of her flight reveals the contradictions present in her efforts to respond selectively to the restrictions of patriarchy. I would argue that this negotiation reveals the illusory nature of her flight’s heterotopia. Julia must actively choose how to define her subjectivity within an existing system. She extends the boundaries of this system through her flight, but she is never fully free of it.
Julia demonstrates this by recognizing that her flight will be interpreted as a shameful act. However justified, her flight will be understood as a severe transgression against her father and her own reputation. She deliberates: “A sense of delicacy made her hesitate upon the decision which her heart so warmly prompted. If she fled, with Hippolitus, she would avoid one evil, and encounter another. She would escape the dreadful destiny awaiting her, but must perhaps, sully the purity of that reputation, which was dearer to her than existence” (141). Julia is reluctant to incur the shame that flight and its association with elopement would bring to her. In *The Castle of Otranto*, Isabella’s flight was attributed to the encouragement of a lover. Julia fears she will be disgraced in the same way. Her flight will not be read as a mark of an individual fleeing oppression; rather, she will become a figure of contempt in the eyes of society. Yet even though she claims her reputation is “dearer to her than existence,” a sentiment encouraged by a culture that privileges feminine chastity above all else, her actions refute these words. Julia’s primary motivation throughout the novel is not to preserve her reputation, but to preserve her autonomy.28 She makes choices which repeatedly reaffirm this drive, at the expense of her relationships, personal safety, and yes, reputation.

Her example illuminates how women in flight must negotiate space differently, and how that process of negotiation creates a heterotopia. A man traveling alone is unremarkable; a woman traveling alone is solely responsible for whatever harm befalls her. Julia’s efforts to survive and assert her will in the face of coercion are considered secondary to maintaining her virtue. Another Radcliffean heroine, Emily St. Aubert, will famously stop to purchase a hat in the midst of her escape from Udolpho, so that her unadorned head does not spark disapprobation.

28 I would add that Julia balances a sense of self-preservation with her sense of decorum. At one point in the text, she realizes the impropriety of fleeing with Hippolytus. While he insists upon their immediate marriage, she resists, and attempts to seek refuge in yet another convent.
Indeed, “her appearance excited some surprise, for she was without a hat, having had time only to throw on her veil before she left the castle, a circumstance, that compelled her to regret again the want of money, without which it was impossible to procure this necessary article of dress”[emphasis added]. The patterns become clear: in literary portrayals of female survival, women are still held accountable to societal standards of femininity.

In fact, scholars often acknowledge Radcliffe’s strict adherence to codes of femininity. As Yael Shapira writes in "Where the Bodies Are Hidden: Ann Radcliffe's 'Delicate' Gothic” (2006):

The heroine who gravely ponders etiquette while running for her life is a peculiar feature of Radcliffe's Gothic...Radcliffe's own polite identity, as well as the presumed propriety of her largely female readership, required that corporeality be shown in her novels through a particular filter, constructed according to the norms of her time. (454)

I would argue that this adherence to conventional configurations of femininity grants Radcliffe the space to suggest subversion on other levels. A heterotopia, while existing as an Othered site, must still adhere to the conventions of the social order. Even though Julia is temporarily removed from her father’s home, she is still a subject of her society, and must behave accordingly. Heterotopias may not erase existing conventions, but their unique status calls attention to contradictions and instabilities in accepted norms, which might appear less remarkable in their original social context.

30 Jane Austen will also successfully achieve this twenty years later, by integrating subversive ideas into conventional courtship plots.
Radcliffé’s fleeing heroines invariably seek refuge, but soon question the safety of their chosen sanctuaries. In *A Sicilian Romance*, Julia willingly seeks refuge at the abbey only to find a replication of the oppressive conditions of her father’s castle. Later in this chapter, I will discuss how in *Romance of the Forest*, Adeline also flees the confines of a convent, and she will refer to a return to it as a “last resort.” At the abbey, Julia unwittingly trades one tyrannical father for another. She confesses to the Abate that she “had sought in this monastery, a last asylum from injustice and misery … entreating that the Abate would grant her his pity and … protect her from parental tyranny” (52). But by securing herself within the confines of the abbey and thus the Catholic Church, Julia makes herself vulnerable to another patriarchal order. She finds herself imprisoned within the abbey, and subject to the law of a new father, who judges her rebellion harshly:

Daughter … you have been guilty of heinous crimes. You have dared to dispute—nay openly to rebel, against the lawful authority of your father. You have disobeyed the will of him whose prerogative yields only to ours. You have questioned his right upon a point of all others the most decided—the right of a father to dispose of his child in marriage. You have even fled from his protection—and you have dared—insidiously, and meanly have dared, to screen your disobedience beneath this sacred roof. (63)

Julia is rebuked for daring to act on her own will. The litany of accusations leveled at her by the Abate illuminate the true source of his anger: female disobedience, and not only that she disobeyed her father, but that she felt she had the right to do so.\(^{31}\) Julia’s flight embodies her betrayal of the social order, and thereby creates an alternate relational space. If her duties under

\(^{31}\) It should be noted here that the Abate is also giving vent to his pride because he believes that his position has not been properly appreciated by Julia and Madame de Menon. He terrorizes Julia in order to instill in her a proper sense of his masculine authority.
the roof of her father’s home are clear, and to remove herself from that space without her father’s permission implies a rejection of those duties, Julia inevitably experiences a new sense of identity even in the confines of the abbey’s simulated prison. She is already in flight, and therefore, does not see herself as bound to the same rules.

Radcliffe constructs the convent as a false sanctuary. Julia finds herself in a situation which parallels her dilemma at the start of the novel. The Abate threatens Julia with a choice: she must either take the veil, or he will return her to the Duke, an ultimatum which replicates her father’s earlier ultimatum. Once again Julia chooses her own path, and plans to “fly for concealment to the deep caverns belonging to the monastery, which wound under the woods” (76-77). She rejects the patriarchal space of the abbey, and seeks temporary refuge in symbolically feminine terrain. Julia exhibits far less hesitation than before, and demonstrates the full evolution of her character in flight.

The heterotopia created by the act of flight enables Julia to experience independence and self-reliance. The final juxtaposition of an active, vibrant, Julia with her despairing, imprisoned mother, makes clear her transformation throughout the text. David Durant argues that Radcliffe’s “heroines do not progress from adolescent innocence to adult goodness through the trials they undergo” rather, they maintain their innocence by resisting change (525). He claims that by the end of Radcliffe’s novels, “her heroines devise no strategies by which to appreciate a chaotic world” (525). Yet Julia’s behavior in the cave and her response to her mother’s imprisonment at the end of A Sicilian Romance directly counters this claim. She has become a confident and assured woman whose experience of independence teaches her vital lessons of survival, and

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makes her the rescuer of her mother. Julia immediately devises a plan for them to escape:

‘Let us hasten to fly this horrid abode—let us seek to escape through the cavern by which I entered.’ She paused in earnest expectation awaiting a reply. ‘Whither can I fly?’ said the marchioness, deeply sighing … her broken spirits, the effect of the long sorrow and confinement, made her hesitate how to act; and there was a placid despair in her look. (176)

We see the evolution of Julia’s character in this revealing role reversal. She is all action and confidence. She is eager to rescue her mother and herself from this new prison. In contrast to the marchioness Julia demonstrates initiative and confidence. She is optimistic in the prospect of their escape, having “represented these circumstances to her mother, and urged them so forcibly that the lethargy of despair yielded to hope, and the marchioness committed herself to the conduct of her daughter.” Whereas Julia was once urged to fly by Ferdinand and Hippolitus, now she is the director of this rescue: she cries out passionately “‘Oh! Let me lead you to light and life … making me the deliverer of my mother’” (177).

_The Romance of the Forest_

The Gothic world is one of nightmare, and that nightmare is created by the individual in conflict with the values of her society and her prescribed role.  

—Juliann E. Fleenor

Whereas _A Sicilian Romance_ may be considered Ann Radcliffe’s take on the despotic villainy of _The Castle of Otranto, The Romance of the Forest_ (1791) broadens the scope of flight within the Gothic narrative, exploring applications beyond the act of a persecuted heroine.

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Radcliffe begins *The Romance of the Forest* with multiple characters already engaged in mid-flight. A financially ruined couple flees Paris, creditors, and the law, only to encounter a young woman, Adeline, attempting to escape mysterious captors. Adeline joins the La Mottes in flight, and together they seek temporary refuge at an abandoned abbey hidden deep within the forest. The discovery of their asylum by a villainous Marquis will have sinister implications for both the La Mottes and Adeline, and they all spend the novel in varying states of confinement and flight. Radcliffe examines forms of imprisonment and freedom on multiple levels by introducing questions of innocence, guilt, and the enactment of justice by both individuals and the state.

The flight of Radcliffe’s “innocent” heroine becomes complicated when Adeline must align her fate with the flight of the guilty. If the act of flight creates an alternate space in which one might enjoy a greater fluidity of identity, this must be true for all agents. If the heterotopia of flight acts as a relational space, it explains the constantly shifting relationships throughout the novel. Adeline is continually being forced to determine who she may trust, and who is a danger to her. Instead of positing a traditional family as the immediate danger to her heroine, Radcliffe instead fashions a series of surrogate guardians who alternately protect and betray Adeline as the situation demands. The passage of flight creates a degree of ambiguity in determining the identities of characters in motion. The La Mottes explore the full spectrum of their own moral capabilities, and Adeline demonstrates her ability to survive most successfully without the protection of “family.”

Radcliffe constructs an even more dramatically liminal heroine in Adeline. She has no stable identity; her relation to a family, a name, or even a state of consciousness is indeterminate at the start of the novel. Throughout the narrative, Radcliffe examines Adeline’s relative agency and vulnerability as a woman in flight by denying her any identifying ties except those she
claims for herself. The discovery of her true lineage will facilitate her eventual reinsertion into the social order at the end of the novel, thus eliminating any need for the independence she proves in flight.

Although prone to fits of weeping and indulging in self-pity, Adeline is not a heroine immobilized by her grief. On the contrary, she repeatedly advises the La Mottes to take action, and continue their flight, rather than endure the terror of their own persecutors. But it is when Adeline learns of the Marquis’s plans to rape her (with the assistance of her former protectors, the La Mottes) that she demonstrates meaningful initiative. She enlists Peter, a reluctant servant, to help her flee the abbey, exclaiming, “We fly from enemies; strangers may prove friends: assist me but to escape from this forest, and you will claim my eternal gratitude: I have no fears beyond it” (147). She is confident and insistent: “If I was once beyond this forest, I would then endeavor to take care of myself, and repay you for your kindness” (148). When she reaches their appointed meeting place, she finds herself alone, and must make a decision as to how to proceed. She worries at Peter’s delay, and suspects something has gone wrong with their plan: “This conviction operated sometimes so strongly upon her fears, as to urge her to quit the cell alone, and seek in flight her only chance of escape” (154-5). Adeline’s instincts are correct. Their plan has been compromised; the Marquis succeeds in carrying her off to his villa.

Had Adeline been acting alone, capable of making decisions solely for her own protection, she might have been safe from the Marquis. Her reliance on Peter makes her vulnerable. When she is alone she exhibits confidence in her own powers of reasoning and perception. In the company of others, she defers to their judgment. In flight, Adeline possesses an agency denied to her when she acts within a more traditionally defined social structure. Even her reliance on Peter to convey her through the forest conforms to masculine/feminine
protector/protected binaries.

Adeline further demonstrates her independent survival skills when she successfully flees the Marquis de Montalt’s villa by herself. Locked in unfamiliar chambers, she immediately checks the doors and windows of her prison for possible means of egress. Nelson C. Smith argues in “Sense, Sensibility, and Radcliffe” (1973) that while Adeline’s penchant for weeping might make her the least sympathetic of Radcliffe's heroines, she too demonstrates common sense when it is most critical. Radcliffe even makes clear that Adeline is unmoved by the lavish furnishings which might have distracted another woman: “Adeline threw a transient look upon these various objects, and proceeded to examine the windows, which descended to the floor, and opened into balconies towards the garden she had seen from the saloon… one refused to yield, but her heart beat with sudden joy when the other opened to her touch” (274). Adeline is full of action and purpose. She realizes that “the window, which descended to the floor, was so near the ground, that she might jump from it with ease: almost in the moment she perceived this, she sprang forward and alighted safely in an extensive garden” (275). Radcliffe pointedly describes her lack of hesitation, and the certainty with which she carries out her intent. This confidence continues: “Thence she had little doubt of escaping, either by some broken fence, or low part of the wall; she tripped lightly along, for hope played round her heart… she resolved neither to return to the chateau, nor to relinquish her search” (275-7). Yet when she encounters Theodore, who has come to rescue her from the Marquis, she defers to his authority, and permits him to carry her off the grounds, as he declares, “let us fly!” (279). Theodore “congratulated himself on her preserver” and, like the Theodore of Otranto, is largely credited with the rescue of the fleeing

maiden.

While it is primarily due to Adeline’s own bravery and ingenuity that she gains her freedom, Radcliffe goes to great lengths to make Adeline’s escape efforts acceptable to societal expectations of feminine virtue. Adeline justifies her use of deceit to herself and the reader when adopting artifice to fool the Marquis into thinking she believes the sincerity of his proposal. And even though her flight from the Marquis’s villa surely preserves her from bodily harm, Adeline is not insensible to her vulnerability in relying upon Theodore to convey her to safety: “the circumstances of her present situation now appeared to her, and she became silent and pensive: she had no friends to whom she could fly, and was going with a young Chevalier, almost a stranger to her, she knew not whither (281). Theodore must apologize for confessing his love to Adeline during their escape from the villa, thus imposing additional intimacy upon their already compromised circumstances. In *Rise of the Woman Novelist from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986), Jane Spencer writes “Such concern for decorum is necessary to veil the way Radcliffe’s plot works to satisfy Adeline’s sexual desires, unacknowledged though these are by heroine or author” (206). Radcliffe has to emphasize the propriety of Adeline’s and Theodore’s behavior, so that a strict observance of social codes counterbalances the surrounding context of pure romantic fantasy (206).

In *A Sicilian Romance* and *The Romance of the Forest*, Julia and Adeline are at their most vulnerable when they depend upon the assistance of others. The burden of obligation places them both in situations of increased threat. By surrendering her safety to the protection of the Abate, and thus yielding her autonomy to his authority, Julia finds herself in greater danger than before. Adeline’s dependence upon the La Mottes invites her repeated imprisonment in the ruins of the abbey, where she must flee from the Marquis’ lascivious demands.
While the conclusions of both texts suggest that each heroine ultimately finds security in the protection of marriage, the flight of each woman achieves more than the suspenseful extension of the plot’s conflict. Before becoming reabsorbed into their proper roles within the patriarchy, these young women experience adventures in which they enjoy an independence and agency they would otherwise be denied. The act of flight exposes the fallacies of patriarchy. Rather than revealing her heroines to be fragile victims of a world “wicked and beyond the control of the innocent,” Radcliffe proves these women to be active agents who, when given the opportunity, are capable of negotiating a world ruled by systems of law aimed at oppressing them (Durant 525).

**Sentimental Flight**

Heterotopia are not quite spaces of transition—the chasm they represent can never be closed up—but they are spaces of deferral, spaces where ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve—social order, or control and freedom.  

—Kevin Hetherington

Like Gothic fiction, the plots of Sentimental novels in the eighteenth century frequently revolve around the plight of a vulnerable young woman forced to survive in a dangerous environment. Heroines flee their homes from threats similar to those of their Gothic counterparts: forced marriage, appropriation of inheritance, and implied rape. However, the space of flight varies significantly between the two genres. Gothic heroines flee with the purpose of

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concealment. Often the danger is immediate, so they hope to find sanctuary in a remote space separate from society and their oppressor’s influence. Women run to forests, to caves, through tunnels, and even into abandoned ruins. These alternate spaces, imbued with feminine symbolism, serve as a contrast to the rigidly patriarchal structures of castle and convent. The movement of Gothic flight is a retreat from the exposure of the public domain into the anonymity of the margin. Heroines seek refuge on the periphery, in the liminality of such terrain beyond the governance of those who seek to dominate them.

In stark contrast, flight in Sentimental fiction occupies primarily public spaces. Heroines flee to cities, ride on public stagecoaches, and participate in social intercourse. Their reasons for running may initially resemble those of their Gothic sisters, but the way they perceive society, and their identification as public figures, differs dramatically. In the two examples that I will discuss, Charlotte Lennox’s *Henrietta* (1758), and Fanny Burney’s *The Wanderer* (1814), the female protagonists, Henrietta and Juliet, flee their homes to ingratiate themselves into new communities using new identities. Both women negotiate with varying degrees of success the formidable challenge of surviving in a world dictated by social connections and familial influence, under the adopted personas of friendless, classless, single women. This is no easy task, and though Henrietta and Juliet are perhaps less in fear of risking an encounter with the Italian banditti than risking their reputations, there is very real danger for a young, beautiful woman perceived to be without protection.

While Sentimental flight still entails a hasty departure from an oppressive point of origin, the passage of flight is not limited to the crossing of geographic borders. In order to survive independently, heroines must create alternate personas in which they often pretend to occupy a lower class status, or in the case of Juliet a different race, however briefly. By deriving
protection from the perceived cover of an altered social rank, these young women are able to hide in plain sight; and the same system that limits their autonomy as upper class women affords them, in limited ways, the freedom to manipulate cultural codes in order to assume conditional anonymity and social fluidity.

In this context, flight more closely resembles the concept of heterotopia as described by Kevin Hetherington in *Badlands of Modernity* (1997). Hetherington posits that heterotopia, rather than serving as sites of resistance, are actually “spaces of alternate ordering.” According to Hetherington, “heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternate way of doing things.” Lennox and Burney manage to deliver largely conservative narratives which revolve around deliberately subversive female protagonists. If flight, as a heterotopia, exists as a series of spatial and social relationships, women writers during this time period utilized flight as a means of reordering these relationships, not with the aim of challenging the existing order, but to offer a brief glimpse of an alternative. There is never any question that the heroine will be both wealthy and wed by the end of the novel; the purpose of her flight is not disruptive, rather, it is instructive. If “heterotopia reveal the practice of social ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing,” so can the act of flight reveal and critique the class and gender limitations of a contemporary social order.

For these reasons, the passages of flight in Sentimental fiction act as heterotopias of compensation: alternate spaces that attempt to mirror or recreate existing structures. Heroines aspire to assimilate into new communities while still maintaining their anonymity. To do so, they

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37 Ibid, ix
must demonstrate knowledge of social codes and behaviors, thus fashioning a performance of identity based on their understanding of how their participation should appear. Yet these women do not assimilate fully; they remain in a state of liminality that inhibits them from total integration. Therefore, within the construct of an adopted identity, they occupy an alternate social paradigm of their own creation, in an attempt to recreate a world in which they hope to become invisible. Invariably, this “in-betweenness” only enhances their visibility further.

*Henrietta*

Seeming to be outside the group, the liminal figure is actually its moral representative and, in fact, exists to serve the social structure from which he seems to have been separated.38

—Sarah Gilead

Charlotte Lennox’s *Henrietta* (1758) begins with her eponymous heroine already in mid-flight. In their introduction to the critical edition of *Henrietta*, Ruth Perry and Susan Carlile credit Lennox with the creation of a memorable “opening gambit” as we witness Henrietta negotiating the volatile space of a crowded stagecoach: anxious, alone, and determined.39 They suggest that Fanny Burney uses this very construct as the inspiration for her opening scene in *The Wanderer*, decades later. *Henrietta* is the story of a beautiful young orphan, dependent upon her indifferent relations for support, who flees the home of her aunt in order to escape a forced conversion to Catholicism and marriage to a man she abhors. Henrietta sacrifices familial protection, and the promise of a generous inheritance, in favor of her liberty and the protection of

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her personal and religious integrity. However, once made, this choice incites a number of situations in which she must negotiate her own autonomy at the expense of material comfort to the point that “Henrietta … spends most of the book calmly but firmly telling an interesting assortment of men and women what she will and will not do for money.” 40 After leaving her aunt’s estate, Henrietta attempts to seek assistance from a long lost brother and an absent guardian, but ultimately must rely on her own wits and competence in order to find housing and later employment, all while being pursued by suitors of dishonorable intent. Ultimately, she is reunited with her brother, who assumes immediate control of her person. Her flight, as well as any claim to independence, is essentially concluded.

The coercion of forced marriage, a familiar threat to eighteenth-century heroines, is interestingly complicated by Lennox through the added element of religious conversion. Henrietta’s aunt attaches conditions to both her financial support of Henrietta as well as her already limited affections, by demanding that Henrietta convert to Catholicism and marry Sir Isaac Darby. Therefore, Henrietta’s rejection of her aunt’s directive is validated by both personal and spiritual motivation. This in turn complicates Henrietta’s rebellion, and the language of her objection changes depending on which terms she deems most objectionable at the time. In her first response to her aunt (or rather, the first response she is able to fully utter without Lady Meadows’s hand clamped over her mouth), she declares:

> Were anything less at stake than the future happiness of my life, you should find me incapable of opposing your will; but in this case it is not possible for me to obey you. Judge of my aversion to that man, when I protest to you, that if death or his hand was an alternative that I must chuse, I would without hesitation prefer

40 Ibid, (ix)
death as the lesser hardship. (72)

However, Henrietta’s choices throughout the novel repeatedly belie this dramatic statement. Henrietta not only continually acts in the interest of her own survival, but she also does so on her own terms, within the existing social structure. Henrietta rejects the binary of marriage or death, and instead creates an alternate path, in flight.

Sentimental flight, because of the public nature of its execution, adheres to a more complex system of social coding. Although Henrietta frames her imperative for flight in terms of life and death, she is more concerned with the social ramifications of her action than actual physical risk. Whereas Gothic heroines are subject to the same suspicions, their first concern is escaping imminent physical danger. Ironically, Sentimental heroines often find themselves in threatening situations because of their stubborn persistence to maintain contemporary standards of feminine propriety, whereas the neglect of such codes might have spared them from harm or grief. This marks a noticeable shift in the way Sentimental heroines perceive danger in contrast to their Gothic counterparts. The threat is rendered less direct, and therefore it is even more pervasive. Henrietta fears the inevitable compromise of her body and beliefs rather than an immediate assault. She contextualizes her actual departure according to the social significance of her act to Miss Woodby, “I don’t think you will allow it to be an escape, when I tell you I walked peaceably out of a door, not without some trepidation however, which arose less from the fear of a pursuit, than the consciousness that I was taking a step which every young woman of delicacy will if possible avoid” (75). Henrietta repeats this sentiment throughout the novel; she understands all too well that her flight risks her reputation, her most precious asset. The loss of one’s reputation is essentially the same as the loss of one’s virtue, and thereby the loss of a woman’s cultural capital. Henrietta recognizes this grim truth from the very beginning: “the
consequences of her flight rush’d full upon her mind: Lady Meadows’s favour irrecoverable; her fortune ruined; her reputation blasted. This last thought, which, from the delicacy of her sentiments, gave her the deepest regret, dwelt most upon her mind” (15). Significantly, “her reputation blasted” gives her her “deepest regret,” and will inform the way she performs her identity in flight.

In flight, Henrietta’s participation in the social order is, in a sense, re-ordered, due to the liminal properties of her new state. She is simultaneously bound to conventions reinforcing an existing social hierarchy, yet she temporarily enjoys an enhanced mobility within those strictures. In *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century “Women’s Fiction” and Social Engagement* (2000), Paula R. Backscheider argues that because of this unique flexibility, heroines are able to take on more assertive roles within the narrative. She explains: “often associated with maturity and initiation rites in anthropological literature, liminal spaces in the best novels go beyond that to form a special province of world discovering and problem solving” (18). We see evidence of this when Henrietta’s attempts to locate a new protector fail. For the first time she takes charge, finding herself more than capable of negotiating with lecherous “libertines” and opportunist landladies. This freedom affords her the opportunity to change her name, and even change her class. Her initial feelings of degradation at her lowered station are countered by her pleasure in self-sufficiency, and the relief that she is generally recognized as a gentlewoman by her manners, bearing, and beauty.

These very signifiers of her gentle birth prevent Henrietta from fully assimilating into society as a companion or maid servant. While she adopts an air of humble supplication, she does not disguise her lovely features or pleasing speech. For Henrietta, this mainly works in her favor; strangers are delighted with her gentility and find her story more credible because of it. It
is important for Henrietta and the reader that she is never fully believed as a lower-class female. She feels strongly the degradation of posing beneath her station, even as she reluctantly asks Mrs. Willis to find her a “service.” Again and again, Henrietta’s physical and social “virtues” suggest her true status, and she enjoys a degree of privilege from this. Henrietta briefly enjoys the distinction of transitioning from a despised member of the upper class to an exemplary figure in the lower. Henrietta also takes comfort in the belief that her situation is temporary:

Henrietta, whose imagination was naturally lively, and not wholly free from those romantic notions which persons of her age readily admit, began to consider her transformation from the niece of Lady Meadows, and a presumptive heiress, into the waiting-maid of a cit, as one of those caprices of fate which never fail to produce surprising effects. She could not help fancying herself the future heroine of some affecting tale, whose life would be varied with surprising vicissitudes of fortune; and that she would at last be raised to a rank as much above her hopes, as the station she was now entering upon was below all that her fears had ever suggested. (138)

The heterotopia of her flight re-orders social codes to the point that Henrietta’s original persecution is revealed to be especially contradictory. In being denounced by her aristocratic relations as unworthy of their distinction, she is forced to perform the very status they would suggest she inhabits naturally—and yet, it is revealed to be decidedly unnatural. Lennox details at length Henrietta’s inability to convincingly play the role of a member of the servant class in order to reassure readers of her sincerity as a virtuous woman.

Henrietta is aware of how her change in class imputes a looser moral character, and she experiences increased vulnerability at the loss of a direct male protector. While she utilizes the fluidity of her class status to negotiate the terms of her independence, this same indeterminacy
destabilizes her claim to protection. It is in this way flight acts as a relational space that unsettles and illuminates the process of constructing social order. Henrietta’s integrity as a woman and as a character are unchanged, but her presence, even as she works to assimilate into the existing social structure and not subvert it, serves as a critique upon its inherent contradictions. If virtue is largely associated with class, Henrietta’s unique liminality exposes the artifice of such characterizations.

Henrietta’s flight is not framed as a rebellion against patriarchy. While Gothic heroines fly directly from wicked male aggressors, and revel in their eventual defeat, Henrietta’s enemy is less clearly defined, and she equivocates on the terms of her escape. At one point she even makes an appeal to her aunt for permission to return. But it is her eager “surrender” to her brother’s custody in the last section of the novel that especially problematizes a reading of her flight as liberatory. Mr. Courteney is a stern, strict figure who, instead of receiving Henrietta as family, acts as a disapproving custodian instead, prompting Henrietta to exclaim, “Why do you look and speak so coldly, my dear brother? ...To be sure I can have no objection: dispose of me as you please, you are in the place of my father, I will obey you as such” (223). It is difficult to see this formerly spirited heroine submit so happily to such a figure, but it is not contrary to her character. Henrietta’s goal from the beginning has been to seek the protection of her brother. Therefore, we cannot be surprised as readers, to see it done. Katherine Sobba Green explains in *The Courtship Novel, 1740-1820: A Feminized Genre* (1991), “thus, even while Lennox goes to some length to exercise feminist issues in relation to marriage, and while her heroine outlines a model for rebellion against female socialization, her denouement neatly restores the social fabric to a seamless whole” (61).

However, her liminal agency in flight leaves a lasting impression on the reader, and Mr.
Courteney’s harsh interpretation of his duties as both Henrietta’s guardian and the Duke’s trusted employee invoke questions regarding the justice of this system. Order has been restored, but it has been unsettled. Instead of facilitating a match between Henrietta and the marquis, he actively works to prevent it, threatening Henrietta, “It is possible the marquis may talk to you of love: if you give him the least encouragement, you will forfeit my esteem forever; it shall never be said, that I took advantage of his youth to draw him into a marriage with my sister” (227-8). Above all else Courteney prioritizes his own honor, declaring, “your marriage with him, sister, will bring everlasting infamy upon me” (236). Henrietta submits to his demands, but she objects to any implication that she would purposefully bring shame upon their family. She quietly pleads, “place some confidence in me, brother, you will find I shall deserve it” (236). He obviously does not have confidence in her; her flight from Lady Meadows damages her in her brother’s eyes perhaps more so than any other. The final insult comes when he, shockingly, commits Henrietta to a convent, in order to prevent her from disgracing him, and jeopardizing his standing with the duke. The very threat that prompts Henrietta to take flight in the first place is reintroduced as another means of controlling her. Yet this time she assents willingly to her brother’s suggestion since she “found it so reasonable, and so much to the advantage of her reputation, that she readily yielded to put it in immediate execution” (237). Henrietta is released from her confinement after her brother is materially rewarded by the duke for his loyalty, and she is finally permitted to marry the object of her affection. Lennox’s decision to frame both ends of her narrative with alternate forms of imprisonment only serves to emphasize the unique properties of the heterotopia created by Henrietta’s flight.

If in flight Henrietta enjoys an autonomy denied her by her aunt and later her brother, she also enjoys control over her own narrative. To explain her plight and establish credibility,
Henrietta relates her story and real name to a sympathetic Miss Woodby and later Mrs. Willis. These confessions have mixed results: Miss Woodby initially minimizes the seriousness of Henrietta’s plight by insisting, “Such a beauty as yours would have soon engaged some adventurous knight in your cause, who would have scaled the walls to have delivered you—Oh, what a charming adventure! I protest I would submit to a few months confinement in such a place, for the pleasure of being delivered from it in so gallant a manner,” before later betraying her friend’s confidence to gain favor with a gentleman (74). Alternately, Mrs. Willis insists that Henrietta return to her aunt and beg forgiveness, detailing the imprudence of her actions: “Can a young woman, who voluntarily sets herself free from that restraint, hope to escape unfavourable censures, when those who owe it to chance only that they are not subjected to any control, suffer perhaps in the opinion of the world, because they are possessed of a liberty which they may make an improper use of?” (116). While both confidants offer flawed advice, one erring on the side of romantic fantasy, the other rigid conformity, they offer something more valuable to Henrietta: the opportunity to tell her story. Henrietta derives emotional comfort from the exercise of unburdening her conscience. Miss Woodby permits Henrietta to clarify her reasons for fleeing her aunt’s house: “the loss of liberty seemed to me so frightful a misfortune, that I was almost distracted with the idea of it” (75). Mrs. Willis’s gentle remonstrances urge Henrietta to seek reconciliation with her aunt, an act which, when met with fierce insistence on Henrietta’s Catholic conversion, serves to confirm, in her mind, the necessity of her flight: “she was not free from a little enthusiasm that told her it was glorious to suffer in the cause of religion, nor so disinterested as not to feel great pleasure in the thought of being able to free her moral character from injurious suspicions, by so firm an attachment to her religious principles” (132).

Henrietta’s multiple retellings of her story to other characters throughout the text
emphasize her ability to reframe her actions separate from the disparaging history perpetuated by her aunt. By fleeing her house and detaching from her influence, Henrietta establishes a new trajectory and claims not only control over her actions, but also the narrative context for those actions. Henrietta is free to tell her story, or withhold it, according to the circumstances. She maintains a protective anonymity unless revealing the truth will serve her advantage. Even though she risks her reputation with such open rebellion, she also asserts her own will, and voice, in a means denied to her before and after her time in flight. This freedom to determine how and when she may release the details of her situation, and the way she uses this liberty to her benefit is significant in comparison to Fanny Burney’s heroine, Juliet Granville, in *The Wanderer*, who must navigate her own flight constrained by a vow of silence.

*The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties*

Disguise, I acknowledge, Sir, you may charge me with; but not deceit! I give no false colouring. I am only not open.  

—Francis Burney, *The Wanderer*

Fanny Burney’s fourth novel *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties* (1814), famously conceived in the tumultuous 1790s and eventually published in 1814 to scathing reviews begins, like *Henrietta*, with its heroine in mid-flight. Set amidst the turmoil of the French Revolution, Burney’s narrative portrays Juliet Granville’s daring escape from France during the height of the Terror and her attempts to survive in a British resort community, all the while unable to reveal a single detail about her identity. The loss of her purse places the “Incognita,” as

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42 Reviews were published rather swiftly for the time, and most of the vitriol was aimed at the length of the text.
she is initially called, at the mercy of the local gentry, though her sole aim is to find a means through which she may maintain her independence and anonymity until her friends can claim her. The mysterious circumstances of her flight: a forced marriage, a scheme to divest her of her inheritance, and a Bishop in peril, are only brought to light at the very end of the text, when Juliet’s identity is made known to her family and her journey concluded.

Juliet’s refusal to reveal her name or position is a continual source of unrest within the small community of Brighthelmstone, the town we now know as Brighton. Despite her attempts to quietly assimilate, the heterotopia created by her flight only serves to “distort, unsettle” and “invert” the space around her. This is because there is no available narrative in which a young woman traveling alone may enjoy any degree of autonomy; she might only achieve such independence through connections, or money. Having neither, Juliet exists as an anomaly; she has no identity the gentry can use to assess where she fits into the social order of the town because she refuses to supply it, suggesting a defiance of social customs and class authority. This defiance marks her as deviant, and subject to the judgment and persecution of the local community.

Juliet’s efforts to maintain her anonymity are complicated by her state of financial dependence. In *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self* (2003), Patricia Meyer Spacks details how “the poor have no right to privacy,” and therefore Juliet, in a position of dependence, would be expected to subject herself to the scrutiny of her benefactors in return for their assistance (92). One by one, Juliet is persecuted by a string of “benefactors” who expect that their assistance will yield them control over the mysterious Juliet, and thus force her to reveal her

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secrets to them. However, Juliet refuses to supply her story as collateral capital, which serves to infuriate her “patrons” and turn them against her. Furthermore, Juliet’s efforts to exercise her own free will (for example, in the management of her brief venture as a harp instructor) are met with strict disapproval and financial consequences. Juliet suffers a gradual decline in social favor and therefore must transition over the course of the novel from house guest, to domestic companion, to music tutor, to public performer, to seamstress, to servant, to shop girl, and finally vagrant. This descent is largely due to her refusal to reveal the truth of her identity or situation to anyone, including the reader.

While Juliet’s manners provide her with a “socially acceptable mask,” they are not an adequate substitution for a name and family lineage (Spacks 94). Without this concrete means of identifying her place within the social order, she must suffer the implications of guilt. The common assumption, of which Juliet is painfully aware, is that a young woman, on her own, would only be in such a situation due to her own wrongdoing. According to patriarchal custom, if Juliet is of good birth and chaste, she would be under the care of a guardian and not fending for herself on the English Channel. Her insistence on remaining alone and her refusal to identify a familial or legal connection act as proof of her refusal to submit to the social order, implicating her as guilty of wrongdoing. Yet as Margaret Doody notes, “Burney shows us why we cannot believe that the system of male patronage and protection actually works justly and fairly for women” (Doody xxi). Juliet’s situation, just like those literary heroines before her, demonstrates the hypocrisy inherent in a system that purports to control women for their own protection, yet uses that system of control to exploit and violate them. Juliet herself will ask, when frustrated by the injustice of her situation, “‘What is woman, with the most upright designs, the most rigid circumspection, —what is woman unprotected? She is pronounced upon only from outward
semblance: —and, indeed, what other criterion has the world? Can it read the heart?” (344). Juliet’s flight outside of the system creates an alternate space for her survival, yet subjects her to the prejudices of those invested in maintaining the current order.

Juliet understands her social disadvantage, and hopes to demonstrate her “innocence” through her actions, if not through her history, in order to peacefully assimilate into the society at Brighthelmstone. This proves to be impossible as evidenced by her repeated clashes with Mrs. Howel, one of the society women offended by Juliet’s presence. To Juliet’s claims of innocence, she responds, “‘Innocent?’… without a name, without a home, without a friend? —Innocent? presenting yourself under false appearances to one family and under false pretenses to another?” (133) Juliet is guilty of only her anonymity. Beyond the physical disguise she adopts to make her escape from France, she never lies, and in fact, rather than utter a word she is not at liberty to communicate, she responds to the many inquiries into her name and situation with persistent silence. She simply refuses to answer. This, too, angers her critics. Juliet’s silence compels her companions to name her themselves: the absurd “Ellis” taken from the mistaken pronunciation of the initials “L.S.,” on Juliet’s correspondence. Their need to assign her a name reveals the anxiety caused by Juliet’s undefined presence in their midst, and is just one example of how they attempt to control what they do not understand.

Juliet’s indeterminacy renders her dangerous in the eyes of the community. Because her expectations of a British sanctuary have been disappointed, she is forced to maintain an active state of flight, even while she is waiting for news. She is caught in a liminal state of in-betweenness, as Doody describes, “She is always a woman on the cusp: neither French nor
English, neither maid nor wife.” (xxi)\textsuperscript{44,45} She must strive to maintain feminine modesty while being exposed to public scrutiny, and she must demonstrate the manners and accomplishments of a gentlewoman, though her status seems to defy such claims: “she unites but does not resolve contradictions” (Doody xv).

Juliet’s liminality marks her as a deviant figure in society, yet at the same time affords her a certain degree of agency. Her anonymity prevents her from claiming her rightful identity, but protects her from capture by those who wish her harm. This contradiction alternately enables and limits Juliet’s efforts to maintain her independence. Juliet demonstrates remarkable facility with disguise, since throughout the text she “moves from black to white, and is found to have an interchangeable or indeterminate set of identities” (Doody xxxv). Indeed, when Juliet first appears within the text, she is wearing bandages on her face, rags for clothes, and dye upon her skin. These efforts render her racially ambiguous, and the revelation, days later, “of a skin changed from a tint nearly black, to the brightest, whitest, and most dazzling fairness” only adds to the confusion surrounding her identity, and motives (43). Mrs. Ireton scathingly describes Juliet’s varying impressions:

You have been bruised and beaten; and dirty and clean; and ragged and whole; and wounded and healed; and a European and a Creole, in less than a week. I suppose, next, you will dwindle into a dwarf; and then, perhaps, find some surprising contrivance to shoot up into a giantess. There is nothing that can be too much to expect from so great an adept in metamorphoses. (46)

\textsuperscript{44} Margaret Doody, Introduction. The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties, by Frances Burney. 1814. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991) xxi.

\textsuperscript{45} Doody refers to the fact that even Juliet’s true identity is complicated. Since it is unclear whether she is married to a Frenchman, both her liberty and citizenship are in question.
Her metamorphosis is, in fact, the issue. The open disdain directed toward Juliet when she is believed to be African or West Indian\textsuperscript{46} is not alleviated by the dissolution of her disguise. Juliet clearly hopes that her artificially darkened skin will render her unrecognizable, but more importantly, beneath the notice of her fellow travelers. She depends upon their snobbery in order to avoid scrutiny. Instead, the revelation of her dissimulation only increases their interest in her, and the strangeness of her unidentifiable presence among them. Once Juliet proves herself to be capable of manipulating multiple categories of race and class, she establishes a willingness to transcend any number of social boundaries, thus making her a dangerous figure.\textsuperscript{47}

It seems laughable that a young, diminutive, and painfully modest young woman could be viewed as dangerous, but her presence as a liminal figure, eluding usual strictures of control, threatens the balance of numerous households in this community. Her critics fear that she will prey upon those susceptible to her appealing nature and considerable beauty. Mrs. Maple fears that she will be discovered to have harbored a disreputable person under her roof, and introduced her to society. Mrs. Howel goes to extreme measures to prevent Lady Aurora and Lord Melbury, two youths in her charge, from seeing or even corresponding with Juliet. Finally, Lord Denmeath “saw that there was no time to be lost in guarding against the most eminent danger: he desired, therefore, that the young woman might be induced, if possible, to quit the country without delay” (209-10). He alone suspects Juliet’s true identity and acts out of greed, rather than in response to Juliet’s threats to the social order. Yet his designs are executed and supported by a community

\textsuperscript{46} For further discussion of Juliet’s reception as a racialized figure, see: Sara Salih. “’Her Blacks, Her Whites, and Her Double Face!’: Altering Alterity in The Wanderer.” Eighteenth-Century Fiction 11.3 (April 1999) 301-315.

\textsuperscript{47} This is a fascinating reversal of a mode of flight I will discuss in Chapter Two of this study. Fugitive slaves also manipulated codes of race in order to “pass” as white in flight. This had the effect of suggesting the possibility that more people might be doing the same thing, and called into question essentializing strategies of determining race.
predisposed to fear an individual not bound to obey prescribed social codes.

Lord Denmeath implements measures to remove Juliet from the country because he comprehends better than anyone how her act of flight empowers her. Though her purpose is often convoluted by the many complicated subplots in Burney’s novel, Juliet ultimately seeks to claim her true name, her family, and her identity.\footnote{Her secondary goals might include: claiming her true inheritance, securing the Bishop’s safety and ending her coerced marriage.} Lord Denmeath stands to profit by denying Juliet’s true family connections and rightful inheritance. Juliet’s continued state of flight signifies her insistence on claiming her birthright, and growing understanding of her own capabilities. Should she identify herself, Lord Denmeath would be in a better position to control her. Because she refuses to be named, his access to her is limited, and she remains out of his reach.

Through the isolation of flight, Juliet gradually gains confidence in her own ability to survive. Early in the novel, Juliet claims to seek only “protection” and “compassion” (57). As the narrative progresses and Juliet is repeatedly betrayed by false gestures of protection and compassion, she must learn to survive without assistance. She obtains, briefly, her own living quarters and “the hope of self-dependence, ever cheering to an upright mind, sweetened the rest of Ellis in her mean little apartment” (220). Again and again, Juliet asserts her right to act on her own will, since she is manifestly not under the direct control of another. At one point in the text, Juliet is forced to take a position serving Mrs. Ireton, who derives great pleasure from humiliating her. After a particularly nasty insult, Juliet decides to simply leave the room, and reject the continued abuse. Mrs. Ireton demands to know who has given her permission to leave, and she responds, proudly, “‘A person, Madam, who has not the honour to be known to you,—
myself!’ And then steadily left the room” (525). Juliet’s defiant phrasing reveals her satisfaction that Mrs. Ireton’s power is not absolute; in withholding her identity, she keeps it for herself.

Like Henrietta’s, Juliet’s flight creates a heterotopia of compensation when she creates a separate, relational space in the midst of an established community. Even though she enjoys a certain degree of fluidity in self-expression through her liminal state as a woman in flight, once she discards her initial disguise and accepts her assigned alias “Ellis,” Juliet strives to adhere to strict standards of feminine modesty, often at the expense of her own peace of mind. In “Defiant Women: The Growth of Feminism in Fanny Burney's Novels” (1977), Rose Marie Cutting explains that while in Burney’s previous novels her heroines undergo a rigorous education in proper female etiquette, “Juliet, the heroine of the fourth novel, is not shown acquiring the feminine virtues. Her conduct is already perfect; yet such behavior does not fit her for integration into the corrupt society depicted in the novel” (520). These social codes are contradictory. By replicating expected values, she demonstrates her knowledge of society, but she is unable to enjoy equal participation, since the actual execution of these codes is revealed to be rife with hypocrisy.

Juliet attempts to replicate social values as she knows them, only to find them inconsistently practiced by the community around her. In this way, her example reveals the artifice of these constructed rules that do not serve the interests of those they are meant to protect. Juliet occupies an alternate space in the heterotopia of compensation created by her flight, since her observance of social conventions is more credible than the society she emulates. Juliet becomes distraught upon realizing “her conduct is criticised, not scrutinized; her character is censured, not examined; her labours are unhonoured, and her qualifications are but lures to ill will!” (275). Her efforts to assimilate, using the codes of the community, reveal the corruption
within the system.

Her experiences demonstrate the injustice of the system when Juliet finds that it functions prejudicially. Any actions she might take to raise herself out of a position of dependence are forbidden to her, and yet she is continually imposed upon to further “disgrace” her own condition to please her strictest critics. She repeatedly refuses the assistance of her male admirers, so as not to incur immodest obligation. She denies herself relief from material distress and the petitions of creditors set upon her by her self-serving benefactresses, who take on debt in her name. At various points in the novel, the reader might question why she doesn’t simply agree to use the funds offered to her so frequently, in order to be free of these burdens, and indeed, Juliet asks the very question: “‘Why am I doomed to seek—so hardly—the support that flies me, —yet to fly the consolation that offers?’” (297). At times, her survival is threatened by her adherence to the social codes she maintains in order to assimilate.

Yet the corruption of these codes is most evident when she is criticized for her refusal to encourage the attentions of a male admirer, and thus resolve her pecuniary distress. Upon being accused of choosing to be poor when she could simply become Lord Melbury’s mistress, Juliet exclaims, “Choice! Madam! Alas! Deprived of all but personal resource, I fixed upon a mode of life that promised me, at least, my mental freedom. I was not then aware how imaginary is the independence, that hangs for support upon the uncertain fruits of daily exertions!” (473-4). Burney’s irony is clear. Juliet is continually thwarted in her efforts to earn her subsistence through honorable labor because her mysterious origins cast doubt upon her modesty. Therefore she is left with no other recourse but to take the very action which would confirm those unfounded suppositions. She bemoans the fact that there is no space in which a solitary woman may exist honorably and independently in this society.
By the end of the novel, Juliet is indeed “relieved” of her independence. Once her identity is revealed, Juliet is swiftly reinserted into her proper social role. Interestingly, she feels an initial resistance to such sought-after security: “the immediate impulse of Juliet urged her to remonstrance, or flight; but it was the impulse of habit, not of reason; an instant, and a look of Harleigh, represented that the total change of her situation, authorized, on all sides, a total change of conduct” [emphasis added] (860). Of course her conduct will not change, only society’s perception of it will. We can surmise that Juliet’s general behavior as Harleigh’s wife, or Lady Aurora’s sister, would be indistinguishable from her behavior in flight, apart from maintaining her anonymity. Yet upon her romantic reunion with Harleigh, he speaks of Miss Ellis and Miss Granville as if they are two different people. Juliet even encourages this characterization and disassociates from her flight persona, particularly in the following treacly exchange: “Miss Granville is wholly independent; mistress of her heart, mistress of herself—” “No, Mr. Harleigh, no!” she softly repeated, “I am not so independent!” A smile then beamed over her features” (860-1). The implications of her romantic supplication seem clear, Juliet is happy to relinquish her independence in favor of a (chosen) husband’s protection, but I would like to suggest room for a more optimistic reading of this line. Whereas she refutes Harleigh’s use of the word “wholly,” the inclusion of “so” in the phrase “I am not so independent!” might imply this is not an admission of total submission.49

Yet the discouragement of her independence, and the dismissal of her flight at the end of the novel seems to suggest an ambivalence on the part of the novelist of how to frame the significance of Juliet’s journey. In titling her novel The Wanderer, Burney seems to identify

49 She willingly concedes her autonomy in exchange for acceptance, social validation, economic security, and love. I would like to interpret this phrase as implying that her sacrifice is not total, but I recognize that this might be wishful thinking on my part.
Juliet as the iconic Romantic figure of the restless adventurer. Margaret Anne Doody explains: “‘Wandering’ is the quintessential Romantic activity, as it represents erratic and personal energy expended outside a structure, and without progressing to a set objective… impelled either by the harshness of a rejecting society or by some inner spiritual quest” (vii). It is interesting to envision Juliet within this context, considering that on the last page of the novel, Burney petitions her readers to view Juliet as “a female Robinson Crusoe, as unaided and unprotected, though in the midst of the world, as that imaginary hero in his uninhabited island” (Burney 873). However, I would argue that Juliet is neither wanderer nor adventurer; these narrative frames do not account for the stakes of Juliet’s flight. Juliet is compelled to flee because of an immediate threat. Whether she is trying to assimilate into British society, or running from lascivious woodcutters in the forest, Juliet’s larger narrative is not one of existential restlessness, but one of survival. Over the course of the text, Juliet’s flight transitions through several different stages, each marked by noticeably dynamic fluctuations in pacing. These changing risks impact the choices she makes throughout her journey; Juliet must adapt to the demands of each new challenge in order to survive. In contrast to the Romantic wanderer, Juliet does have an objective, and every action serves that purpose.

Scholars such as Tyler Tichelaar have referred to Juliet as a “Gothic wanderer” due to The Wanderer’s inclusion of such Gothic tropes as a stolen inheritance, mysterious identity, and a persecuted maiden. The last section of the novel may indeed be Burney’s nod to the genre, when, believing her villainous husband to be near, Juliet flees London for the perceived safety of the forest and farm. Her terror at being pursued forces her to maintain an exhausting pace of

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constant movement throughout the countryside.\footnote{Burney slyly amplifies the threat by positing an agent of Robespierre as the disturber of English pastoral innocence (and Juliet’s happiness). In fact, the specter of the French Revolution haunts the entire novel, as Burney skewers the snobbery of the upper class, and inserts repeated soliloquies on behalf of the working poor. For more on how both Burney and Radcliffe can be read in this context, see Claudia L. Johnson, Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender and Sentimentality in the 1790’s: Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1995).} The gradual escalation of Juliet’s flight from domestic assimilation to Gothic melodrama demonstrates the proximity of both genres on the same literary continuum, in how these narratives envision a politicized and sexualized female body.

Nancy Armstrong’s groundbreaking work Desire and Domestic Fiction (1987) challenged the notion that British novels in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries only served to reflect social and political realities in art, asserting rather, “we render ourselves unconscious of the political power we ourselves exercise whenever we represent sexuality as existing prior to its representation.”\footnote{Nancy Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1987).} In contrast to Ian Watt’s\footnote{Ian Watt, Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).} reading of the novel’s role in documenting the rise of eighteenth-century individualism, Armstrong maintains that the novel was in fact, responsible for constructing the modern model of individualism, as well as a uniquely female-centric subjectivity which was accepted by an audience eager to identify with such depictions of middle-class domesticity.\footnote{Ibid} By identifying control over female sexuality as the locus for continued patriarchal hegemony, the novel ultimately constructed the public/private (domestic) spheres as we understand them, while also providing the tools to examine them. Gothic and domestic fiction in the eighteenth century simultaneously represented and criticized the significance of female
sexuality and its ability to threaten the stability of society.

It follows then, that the trope of female flight within each these texts effectively serves as an embodied critique of both the novel and society as a whole. While the Gothic text seemingly requires a helpless female victim, the heterotopia of illusion created by her flight belies this weakness, and serves as a rebuke to the circumstances demanding it. The Sentimental heroine seemingly uses her knowledge of social custom in order to survive her flight, but the heterotopia of compensation fashioned by her movement reveals the artificiality of such social hierarchies, etiquette, and gender roles, and their inadequacy to effectively order society. The narrative trope of flight ultimately critiques the parameters of freedom and acts as a temporary site of resistance through its creation of a relational space through which a liminal figure may evolve.
Chapter 2: Flight from Bondage

A thousand lives seemed to be concentrated in that one moment to Eliza. Her room opened to a side-door to the river. She caught her child and sprang down the steps towards it. The trader caught a full glimpse of her, just as she was disappearing down the bank; and throwing himself from his horse, and calling loudly on Sam and Andy, he was after her like a hound after a deer. In that dizzy moment, her feet to her scarce seemed to touch the ground, and a moment brought her to the water’s edge. Right on behind they came; and nerved with strength such as God gives only to the desperate with one wild cry and flying leap she vaulted over the turbid current by the shore on to the raft of ice beyond.55

—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom’s Cabin

Eliza Harris’s daring escape across the icy Ohio River is one of the most memorable scenes from the best-selling novel of the nineteenth-century, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). Readers were captivated by the image of a desperate mother protecting her child from ruthless slave catchers in pursuit. In fact, in a text largely chronicling the suffering of its eponymous character, Eliza’s brief flight sequence often overshadows the main narrative. The scene of Eliza’s escape across the ice also became an audience favorite in the wildly popular theatrical performances of the play by George L. Aiken, second only perhaps to little Eva’s own “flight,” her ascension to heaven. Additionally, songs, poems and paintings depicting Eliza’s flight were widespread in popular culture.56 What is especially striking is how Eliza’s desperate act is framed as patriotic, and even holy, within the larger context of its defiance of the Fugitive

56 Notable artistic renderings of Eliza in culture include Francis Ellen Watkins Harper’s poem, “Eliza Harris,” the song “Eliza’s Flight” by M.A. Collier, E.J. Loder, and Oliver Ditson, and Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot’s famous oil painting, also titled “Eliza’s Flight”
Slave Act of 1850. As David Reynolds explains in *Mightier Than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America* (2011), “The Harrises’ flight appeals to the higher law of godly justice, morality, and patriotism. All these higher ideals glow like a halo around the fugitives and their abettors—a religious aura captured in contemporary illustrations, such as an engraving by Hammat Billings in a gift-book edition that depicted Eliza wearing flowing, Madonna-like clothing while her son Harry wears a halo-like round hat.”  

Eliza is most noble, and most sympathetic, in the act of leaping across the ice in order to protect her child. This is selective admiration; Eliza’s adjustment to life in the North and the prejudice she could expect to face are easily omitted from the story. Eliza is celebrated for her flight, not her life before or after the event.

In light of this, abolitionists were eager to capitalize on America’s appetite for narratives of escape from bondage in the mid-nineteenth century. The popularity of Stowe’s novel may have even boosted sales of publications by Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson and Sojourner Truth in the 1850s. Among the numerous autobiographical accounts detailing the institution of slavery, narratives depicting clever escapes benefitted from public interest in the “evidence of the courage and imagination required for the execution.” Some scholars credit the popularity of flight narratives for their ability to reinforce “the nineteenth century tradition of success through determination, self-improvement and independence.”

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58 Reynolds, 149.
While a reading of these narratives through such a lens is appealing, it ignores the urgency underlying these particular examples of flight. These were not tales of adventure; these were tales of survival intended to educate readers and inspire them to take political action.\textsuperscript{61}

Yet while most slave narratives were published in order to further the cause of abolition, some authors worried about the risks of making the details of one’s escape, no matter how extraordinary and compelling, too explicit for public consumption. Frederick Douglass famously abstained from divulging revealing details in his \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass}, (1845) claiming that “I… succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption… How I did so,—what means I adopted,—what direction I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance,—I must leave unexplained.”\textsuperscript{62} Douglass was critical of Henry Box Brown’s decision to detail the process of his own ingenious method of escape, that of mailing himself through the post in a shipping crate, due to fears that his revelation would eliminate this option to future fugitives hoping to utilize a similar method.\textsuperscript{63} Despite these legitimate concerns, former slaves continued to publish and dictate descriptions of flight for an eager public.

How can the public’s fixation on narratives of escape and particularly the narratives of slaves escaping from bondage be explained beyond a general appreciation for feats of courage and will? Often the same audience who embraced the fugitive’s flight also largely supported the segregation of public space; emancipation was not the same as equality. I suggest that it was the

\textsuperscript{61} I am just as reluctant to compare William and Ellen Craft’s \textit{Running a Thousand Miles For Freedom} (1860) to Homer’s \textit{Odyssey}, as I was to compare Frances Burney’s \textit{The Wanderer} (1814) to Daniel Defoe’s \textit{Robinson Crusoe} (1719) in Chapter One of this study.


very liminality of flight that made it so appealing. The publication of a slave narrative by a living person generally implied two important factors: one, that the flight was successful, and two, that it was concluded. Actions justified by the context of an urgent escape would not receive the same approval otherwise. Ellen Craft may have been celebrated for her ingenious gentleman’s disguise in flight, but as she makes very clear in her own narrative, and as I will discuss later in this chapter, this deception was only permissible by the extreme terms of her situation. She articulates her reluctance to adopt a false identity in order to assert claims of feminine virtue, but her reticence also works to mollify the reader’s fears that this deception comes naturally. Proven successful in this instance, what is to prevent other African Americans from manipulating those same cultural codes in order to pass as white or male? The passage of flight creates an alternate space not just for the subject of the narrative, but for the reader as well, to reassure them that this form of dissemblance has no place in “regular” society. These are the acts of extremes; they cannot and will not be sustained. Because of this, writers could represent flight, whether autobiographical or fictional, with more freedom and creativity than other parts of their narratives.

If the passage of flight can be considered a heterotopia that allows individuals to experience a more fluid performance of identity, written representations of flight enjoyed a similar license. In Chapter One of this study, I argued that the narrative trope of flight as depicted in Gothic and Sentimental novels could be understood as a heterotopia: a temporary, relational, “in-between” space with unique properties. The heroines in those texts took flight in order to escape hostile homes, the very space expected to provide them sanctuary. These narratives revealed a pattern of women forced to flee from imprisoning domestic spaces, in which women are subject to patriarchal oppression through the rule of the father. In running from
the space that defines, subjugates and in some cases, assaults the female body, these heroines create an alternate space in flight which ultimately serves as a critique of the system they flee and must inevitably rejoin. The domestic is therefore posed as a clear threat to female autonomy and well-being.

These examples of Gothic and Sentimental novels illustrate the facility of the domestic to reinforce patriarchal codes. This chapter will explore how African American writers in the nineteenth century demonstrate how the domestic also served to impose codes of race and class upon the body of the individual. Robert F. Reid-Pharr offers a more expansive view of the extent to which the domestic space defines and subjugates the individual in his work, *Conjugal Union: The Body, The House and the Black American* (1999). In his discussion of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, (1859) he asks,

> Why is it necessary to the proper functioning of the white household that the black body be so viciously abused? I would suggest that what Wilson accesses through the representation of punches, slaps, lashes, and insults is the recognition not only that domesticity is founded upon and within systematic and historically entrenched modes of violence but also that it is itself one of these modes. Since the domestic is the primary vehicle by which bodies are brought into order, by which they are established as raced and gendered entities, it is necessarily violent because the process of racing and gendering subjects is always violent. (92)

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Just as the domestic acts as a space in which patriarchy is imposed upon the female body, it is similarly the space in which laws of racial hierarchy are enacted and enforced. The system of antebellum slavery, while fully sustaining the Southern agricultural industrial complex, was translated through the domestic structure of the plantation. The plantation house was the center of this structure, and a slave’s role was defined primarily in relation to that space. Labor was designated in terms of its support of the family estate, and the stability of that estate directly impacted each enslaved person on the property. In most instances, flight from bondage meant flight from the plantation house and the governing power situated within. Though sanctified by law, flight was not considered an offense to the state, but rather to the individual, the family, and the estate. Slave owners summoned law officials to retrieve the “property” of that estate; the link between an enslaved individual and the domestic power of the plantation was both legally and privately recognized.65

While flight from this domestic system of bondage had at the outset the intended objective of freedom, it achieved at best a conditional liberty. Saidiya Hartman describes this as the “non-event of emancipation” in her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). 66 Hartman explains how “the advent of freedom marked the transition from the pained and minimally sensate existence of the slave to the

65 In an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr on the making of his film, *Django Unchained* (2012), Quentin Tarantino likened his portrayal of the Candyland Plantation to a feudal kingdom, in which the plantation acts as its own economy, and the owner essentially governs this community with near impunity, as a medieval lord would rule his serfs, who were then defined in terms of their service to the family and estate.


burdened individuality of the responsible and encumbered freedperson” (116-7). Hartman defines the phrase “burdened individuality” as “the double bind of freedom: being freed from slavery and free of resources, emancipated and subordinated, self-possessed and indebted, equal and inferior, liberated and encumbered, sovereign and dominated, citizen and subject” (117).

While the crossing of the border was both materially and symbolically significant, former slaves were introduced into a new system of subjugation, thus shifting the meaning of flight itself. In this context, the act of flight takes on a different signification when it is no longer a method through which liberation is achieved. In destabilizing the meaning of the destination, the journey itself undergoes reconsideration, and the emphasis shifts from outcome to process. Flight acts as a liminal space in-between differing states of legal persecution, a heterotopia that both replicates and critiques the respective states of bondage and “burdened individuality.”

In exploring the connections between British Gothic and Sentimental fiction and depictions of flight in nineteenth-century American slave narratives, it is not my intention to 

_equate_ the fictional peril of British heroines to the historical enslavement of living persons. The two cannot be compared. While historically the example of transatlantic slavery was often appropriated by European writers as an allegory for different forms of political tyranny, Mary Nyquist explains in _Arbitrary Rule: Slavery, Tyranny, and the Power of Life and Death_ (2013) why one cannot equate political slavery with chattel slavery. Each system was constructed differently, defining citizenship in starkly contrasting terms. To critique the abuses of one’s rights under a system of political slavery, as done by American colonists for example, is to argue from the point of view of a free citizen whose rights have been imposed upon. There is an assumption of a prior knowledge and expectation of specific political rights. While eighteenth-
and nineteenth-century writers adopted a stance of “antityrannicism,” they did little to actually consider the plight of individuals in bondage while using their example as a metaphor for injustice. In doing so, they reaffirmed the underlying justifications for race-based subjugation by ignoring crucial differences while considering themselves to be undeserving of persecution.

Kari J. Winter describes how eighteenth-century women writers in particular appropriated the metaphor of slavery in order to criticize patriarchal oppression in her book, *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790-1865* (1992). Winter cites Mary Wollstonecraft specifically for her repeated comparisons of women and slaves, such as in her novel *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Women* (1798):

“[Is] not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” Winter questions how one might negotiate comparisons between genres that critique both political and chattel slavery, a query deeply relevant to this project (79). In response, she suggests that “nineteenth-century black women’s narratives both complement and challenge the social analyses articulated in white women’s Gothic novels because they combine strident attacks on the patriarchal order with incisive critiques of white women’s racism and classism” (13). It is this reading of the intertextuality of nineteenth-century texts that guides my own analysis. The texts referenced in this chapter continue a dialogue about literary portrayals of oppression and resistance, while at the same time introducing critical language to broaden the scope of the subject matter.

In examining depictions of flight in both eighteenth-century Gothic and Sentimental fictions as well as nineteenth-century slave narratives, my goal is not to equate these different forms of oppression, and thus appropriate the reasons and means of flight from one to the other. It is imperative to reiterate that the individuals in flight in autobiographical slave narratives

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67 Nyquist, 1.
experienced real and severe danger. The actual risks faced by these persons cannot be compared to the fictional peril described in other narratives. I am not examining specific historical methods of flight from bondage; rather, this chapter focuses how the passage of flight is depicted in both autobiographical and fictional accounts of the time. I suggest that the depictions of flight might be compared in how authors use this literary trope as a means of constructing an alternate relational space between shifting states of liberty. After the authors had achieved a relative state of safety, how did they choose to render this experience through language? What do their narrative choices reveal about the literal and symbolic associations with other depictions of flight? How did writers frame their experiences in terms of why, and how, and where they fled? I will explore how certain nineteenth-century texts simultaneously incorporate and critique Gothic and Sentimental tropes to ultimately expand the narrative potential of the trope of flight. Additionally, descriptions of flight in these narratives should still be considered specific literary constructions impacted by the conventions of genre. This chapter examines three examples of nineteenth-century American slave narratives and black fiction which deliberately reference Gothic and Sentimental flight while reinterpreting those modes through the historical lens of antebellum slavery.

William and Ellen Craft’s famous account Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom (1860), is a first-hand account narrated primarily in William’s voice, relating the details of the married couple’s daring escape from bondage. First published in 2003, the lost manuscript of The Bondwoman’s Narrative (1858) by “Hannah Crafts” 68 was a thrilling discovery as potentially the

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68 I will hereafter refer to the author of The Bondwoman’s Narrative (2002) as Hannah Bond, due to Gregg Hecimovich’s recent discovery of the identity of “Hannah Crafts.” His research was initially reported in September 13th 2013 issue of The New York Times, and will be expanded upon in his upcoming publication, The Life and Times of Hannah Crafts.
first African American-authored novel.69 The Bondwoman’s Narrative incorporates the narrative tropes of three separate genres—Gothic fiction, Sentimental fiction, and the slave narrative—in the dramatic story of a young woman’s experiences as a slave and her eventual emancipation. Finally, Harriet Jacobs’s autobiographical Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), uses conventions of Sentimental fiction and slave narratives to critique the domestic and transform the passage of flight.

*Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*

This book is not intended as a full history of the life of my wife, nor of myself; but merely as an account of our escape . . .70

—William Craft

William and Ellen Craft became national celebrities after accounts of their famous flight spread through newspapers, speeches and even poems. Traveling from Macon, Georgia to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania through open public transport, Ellen Craft wore the disguise of an ailing white male slave owner while her husband William acted the part of her loyal slave. The daring nature of their scheme as well as the victorious outcome captured the public’s attention, and energized supporters of both slavery and abolition. In fact, the couple became so notorious that their continued public presence in the North served as a public rebuke to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and President Fillmore was pressured to authorize military force in order to make

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69 See Appendix: Dr. Joe Nickell’s Authentication Report in *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, (2002) by Hannah Crafts, Henry Louis Gates, Jr on the process of authenticating the manuscript’s date of composition.

the Crafts comply with federal law. To avoid recapture and relieve supporters from the burden of protecting them, the Crafts eventually fled to Great Britain. Though the Crafts’ story was familiar to the American public, it would be nearly twelve years before William and Ellen published their own written account of their experiences in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom: the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860). Unlike other popular slave narratives of the time, the Crafts’ story focuses primarily on the flight itself rather than the history of their life in bondage or their years thereafter as free persons in England and the United States.

Although little of the Crafts’ account focuses on their years as slaves, the narrative begins by emphasizing the vulnerability of family bonds under the institution of chattel slavery. William describes his feelings of helplessness and grief as he watched his mother, father, and then sister taken away and sold to serve the pecuniary interests of his “Christian” slave master. He also relates accounts of other families separated in a similarly cruel fashion. Finally, he quotes examples of law code from Louisiana, South Carolina and Georgia that specifically conveyed upon slave owners absolute power over their slaves. The point of this evidence is to build the foundation for the Crafts’ justification for flight. On a larger scale, the Crafts denounced the injustice of slavery as a whole, but in articulating their personal grievances, they focus primarily on slavery’s power to displace human beings against their will and sever familial bonds.

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71 William Craft is generally credited with the writing of the narrative, but sources affirm that it was a collaborative effort, and that Ellen Craft was an instrumental participant. I will address the significance of these questions of authorship later in this section.
The Crafts reveal that the impetus for their flight originated in their simple desire for a family. Under slavery they would be powerless to claim their own children and protect them from the will of slave masters. William declares that the reason for their flight “above all” was “the fact that another man had the power to tear from our cradle the new-born babe and sell it in the shambles like a brute, and then scourge us if we dared to lift a finger to save it from such a fate” (3). The framing of their flight in this manner implies that the Crafts were endangered by any attempt to replicate familial domesticity. Their children would make them more vulnerable and ultimately would serve as additional profit for their oppressors. As Saidiya Hartman points out, “Suppose that the recognition of humanity held out the promise not of liberating the flesh or redeeming one’s suffering but rather of intensifying it?” (4) Since parents’ love for their children was often exploited in slavery, it is the Crafts’ desire to create life and experience parenthood that threatens their safety as individuals. Barbara McGaskill writes of Ellen Craft, “She imbricates these with her own Black family and her own identification as a mother and a wife, thus emphasizing the irony of her own escape (and of the departures of so many women like her) having been made in order to cultivate a home” (514). Rather than providing fulfillment and protection for the Crafts, the family structure only increases their vulnerability in slavery. Thereby the demonstration of their humanity is also the means through which they might be further subjugated. The fallacy that justified the separation of family members, the denial of their humanity, was exposed by the abuse of human suffering within this system. Their humanity was the very thing being exploited. The prospect of forming a domestic household

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only heightened the danger to them and their loved ones. The Crafts acknowledged that in slavery, there could be no expectation of safe domesticity, therefore they must take flight.

In fleeing openly through public transport, the Crafts faced tremendous risk. The danger of recognition, the penetration of their disguise, or any number of variables that might disrupt their careful plans put them in constant fear of discovery. At one critical point in their journey, the Crafts were nearly denied passage further north after they could not supply proof of ownership papers for William. He writes:

Neither of us dared to speak a word, for fear of making some blunder that would tend to our detection. We knew that the officers had power to throw us into prison, and if they had done so we must have been detected and driven back, like the vilest felons, to a life of slavery, which we dreaded far more than sudden death. We felt as though we had come into deep waters and were about being overwhelmed, and that the slightest mistake would clip asunder the last brittle thread of hope by which we were suspended, and let us down for ever into the dark and horrible pit of misery and degradation from which we were straining every nerve to escape. (46)

William’s language emphasizes the precarious nature of their endeavor, and the odds against its success. In fact, at several points in the narrative he alludes to their good fortune, or the will of God as the proper benefactor of their escape. This humility underscores the cunning of the Crafts, and their ability to read situational cues in order to navigate such challenges.

William and Ellen Craft’s flight from slavery was successful largely in part because of their effective replication of contemporary social codes. In flight, the Crafts adopted false
personas and constructed a fictitious narrative in order to travel undisturbed through public space. These daring strategies were later celebrated as evidence of their bravery, wit and creativity. However the specific methods employed by the Crafts in flight and the reasons for their success are revealing. In replicating and ultimately critiquing the social codes of the day, Ellen and William Craft manipulated signifiers of race, gender, class, and disability in order to pass in plain sight.

The Crafts’ flight utilized established systems of power. Much of the cunning of their escape lay in how they subverted the existing infrastructure of rules and codes. William explains how they even acquired permission to leave, stating “We knew it would not do to start off without first getting our master’s consent to be away for a few days” (21). The Crafts had to maintain a hyper awareness of social norms in order to traverse public spaces. In doing so, they ultimately reflected back to society the image of its own systems of power. A free white man, managing a black slave, reaffirmed the laws and prejudices of the time, allowing them to move unmolested, for the better part of their journey. Ironically, at times the Crafts played their parts almost too well. As the benevolent slave owner and the happy, loyal slave, the Crafts might have been drawn directly from pro-slavery propaganda, As a result, it did provoke several incredulous responses to their relationship. Ellen is advised not to spoil her slave, and William is encouraged by other slaves to escape in Philadelphia, revealing that contrary to vehement pro-slavery assertions, the reality of a contented slave and master evoked skepticism in Northerners and Southerners alike. But by generally reflecting those norms instead of challenging them, the

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74 This bears some similarities to the heterotopia of compensation found in Sentimental flight as described in Chapter One of this study.
75 For a discussion on the history of pro-slavery texts, see William Sumner Jenkins’ Pro-slavery Thought in the Old South (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press: 1935) in which
Crafts were able to create an alternate space in which they could manipulate the perception of their identities, which largely depended on the adoption of disguise.

In dressing as a white male, Ellen acknowledged certain expectations of privilege. By assuming this persona, she exercised that privilege and used the system against itself. Just as a southern white male of this time might expect to enjoy a freedom of mobility, the acceptance of his word, and power over persons of color, so too could Ellen expect to enjoy such privileges. The very system that granted a person these liberties also made it possible for them to be manipulated. Ellen’s employment of these signifiers of white power called into question the inherent superiority of these characteristics.

In adopting these alternate personas, the Crafts risked jeopardizing perceptions of their integrity, and in the case of Ellen, compromising public perception of her femininity. In the narrative, the subject of Ellen’s disguise is handled with care. William insists that Ellen was reluctant to play her part, claiming “My wife had no ambition whatever to assume this disguise, and would not have done so had it been possible to have obtained our liberty by more simple means” (24). Ellen’s reticence may have been an obligatory demonstration of rectitude; the act of deceit could not be depicted as one she entered into eagerly, or naturally. This is also complicated by the implications of her success. If a system of legal privilege is founded on the inherent superiority of one race or sex over another, what does it mean if an individual can pass as a member of that so-called superior group without detection? Shouldn’t one’s pronounced

he explains how pro-slavery publications emphasized the “positive good theory,” that slavery was a positive force, and that the relationship between slave and master was ultimately one of benevolence and gratitude.
inferiority prevent such a possibility? Ellen’s manipulation of contemporary gender, racial, and class codes suggested these terms to be arbitrary, and not fixed.\footnote{Barbara McCaskill. “‘Yours Very Truly’: Ellen Craft—The Fugitive as Text and Artifact” \textit{African American Review} 28.4 (Winter 1994): 511}

The disguise also introduced questions of Ellen’s femininity, and the “unnatural” state of a wife, ruling over her husband as master, instead of the socially and legally accepted inverse. The narrative seems to emphasize Ellen’s “womanly” frailty, when William describes how he had to persuade Ellen to enact their plan: “Come, my dear, let us make a desperate leap for liberty!” But poor thing, she shrank back, in a state of trepidation. I turned and asked what was the matter; she made no reply, but burst into violent sobs, and threw her head upon my breast” (27). This melodramatic portrayal of Ellen is repeated when she is released from her male disguise once they reach Philadelphia. William writes that his wife

… grasped me by the hand, and said, “Thank God, William, we are safe!” and then burst into tears, leant upon me, and wept like a child. The reaction was fearful. So when we reached the house, she was in reality so weak and faint that she could scarcely stand alone. (50)

These descriptions of Ellen’s behavior stand in stark contrast to the evidence of the rest of narrative, which testifies to her courage and presence of mind in situations of great risk. As narrator, William essentially distinguishes between two separate characters: Ellen, his wife, and Mr. Johnson, his ailing “master” with whom he is traveling north. William signals this differentiation through language: when Ellen adopts the disguise of Mr. Johnson, William refers to her in the narrative as “my master (as I will now call my wife)” and uses the masculine
pronoun of “he” throughout. (28). At the moment of their arrival in the north, William switches his form of address back to “my master—or rather my wife, as I may now say” (50).

This division of identity is interesting, and has several implications. First, there is the suggestion that what Ellen does and says as Mr. Johnson is separate from who she is as Ellen Craft. In flight, she is a different person. As a woman, as a slave, she could not or would not act in this manner, speak in this manner, but as Mr. Johnson, her actions are within the bounds of acceptability. There is no transgression; there is only a white man, exercising his rights as a white man. Another implication is that William and Ellen carefully crafted this separation of selves in order to preserve the integrity of Ellen’s femininity. To adorn herself in male clothing, to impersonate a man, to keep company with other men, might suggest vulgarity in a woman’s behavior. Therefore, readers are asked to picture— not Ellen in disguise, but a young Mr. Johnson. Ellen’s dependence upon her husband, her reluctance to lie, her relief at the conclusion of her performance (rather than their deliverance from slavery) all support such a reading.

I would argue that this distinction between identities also serves as an embodied critique of the limitations of agency for women and women of color. A man is more easily believed to be capable of demonstrating such bravery and intelligence. As a woman, Ellen is not expected to be capable of the feats of will, wit, and courage she completes in flight. In fact, William alludes to her unlikely skill, citing that she “had from the commencement of the journey borne up in a manner that surprised us both” [emphasis added] (50). This, as well as the pronounced demonstrations of feminine weakness, rings false. Ellen proves herself to be more than capable of executing this escape. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that rather than acting as a reluctant participant, she initiates the plan in the first place.
The contradiction between the representation of Ellen within the narrative and her actual role in the Crafts’ flight has been the subject of debate. Barbara McCaskill avers that “William pedestals— and silences— Ellen in his narrative … Motivated, understandably, to persuade (and to market to) a nineteenth-century audience according to their standards of cultivation, William muzzles or suffocates Ellen with the problematic discourse of true womanhood.”77 Charles Heglar insists that there is enough evidence to conclude that the Crafts’ narrative was collaborative, on the basis of the numerous scenes told from the point of view of Ellen alone, in which “William actually serves as her amanuensis” (3).78 Josephine Brown, daughter of William Wells Brown, devotes a full chapter to the Crafts in her 1856 biography of her famous father. Brown asserts in her fictionalized version of the event that it was William, and not Ellen, who expressed a reluctance to flee, “until Ellen commanded,” ‘Come, William … Don't be a coward!”79 This evidence, as well as the very fact of Ellen’s flight from slavery, belie a narrative that greatly understates her agency.

Although most accounts assume the Crafts’ flight to have been concluded upon their passage into Philadelphia, in actuality it extended for years beyond the crossing of this particular border. The Crafts agreed to publicize their story in part to get word to family members with whom they had lost contact, but this served to make them a desirable target for slave hunters eager to claim a reward.80 The Crafts continued to flee north to Boston, and then finally left the United States for Halifax Nova Scotia, and finally Liverpool, England, where they would spend

77 McCaskill, 520-1.
the next few decades of their lives. Among many other professional and civic pursuits, the Crafts were active in the abolitionist speaking circuit, often appearing with William Wells Brown to recount the story of their exciting escape from slavery. This event would define them for the rest of their lives; even as they tried to earn livings in education and business, they were repeatedly dependent on their past fame to earn support for their earnest causes. The final years of their lives consisted largely of persecution and hardship, when “remarkably, the Crafts’ story ends where it began—in Georgia. After a nineteen-year exile, they returned to a Georgia that was very much the same as it was when slavery had started.” The Crafts spent their remaining years subject to the violence and discrimination of a hostile post-war South.

In freedom, the Crafts were indeed able to start a family, secure in the knowledge that their children would never know the degradation of antebellum slavery. However, once they dropped their disguises, the Crafts would live the rest of their lives in a state of conditional liberty. Their inevitable reabsorption by the state subjected them to the laws, restrictions, and prejudices ultimately responsible for the financial and legal hardships endured by the famous couple.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Since I have been at the North, it has been necessary for me to work diligently for my own support, and the education of my children… it has

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81 The story of the repeated attempts to recapture the Crafts, and the efforts on behalf of Bostonians to protect them is as fascinating a tale as their famous flight. For a detailed account, see: RJM Blackett. *Beating Against the Barriers: Biographical Essays in the 19th Century Afro-American History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986)

compelled me to write these pages at irregular intervals, whenever I could snatch an hour from household duties.\textsuperscript{83}

—Harriet Jacobs

While Harriet Jacobs’s narrative, \textit{Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl} (1861), seems to provide a detailed account of her life as a slave, her incredible escape, and her efforts to build a new life in the North, the title clearly indicates Jacobs’s intention to convey only specific “incidents.” The selection of these incidents demonstrates the deliberate effort of Jacobs’s authorship.\textsuperscript{84} Additionally, Jacobs changed the names of the characters within the story, creating a literary distance between herself as author, and Linda Brent, the narrator of the tale. \textit{Incidents} famously references Sentimental literary conventions in order to link the fate of Linda Brent with those of other eighteenth and nineteenth-century heroines.

Scholars have long debated the significance of \textit{Incidents’} intertextuality. In her work, \textit{Domestic Allegories of Political Desire} (1992), Claudia Tate suggests that nineteenth-century black women authors imitated Sentimental tropes in order to appropriate mainstream social and literary ideals of femininity usually denied to them. Tate explains, “My intention is to identify the idealized domesticity in these novels as a fundamental cultural symbol of the Victorian ‘metonym for proper social order,’ a symbol that black women writers in particular used to promote the social advancement of African Americans.”\textsuperscript{85} I disagree with Tate’s characterization


\textsuperscript{84} (Once a subject for debate,) Jean Fagan Yellin’s important documentation of Jacobs’s original correspondence with her editor, Lydia Maria Child, silenced critics and restored to Jacobs the literary and historical fame she deserved.\textsuperscript{84} For Jean Fagan Yellin’s meticulous account of how she authenticated Jacobs as the author of \textit{Incidents}, see: Jean Fagan Yellin. “Written By Herself: Harriet Jacobs’s Slave Narrative. \textit{American Literature}, 53.3 (Nov 1981): 479-486.

that Victorian domesticity is “idealized” by black women writers, especially with regard to Jacobs. Jacobs does not frame Victorian femininity, the cult of true womanhood, as a purported ideal; rather she is nearly as critical of these fictions of domesticity as she is the corruptive institution of slavery.

Jacobs utilizes specific Sentimental and even Gothic literary tropes in order to expose contradictions in literary constructions of female agency. As she merges the genres of slave narrative and Sentimental fiction, Jacobs illustrates that it is in the confined space of the domestic that she is threatened both as a slave and as a woman. *Incidents* references the literary tropes of Gothic and Sentimental flight to critique the ways in which the domestic space serves as a site in which bodies are ordered according to systems of political power. Her incredible act of resistance to this threat, hiding in a tiny garret for seven years, refigures the concept of flight entirely, manifesting not as a passage of physical transition but as one of spatial relativity. Jacobs’s vivid narrative illustrates the threat of the domestic, her reinvention of the trope of flight, and her depictions of the limited freedoms available to “emancipated” women.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* initially describes Linda’s childhood as carefree and idyllic until the loss of a beloved maternal figure puts an abrupt end to this period of innocence. Deprived of her protector, Linda is assigned a new political identity, imposed upon her by the machine of the domestic. Linda assumes the raced responsibilities of house slave and gendered role of sexual prey as she evades the insidious harassment of Dr. Flint. With this specific narrative plight, Jacobs evokes comparisons to Samuel Richardson’s controversial yet enormously popular novel *Pamela* (1740), in which a servant girl is similarly pursued by the

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86 Since I am discussing Harriet Jacobs’s role as a writer, I will refer to the narrator of *Incidents* as “Linda Brent,” in order to distinguish her from Jacobs as author of the text.
master of the house upon the death of his mother. Jacobs’s likening of Dr. Flint’s pursuit of Linda to that of the fictional tale of Mr. B and Pamela raises a number of questions since parallels of sexual insinuations, farcical bedroom maneuvers, and jealous wives seem too deliberate to be coincidental. In her article, “Form and Ideology in Three Slave Narratives,” Valerie Smith wonders if “Jacobs here trivializes the complexity of her situation when she likens it to a familiar paradigm.” It is true that Pamela has options available to her that Linda Brent does not. Pamela is a fiction; she is white. Whatever distance Jacobs achieves by changing the names of the persons in her narrative, we nonetheless understand these “incidents” to be depictions of verifiably true events.

It is possible that Jacobs emphasizes the resemblance to Pamela as a way of exposing how the domestic both initiates and facilitates Linda’s persecution. At first glance, Pamela and Linda perform similar functions within their respective households. They serve as the unseen domestic labor that facilitates the lifestyle of the upper classes without direct engagement. It is the domestic servant class that makes possible the idealization of Victorian domesticity, precisely because the “angel in the house” is not directly responsible for the labor that maintains the house. Distinctions of race and class make this labor available so that these specific constructions of femininity would be possible. Associations of femininity with domestic contentment, chastity and fragility are fashioned at the direct expense of women pressed into slavery and servitude.

Jacobs also draws connections between Linda and Pamela through their perceived sexual availability: Pamela because of her class, Linda because of her race. Linda protests that because

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88 Coventry Patmore, The Angel in the House: The Betrothed. (London: John W. Parker, 1854)
of her race, “she is not allowed to have any pride of character. It is deemed a crime in her to wish
to be virtuous…” (28). Jacobs is not arguing that she wishes to have access to a Victorian ideal
of chastity. She explains that this ideal only exists through a system that defines other women in
opposition to that ideal. Her example makes it possible for that fiction to continue. To desire
access to that status would imply a support for the very system her narrative ultimately
condemns. What she wants is the freedom to act in accordance to her personal values, something
she is prevented from doing while enslaved. Pamela, on the other hand, does less to challenge
class-based assumptions about female sexuality since the novel largely celebrates its heroine’s
efforts to preserve her virginity. The fact that she is successful is interpreted as exceptional. The
full title of the novel, Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded, makes it clear that Pamela’s example has
done little to challenge the Madonna/whore binary. Implicit in the words “Virtue Rewarded” is
the reverse assumption that women who have not been rewarded, must not be virtuous,
perpetuating the same stereotypes of sexual promiscuity that ultimately justify sexual violence.

Linda understands that contrary to providing her the protection of its walls, the enclosed
space of the domestic removes her from view, and enhances her vulnerability to Dr. Flint’s
violence. She recognizes, “Hitherto, I had escaped my dreaded fate, by being in the midst of
people” (45). She counts herself as fortunate to live in a community where she is known, where
her grandmother is respected, and the visibility of Dr. Flint’s actions render a marginal degree of
accountability. It is revealing that what ultimately frightens Linda most is his intention “to build
a small house for me in a secluded place, four miles away from the town … he talked of his
intention to give me a home of my own, and to make a lady of me” (45) [emphasis added]. Here
Jacobs illustrates the true threat of the domestic: isolation. To “make” a lady of her, is to make
her his concubine. By equating the two, he reveals the true function of the domestic space, thus
collapsing any constructed distinctions between lady and slave. Later, Dr. Flint makes the offer again: “I will procure a cottage, where you and the children can live together … think what is offered you, Linda—a home and freedom” (69). His association of home with freedom reflects his own sense of privilege. For Dr. Flint, the home reinforces and even magnifies his authority. Linda is well aware that as an extension of his power, this home poses only danger to her.

Linda ultimately takes flight in order to prevent Dr. Flint from using her children as a means to control her. She reasons, “now that I was certain my children were to be put in their power, in order to give them a stronger hold on me, I resolved to leave them that night” (78). By fleeing Dr. Flint’s control, she eliminates his cause to harm the children. This shifts the intent of her flight; her purpose is not to leave one place, or to reach another. Linda simply aims to remove herself from Dr. Flint’s reach. This intention dictates the unique nature of her flight: she flees by remaining immobile, hidden on the property of her very pursuer.

Linda’s passage of flight is relational: she shifts the focus from where she is, to where she is not. As she hides, her flight is about withholding her person, thus transforming flight from a state of motion, to a state of negation. Jacobs titles this chapter, placed at the very center89 of her narrative, “The Loophole of Retreat,” a phrase presumably taken from William Cowper’s 1785 poem, “The Task:”

Tis pleasant, through the loopholes of retreat,
To peep at such a world;
... I seem advanced
To some secure and more than mortal height
That liberates and exempts me from them all.
It turns submitted to my view, turns round
With all its generations; I behold

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The tumult and am still.⁹⁰

These lines describe the advantage to looking upon the “tumult” of the world from a distance.⁹¹ If we believe that Jacobs is deliberately referencing Cowper’s poem, it might also then imply that her position in the garret, while still incredibly dangerous, also serves to “liberate” and “exempt” her from the threats outside of this tiny space. It seems like a paradox that in this space of severe confinement and restriction, Linda may enjoy any degree of autonomy. By removing herself from the control of Dr. Flint, she gains not only control over her own body, but also over her own narrative. Linda eavesdrops on conversations and is able to influence public opinion of her flight. She writes letters to deceive Dr. Flint as to her whereabouts, essentially extending her flight through language. Finally, her view through the peephole affords her the “power of surveillance.”⁹² Positions are reversed: Dr. Flint once spied upon her, but now she watches him. In this garret space, she exists in an alternate space that is not subject to the same dictates of her former condition. By this definition, Linda is engaged in a more abstract form of flight, one not characterized by motion, but by the in-betweenness of her state of being. Even though she risks great danger, experiences debilitating physical discomfort, and constantly fears the threat of retribution upon her loved ones, she is liberated by the ability to remove her body from Dr. Flint’s immediate control. Valerie Smith agrees that Linda “dates her emancipation from the time she entered her loophole.” She explains:

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⁹¹ For a more detailed analysis of the significance of the reference to William Cowper, see Burnham, 56-7.
⁹² Burnham, 57.
If a loophole signifies for Jacobs a place of withdrawal, it signifies in common parlance an avenue of escape. Likewise, and perhaps more important, the garret, a place of confinement, also renders the narrator spiritually independent of her master, and makes possible her ultimate escape to freedom.  

However, as Isabel Soto cautions in her essay, “‘The Spaces Left’: Ambivalent Discourses in Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass” (2009), the fact that Linda is able to derive agency from this confined space is representative of the slave’s “spatialized existence.”  

Soto likens Linda Brent’s successful use of voluntary confinement to the example of Henry Box Brown, who in 1849 famously mailed himself to the North in a box of impossibly restrictive dimensions. Any agency gained by these individuals comes at a price: both suffered physical and emotional hardship in their respective liminal states. While she is temporarily relieved of the direct control of her oppressor, Linda’s freedom in flight is still relative to her political status. She is imprisoned by her own will, but imprisoned all the same. The passage of flight creates only a temporary space in which she is able to resist and criticize the oppression of slavery; it must still conform to the restrictions of the society in which it is constructed.

This conditional liberty is further illustrated by Linda’s experiences in the North, after she eventually flees to New York. Linda learns that her efforts to secure the freedom of her

children and herself are threatened by the ambiguity of law, and the greed of human beings. Jacobs details Linda’s fear of recapture, as well as her frustrations over her limited ability to protect her children from possible claims of ownership. She also expresses disappointment in the racial prejudice and discriminatory practices of Northern society.

It is important that the end of Jacob’s narrative denies the reader a satisfying resolution, even as she circles back to her language of the Sentimental form. Jacobs famously exclaims, “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free!” The context of this statement belies the triumphant enthusiasm of its language. Jacobs deliberately acknowledges the expectation that the consummate narrative conclusion for a heroine of fiction is of course, marriage. Calling to mind Charlotte Brontë’s words of only a few years prior at the conclusion of Jane Eyre (1847), (“Reader, I married him”) Jacobs cagily differentiates herself from the identifications she previously worked to insinuate. By doing so, she critiques the limitations of Sentimental narrative to convey her story, and thus turns a critical eye on her own readers: “No longer poignantly writing, as she did earlier, to those “happy free women” who form her target audience, she instead writes about them, powerfully and startlingly using her own experiences among them to expose the limitations of their freedom.” Jacobs asserts the superiority of the objective of freedom over marriage in order to disrupt comparisons between Linda and the typical Sentimental heroine—(especially Pamela, whom we are meant to understand achieves fulfillment by wedding her would-be rapist). Again, I must disagree with Claudia Tate’s reading of Jacobs’s treatment of Sentimental convention. Tate suggests that Jacob’s efforts to free herself from bondage come at the expense of her ability to marry, stating,

96 Jacobs, 156
“Marriage and bondage, then, are not merely antithetical in Incidents; they are mutually exclusive. Marriage thus serves as an ideal, though unrealizable, sign of liberation for this text” (32). This directly contradicts Jacobs’s gleeful assertion that her narrative actually concludes with a far worthier goal than marriage, that of freedom. Her language subtly invites her readers examine their own situations, and whether they can attest to the same level of autonomy in their own lives.98

While earlier literary references helped Jacobs reveal parallels between institutions of patriarchy and chattel slavery, it would be a mistake to allow readers to assume that these narratives ultimately pursue parallel goals. Valerie Smith agrees: “she acknowledges that however much her story may resemble superficially the story of the sentimental heroine, as a black woman she plays for different stakes; marriage is not the ultimate reward she seeks.”99 Smith explains that Jacobs must expose the limitations of Sentimentalism, since “as a mode of discourse…it never challenges fundamental assumptions and structures.”100 Furthermore, Smith cites Ann Douglas’s statement in The Feminization of American Culture (1977) that “Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated.”101 In Chapter One of this study, I argued that female protagonists in Sentimental and Gothic texts are inevitably reinserted into the patriarchy through marriage at the end of every novel. Capitulation is expected. The literary trope of flight provides the means through which

98 Jacobs hints at this several times throughout her narrative, notably in her revelation that Linda takes Mr. Sands as a lover, writing, “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment” (47).


100 Smith, 41.

these heroines may briefly resist the restrictions of their agency within this system. Within the
genre of the slave narrative, however, flight functions differently within the context of actual
events. Flight is both symbolic and strategic. Therefore even though Linda Brent is still subject
to the same political system at the close of the narrative, her passage of flight bears greater
significance within the text than just that of a symbolic critique of power.

The Bondwoman’s Narrative

We are all slaves to something or somebody. A man
perfectly free would be an anomaly, and a free woman even
more so. Freedom and slavery are only names attached
surreptitiously and often improperly to certain
conditions...they are mere shadows, the very reverse of
realities, and being so, if rightly considered, they have only
a trifling effect on individual happiness. 102

—Hannah Bond

The remarkable discovery of The Bondwoman’s Narrative manuscript, not to mention the
ensuing efforts to authenticate and publish, nearly overshadowed the fascinating prose of the text
itself. A unique intertextual mélange of Gothic novel, Sentimental drama and historical slave
narrative, it is no wonder that Henry Louis Gates Jr. was cautiously enthused over his acquisition
in a 2001 New York auction. If it was indeed written by a former slave, it would be the earliest
known work of fiction by an African American, pre-dating Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig (1859) by
several years. Additionally, the inclusion of numerous literary allusions and deliberately
borrowed passages from contemporary novelists such as Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë
demonstrated thrilling innovations in narrative style. Since the 2002 publication of The
Bondwoman’s Narrative, scholar Gregg Hecimovitch has not only confirmed Hannah Crafts, the
listed author of the manuscript, to be a former slave, but has found evidence of her true identity.

She is in fact Hannah Bond, a slave once owned by the politician John Hill Wheeler, who later escaped to become a schoolteacher in New Jersey.\textsuperscript{103} The discovery of Hannah’s identity means that our reading of the text may consider how she interweaves autobiographical references with popular literary allusions. If Harriet Jacobs and William and Ellen Craft sought to achieve a degree of authorial distance from their literary selves by writing under assumed names or manipulating pronouns, Hannah Bond goes even further. By constructing her narrative as a novel, rather than as an autobiography, she is liberated from a genre constricted by demands of verifiable credibility. Bond’s deliberate artistic choices and her use of Gothic and Sentimental tropes allow her to articulate a distinctive literary voice.

Much has been written about the specific literary references Bond incorporates throughout the text. We know that if Bond had access to Wheeler’s library, she had an impressive selection of eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts to choose from. Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that several texts from Wheeler’s library, such as Walpole’s \textit{Castle of Otranto} (1764), Walter Scott’s \textit{Rob Roy} (1817), and Dickens’s \textit{Old Curiosity Shop} (1841) make appearances in \textit{The Bondwoman’s Narrative}. However, Wheeler also possessed a number of contemporary slave narratives, including \textit{Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass} (1845) and \textit{Narrative of the Suffering of Lewis Clarke} (1845) which may have proved equally influential to Bond’s education.\textsuperscript{104} Knowing the range of texts to which Bond potentially had access places additional weight on how she uses specific literary references and tropes in her narrative.

\textsuperscript{103} Julie Bosman. “Professor Says He Has Solved a Mystery Over a Slave’s Novel” \textit{The New York Times} 18 September 2013.
Bond’s familiarity with Gothic fiction is evident from the beginning of The Bondwoman’s Narrative through her depictions of the Lindendale Plantation and the text’s narrator, Hannah. However, Hannah does not resemble a typical eighteenth-century Gothic heroine. Instead, Bond depicts her closer to a Jane Eyre than an Adeline.¹⁰⁵ She is the quick-witted observer, rather than the beautiful weeper. As a result, she grows up at the Lindendale Plantation enjoying a certain degree of autonomy since her place within the household is relatively secure. She uses this position as narrator to remain initially on the periphery of the narrative describing Lindendale as a gloomy house reminiscent of one of Radcliffé’s Italian castles. She relates the gruesome history of the estate and the cruelty of its slave masters from a distanced point of view. Hannah suggests the grounds may be haunted, and then draws a direct connection to persons murdered on the premises, adding a realistic twist to the “explained supernatural.” Additionally, Hannah describes the history of the house itself, and the many lives that have inhabited its walls, noting, “There is something inexpressibly dreary and solemn in passing through the silent rooms of a large house, especially one whence many generations have passed to the grave. Involuntarily you find yourself thinking of them, and wondering how they looked in life, and how the rooms looked in their possession....” (15). She connects the Gothic to the historic, locating their intersection within the walls of the great house. It is in this structure that generations live and die; it is in this structure that laws and customs are enforced or enacted. Bond implies the lives that came before us haunt us with the consequences of their choices.

Bond extends this metaphor of the past’s grip upon the present when the household is transformed by the introduction of a new mistress. Her shameful secret, the fact that her mother was a slave, makes her vulnerable to the persecution of a Dickensian villain, Mr. Trappe, and

¹⁰⁵ From Romance of the Forest (1791), by Ann Radcliffé.
positions her as the tragic mulatto within a nineteenth-century literary tradition. It is significant that Bond does not mean for readers to see Hannah in this role even though she is light enough to pass for white, which she does successfully later in the novel. Instead, it is her beautiful, yet weak mistress who is targeted as the hapless victim of her past. Before she learns of her mistress’s secret, Hannah observes that she “seemed haunted by a shadow or phantom apparent only to herself” (27). Hannah becomes her faithful servant and friend, and is devoted to rescuing her, as if the threat her mistress faces from Mr. Trappe is greater than her own peril as a slave. Bond artfully refrains from addressing that fact that while the new Mrs. Cosgrove is threatened with slavery, Hannah is a slave. They are both young, and beautiful, and light-skinned, yet occupy very different roles in the text. Gill Ballinger points out that this paradox only serves to make “her oppression seem all the more arbitrary.” In fact, Hannah uses expressive language to bemoan the sufferings of her mistress while showing comparatively little concern over her own situation. I suggest that Hannah can afford such compassion because she possesses an unshakeable confidence in her own ability to survive, whereas she feels protective of her mistress’s frailty. This distinction is emphasized repeatedly throughout this portion of the text, and offers a subtle commentary on the Gothic genre. Those heroines, in Bond’s opinion, would never survive slavery. She masterfully incorporates the brutality of a slave-owning history into the tropes of Gothic haunting and horror to offer a more realistic and immediate ghost story, while clearly differentiating a new Gothic heroine from the old.

Through her depiction of the Lindendale Plantation as a Gothic estate, Bond demonstrates how the domestic space enforces oppressive strictures based on both gender and race. The young Mrs. Cosgrove is made vulnerable by her mother’s race, but the real danger comes from her marriage and new position within the household. She mistakenly believes that her marriage will protect her from this secret—that through a marriage, home, and family, she will gain the stability and legitimacy she needs to live safely. However, it is this very structure that threatens her. She faces potential threat not just from her blackmailer, but also her husband and even her future children. Hannah advises her to flee her own home because of the danger it poses towards her. Her roles as mistress, wife, and mother make her vulnerable in an upper-class Southern domestic construct that does not allow for any racial ambiguity. As a slave, Hannah enjoys an ironic security in that her race does not compromise her role in the household; it legitimizes it. Mrs. Cosgrove’s position as lady of the house challenges the law, challenges custom, and threatens the functioning of the entire domestic order.

Hannah flees with her mistress only in the capacity of loyal servant; she does not flee for her own sake. Interestingly, Hannah believes that her mistress’s situation necessitates immediate flight, while her own does not. Bond carefully differentiates the two women, emphasizing Mrs. Cosgrove’s resemblance to a tragic sentimental heroine, while Hannah by comparison is strong-willed and quick-witted. She acts decisively as her mistress’s protector: “She ceased speaking, and it was my turn to say something. I saw that her only chance was in flight, flight immediate and precipitate” (49). This juxtaposition is made clear by Hannah’s further descriptions of their relationship: “Again she wept and moaned, while I comforted and consoled her, and sought to imbue her with the idea that it was a time for thinking and acting rather than giving way to overstrained sensations of any kind” (50). Bond deliberately references the tropes of
Sentimentalism (notably a beautiful heroine overcome by her emotions) and then pointedly differentiates her own narrator from those same literary clichés. By doing so, she is able to create a unique space for Hannah’s agency. Even while Hannah acts in service to another, she is fully in control, and most importantly, she knows it. In flight, she demonstrates confidence in her own leadership, even when their circumstances are challenged. Of her mistress, Hannah observes, “I saw that one of her nervous excited spells was coming on, and felt all the more the absolute necessity for strong resolution and courage on my own part. I spoke up cheerily, and how my cheerfulness belied my real feelings. ‘We will do no such thing. I will climb yonder hill!’” (57). Bond establishes Mrs. Cosgrove as the stereotypical tragic heroine, complete with a weakened constitution, in order to illustrate that Hannah is meant to fulfill an entirely different role within the text.

Throughout the novel Hannah approaches each situation, even those of distress, on her own terms. Bond makes a point of demonstrating that Hannah contemplates and rationalizes every decision; she is never helplessly subject to whim or desperation. At several points within the text, Hannah resists opportunities to flee that conflict with her personal code of ethics. Once, when presented with the opportunity to escape and leave her mistress behind, she declares “Even my strong desire for freedom, now become the object of my life, could not have induced me to abandon her” (74). At other points, she refuses to lie about her identity when it would have benefitted her to do so, and she is loyal to those she believes deserving of her respect, even at the cost of her own freedom. She refuses to join fellow slaves Charlotte and William in flight, claiming “I could not lightly sacrifice the good opinion of Mrs. Henry and her family…duty, gratitude and honor forbid it” (147). Even when Hannah is bound, imprisoned, threatened, and enslaved, she finds ways to exercise her own will and choice.
I suggest that rather than interpreting these moments as Hannah refusing to flee, we might read Hannah’s flight as a continuous state of being once she flees the Lindendale Plantation. According to Gothic and Sentimental tropes of flight, literary heroines sometimes experience an extended period of flight while occupying varying forms of sanctuaries and prisons throughout their respective narratives. In this manner, so does Hannah. She initiates flight with the purpose of protecting her mistress, but the death of her mistress frees Hannah to become the central figure in the narrative. From this point on, Hannah’s choices alone dictate the action of the text. Once Hannah is left to act according to her own, she begins to more clearly define her world view. She chooses circumstances in which she feels valued, and respected—as friend to her mistress, as loyal servant to Mrs. Henry. These moments illuminate why she resists fleeing in some instances, and why it is significant when she finally does resolve to flee.

Hannah is protective of her autonomy. Even in servitude, she demonstrates the methods through which she gains responsibility, authority, and thereby a certain degree of personal freedom within the system of slavery. She is uncompromising when it comes to maintaining this space, and famously extends this personal doctrine to the idea of marriage:

I have always thought that in a state of servitude marriage must be at best of doubtful advantage. It necessarily complicates and involves the relation of master and slave, adds new ties to those already formed, and is at the bottom of many troubles and afflictions that might otherwise be escaped. The slave, if he or she desires to be content, should always remain in celibacy… plain, practical common sense must teach every observer of mankind that any situation involving such

107 I’m thinking specifically of the texts discussed in Chapter One of this study, although other texts within these genres might serve as representative examples.
responsibilities as marriage can only be filled with profit, and honor, and advantage by the free. (135)

Here, Hannah clearly identifies marriage as a method through which one’s personal agency is compromised. She disavows the creation of a system of dependence or increased vulnerability that might limit one’s access to freedom. Any personal pleasure or gratification that might result from such a union is in her opinion not worth it. However, her word choice is telling. She describes “the slave” as if speaking from a distanced perspective. She suggests that if the desire of the slave is to be “content,” not “happy,” or “fulfilled,” then one must remain celibate. Contentment suggests toleration and comfort; it does not suggest an ideal state. Therefore, Hannah questions the ties of marriage without dismissing the institution in all contexts. She later declares her “unalterable resolution never to entail slavery on any human being,” and refuses to perpetuate the institution by creating more profit for her enslavers (213). Hannah vows to resist any infringements to her autonomy, such as marriage, children, or even physical affection.

It is this resolve that prompts Hannah’s decision to take flight and finally achieve her freedom. Mrs. Henry brokers Hannah’s “sale” to The Wheelers, a domineering couple who, rather than appreciating Hannah’s superior qualities, treat her with disrespect and humiliation. Her punishing relegation from house-slave to field-slave prompts one of the novels’ most vivid sequences: Hannah’s disgust at the degraded circumstances of the slave quarters, rejecting any “association with the vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts,” and refusing to “receive one of them for [her] husband” (205). Deeming this a “crime against nature,” Hannah declares she will flee. The rapidity of the events following her decision suggest what Hannah lacked was not
opportunity or ability, but justification. As long as she is able to exercise a certain level of freedom and enjoy security in her environment, she is reluctant to act in a manner she deems dishonorable. Once her independence is violated, she does not hesitate to act. Some scholars have pointed out that this exposes Hannah’s relative privilege within the narrative, that her flight is motivated by elitism. But Bond is hardly negligent in representing the horrors of slavery, as experienced by other characters. Just as we see in numerous slave narratives, including *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, Bond includes the histories of other slave characters throughout the text. As in other slave narratives, this serves the purpose of bearing witness to those who may not ever have the opportunity to tell their stories. It also further legitimizes claims made about the system as a whole, by offering a variety of examples and histories to readers. Finally, these references demonstrate Bond’s cognizance of the complexity of the system. Hannah is our heroine, but the literary choices to tell her story are still made within a specific historical context.

The circumstances surrounding Hannah’s actual flight are left purposefully vague. Bond explains that Hannah has (conveniently) been planning for such an occasion; her disguise of male clothing already procured, and her strategy already designed. The flight itself is treated dismissively, as Hannah explainsironically, “I cannot describe my journey; the details would be dry, tedious, uninteresting” (218). This is not exactly true. Hannah will encounter a series of dramatic challenges in flight, all of which she manages successfully. As readers, we are never meant to doubt Hannah’s ability to survive, because her own certainty is unwavering: as when

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she vows that “the instinct of self [-] preservation prompted me to crawl up higher on the bank” (232).

Although Hannah is portrayed as a strong-willed figure from the beginning of the novel, there is a definite progression in how her view of freedom evolves throughout the text. Her definition of happiness, and even contentment, evolves to the point that at the end of the novel, anything less than full emancipation will not satisfy her. While enjoying a moment of rest and sanctuary during her escape, she notes that “the flight of time admonished me that it was necessary to be moving again, as my journey was not yet accomplished, and it was impossible to feel anything like a sense of security while remaining in a slave-state” (236).

Fully committed to her flight, Hannah now has ample justification in her own mind to exhibit behaviors she previously forbore. In flight she adopts a disguise, passing not only as a male, but as white. She lies about her identity, and though she doesn’t refuse to help fellow travelers on her journey, she prioritizes her own survival above their own, whereas she once wished to join her mistress in death in order to be “free.”109 She even refers to herself as a “wanderer.”110 Ultimately, Hannah’s flight is concluded through Sentimental coincidence; she is reunited with Aunt Hetty, the elderly woman who once taught her to read, and receives the financial assistance needed to continue the rest of her journey via public transport, like Ellen Craft (though in women’s clothing). Bond denies her readers any conclusive details, and deliberately ends her narrative in a tone mired in sentimentalism.

109 “She had escaped wo[e] and oppression, and insult, and degradation. Through death she had conquered her enemy, and rose triumphant above his machinations, and I longed to follow her.” (103)
110 This calls to mind Frances Burney’s novel, *The Wanderer* (1814) and the Sentimental tradition.
Bond concludes her narrative with vague assertions of idyllic happiness. Hannah declares, “I found a life of freedom all my fancy had pictured it to be” (244). Hannah’s story resolves neatly: she is reunited with former friends, and even her presumed dead mother, a common trope in both Gothic and Sentimental novels. Additionally she now has a husband and a teaching career, and professes utter contentment. Critics point out that this resolution is too neat; fantastic coincidences and fairytale endings might be expected in other genres, but to include these tropes in a story about slavery is unsettling. In the narratives of William and Ellen Craft and Harriet Jacobs, the endings acknowledge the grim realities of emancipation. Flight from slavery did not resolve the entrenched structural and social prejudice of society; life in the North meant adjusting to new forms of oppression. However, throughout the trajectory of her narrative, Bond demonstrates how Hannah defines and exercises agency, offering a commentary critical not only of the institution of slavery, but the literary forms we use to articulate stories of persecution and survival. Bond offers her readers a test: “I will let the reader picture it all to his imagination and say farewell” (246). Hannah continually asserts her determination to succeed, therefore this ending challenges the readers: who are we to assume she does not?

Chapter 3: Flight from History

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.\textsuperscript{113}

—Walter Benjamin

To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?\textsuperscript{114}

—Saidiya Hartman

In her 2007 book, \textit{Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route}, Saidiya Hartman details the emotionally harrowing year she spent in Ghana, tracing the paths of centuries-old slave routes and searching for a personal connection to this shared heritage. She describes the loneliness of discovering that instead of feeling “embraced” by the land of her possible ancestors, she was treated as an outsider, derided as another rich American tourist come to “cry” over events from the distant past. Hartman repeatedly wonders why native Ghanaians do not seem to mourn the millions lost to the slave trade, while they ask her just as incredulously, why she does. It is a question Hartman struggles to answer as she walks through the dungeons of Elmina Castle and the sites of eighteenth-century slave markets. Now, these locations serve more


as monuments to capitalism than to history, since the flourishing tourism trade is far more significant to the local community (and economy) than a memorial to the past.

However, Hartman found unexpected resonances in this atmosphere of collective detachment. She recognized her own great-grandfather’s refusal to discuss his mother’s and grandmother’s lives as slaves in the similar reluctance of Ghanaians to associate themselves with the legacy of the Atlantic slave trade, realizing that “alongside the terrible things one had survived was also the shame of having survived it. Remembering warred with the will to forget” (16). However, filling in the gaps became even more imperative for Hartman: “For me, the rupture was the story. Whatever bridges I might build were as much the reminder of my separation as my connection” (42). Hartman acknowledged that although she approaches this history from a more distanced perspective, she insists “I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it” (133). Rather than looking to Africa, as many in her generation had, as a “pre-slavery” “Motherland,” thereby denying any link to a slave heritage, she hopes to find meaning in a larger collective history.

Hartman explains:

I knew that no matter how far from home I traveled, I would never be able to leave my past behind. I would never be able to imagine being the kind of person who had not been made and marked by slavery. I was black and a history of terror had produced that identity. Terror was “captivity without the possibility of flight,” inescapable violence, precarious life. There was no going back to a time or place before slavery... (40)
Hartman speaks to a shared frustration over the gaps in the historical record. She cannot trace her family lineage back further than five generations; there is no physical evidence to document her ancestors’ existence. If she believes her own identity to be produced by a legacy of “terror,” her efforts in Ghana illustrate the need to confront that terror in a more concrete form.

The repeated need to explain her motives, to articulate what she was hoping to find in the remnants of the past, pushed Hartman to realize that this history contained a very different narrative for her than it did for many of the Ghanaians she met. One of the last stops on her journey was to Gwolu, a village in northern Ghana founded by people fleeing slave traders. She explains that “their story of slavery was a narrative of victory” whereas hers was a “history of defeat” (233). They were the descendants of those who had survived—the ones not taken. Instead of focusing upon finding a connection based on shared loss, Hartman ultimately realizes “the bridge between the people of Gwolu and me wasn’t what we suffered or what we had endured but the aspirations that fueled flight and the yearning for freedom” (234). The connection she seeks is more abstract than she had anticipated. Rather than a shared sense of grief, Hartman finds what joins her to these communities is a shared narrative of survival.

However, for Hartman that narrative is complicated by the ways in which the ongoing survival of her lineage is still threatened by the grip of the past. Scholars have documented the devastating effects of institutional racism from Reconstruction to the present, proving that Emancipation achieved a conditional liberation.115 Hartman explains that knowledge of this

larger historical trajectory forces us to reexamine the meaning of past events within a broader context: “the encumbrances of emancipation and the fettered condition of the freed individual, at the very least, lead us to reconsider the meaning of freedom, if they do not cast doubt on the narrative of progress.” If our understanding of freedom must shift, how does this affect the way we understand acts of resistance aimed at securing that freedom? How does one resist more indirect forms of oppression?

Hartman’s desire to reconcile the ambiguity of a modern racial identity with the concrete sites of slavery’s origins by personally retracing the Atlantic slave route speaks to an impulse shared by many scholars in the second half of the twentieth century. Increasingly, writers looked to slavery as a historical lens and institutional metaphor through which contemporary American racial politics might be understood. While Hartman’s historical excavation took place on foot, other writers looked to reconstruct that journey through a form of historical fiction: the neo-slave narrative.

In Chapter Two of this study, I examined how nineteenth-century writers adapted tropes of Gothic and Sentimental flight in order to emphasize the agency demonstrated by individuals fleeing slavery. In these narratives, authors describe flight primarily as a means to escape immediate physical danger. But authors like William and Ellen Craft, and Harriet Jacobs also represent the experience of flight as a liminal space in which individuals are able to transcend political and social categories of identity. These depictions of flight from threatening domestic

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116 Hartman, Scenes 10.
spaces thus serve as embodied critiques of the way in which bodies are gendered, raced, and ultimately oppressed by the very space (the home) that is meant to shelter and protect them.

This project aims to do more than document depictions of narrative flight across a span of genres and time periods. I mean to trace a path of influence, to demonstrate that this trope reappears in specific genres and time periods because authors are deliberately recalling these literary strategies in order to contribute to an ongoing dialogue about how individuals resist oppression. If, as I have demonstrated, nineteenth-century authors purposefully referenced Gothic and Sentimental tropes in narratives about fleeing bondage, I must next consider how twentieth century authors engage with these tropes in their depictions of slavery through a modern perspective. These writers have the unique ability to consider the events of the past through a broader scope of history. Within that scope, if the urgency of immediate physical threat is removed, is the aim of flight altered? Furthermore, if modern writers are referencing earlier genres and tropes in order to articulate present-day concerns, how does the trope of flight take on a more metaphorical significance? I would suggest that on a political level, we might extrapolate that the model of the home, as a threatening domestic space, might stand in for the twentieth-century nation-state. How do authors respond to concerns of citizens who increasingly feel threatened by a “domestic” space whose ostensible aim is to provide them with equal protections? Do the oppressive homes and domestic structures in twentieth-century texts embody the gender and racial tension experienced by individuals in a country haunted by the ghosts of its past? If so, the meaning of flight must evolve. One might flee a house, but fleeing a nation or fleeing one’s past poses a different set of challenges. The second half of this study will examine how Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler incorporate the narrative tropes of Gothic and Sentimental flight into adaptations of earlier genres. Because both authors explore the topic of
slavery as modern writers, we can also consider these novels to be examples of “neo-slave narratives.”

A “neo-slave narrative,” as defined by Bernard W. Bell in his The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition (1987), generally refers to a modern text set in the time of slavery or Reconstruction, although this definition has since been expanded. In his seminal work on the subject, Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form, Ashraf Rushdy claims there are actually three distinct types of neo-slave narratives: “the third-person historical novel of slavery, the first-person narration of the life of a slave, and the recounting of the traumatic legacy of slavery from those that trace the continued effects of slavery on later generations.”

Although writers had been exploring fictional portrayals of antebellum slavery throughout the late nineteenth-century, Ashraf Rushdy considers the first modern example of the form to be Margaret Walker’s Jubilee (1966). The difference, he argues, lies in how slavery was viewed through a lens of modernity. This distance was essential in shaping the way in which authors engaged with the subject matter. Writing about the past with the full understanding of the larger trajectory of those events allows us to reexamine the intentions and expectations of those agents of change. What neo-slave narratives offer that nineteenth-century slave narratives could not is a resituating of the past with knowledge of the future. While few if any slave narratives concluded without recognizing the complications of freedom, in the century following Emancipation authors were able to illustrate with even more historical distance the frustration of that contradiction. The focus shifted from physical and legal understandings of freedom to internalized, intellectualized definitions. What does it mean to be a subject? Not just in the eyes

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of the law, but as an autonomous self? I suggest that when issues of citizenship are determined not by borders and laws, but by communities and individuals, the act of flight from one space to another is more symbolic than strategic. Twentieth-century texts consider what flight represents, rather than what flight achieves.

Rushdy attributes the rise of the genre to specific cultural and political forces. He explains that the turbulent political climate of the 1960s was marked by “a renewed respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance” (4). Rushdy argues that the Civil Rights movement inspired African Americans to redefine their relationships to a larger historical legacy, and in doing so, looked increasingly to the language used by nineteenth-century black writers in constructing black subjectivity. He also credits the controversial publication of William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) with igniting debate amongst black writers regarding the appropriation of stories about slavery by contemporary white authors. Black authors expressed anger with Styron’s distortion of Turner’s story through a fictionalized depiction of Turner’s voice. In the Author’s Note for her novel *Dessa Rose* (1986),118 Shirley Anne Williams cites *Confessions* as a motivating factor for her own project, claiming that in addition to wanting to tell the stories of two courageous women, “I admit also to being outraged by a certain critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to-memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner.”119

However, while *Confessions* may have been a catalyst for some writers, Rushdy cautions that labeling the neo-slave narrative genre as “reactive” is an oversimplification. Instead, he

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argues, if we examine the intertextuality of these works, we can understand them in relation to a complex history of historical and cultural influences. He writes, if “slave narratives (and Neo-slave narratives) do not only “react” or “respond” to master texts, but actively engage both specific literary texts and the social conditions from which they emerge” we can explore the connections beyond historical causation (16). In referencing the important work of Hortense Spillers on textual appropriation, Rushdy explains that “the intertextual relationship is discontinuous because the fictional text is not establishing a coherent relationship between itself and a predecessor text; rather, the fictional text is engaged in a complex dialogic negotiation with the various spheres that together form the cultural moment of its production” (17).

It is useful to consider this definition of intertextuality when examining twentieth-century responses to slavery since neo-slave narratives do not seek to imitate or revise specific nineteenth-century texts. Instead, they explore the political and cultural conditions of their literary predecessors through a modern perspective. This study has argued that the early genres of the Gothic novel, the Sentimental novel, and the slave narrative depict the narrative trope of flight as an act of individual resistance to patriarchal and racist oppression. Protagonists flee imprisoning domestic spaces that serve to order them according to codes of gender, class and race. In these texts, individuals take flight from immediate harm and in the process, create a unique space in-between restrictive domains. My reading of those texts demonstrates that this act

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121 Although Ishmael Reed’s famous neo-slave narrative, Flight to Canada (1976) includes satirical treatment of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), and other texts, scholars would argue his work as a whole is responding to contemporary issues of racism and nationalism through this lens of the past. See, in particular, Christine Levecq’s “Nation, Race and Postmodern Gestures in Ishmael Reed’s “Flight to Canada.” (2002).
did not achieve a fully liberated state for those protagonists. Instead, the passage of flight afforded individuals temporarily transformative moments of creative autonomy in a space separate from the confining laws of society. In that context, the act of flight could be read as a transitory, yet significant, episode of empowerment. We can argue that these texts offered profound criticism of the times in which they were written, and the examples of empowered protagonists in flight refuted legally enforced assumptions of inherent inequality.

Clearly the legal landscape has changed dramatically since the publication of the Walpole’s *Otranto*,\(^{122}\) and Jacobs’ *Incidents*.\(^{123}\) In the United States and Great Britain, women now enjoy a relative\(^{124}\) legal equality, and the threats of forced marriage, inheritance theft, and rape are crimes which can be prosecuted through legal channels. The abolition of chattel slavery and the legislation of legal and civil protections for African Americans has likewise eliminated certain threats and alleviated other forms of discrimination described by authors of color in the nineteenth century. However, many of the same social and political tensions expressed by those texts persist to this day through pervasive examples of systemic racism and misogyny. As a result, literary depictions of resistance have also evolved as responses to a hostile environment rather than to a direct danger. In this chapter, I will discuss novels by Toni Morrison that explore more symbolic representations of flight as the focus shifts from an individual’s deliverance from immediate danger (flight as plot device) to the long term implications of his or her survival (flight as metaphor). These texts explore the impact of slavery on individuals, communities, and

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\(^{124}\) I wouldn’t dare suggest that women do enjoy political, social and economic equality, only that in the language of the law they are meant to, whereas in previous centuries, their inequality was explicitly articulated.
successive generations of family. Morrison’s novels contain a range of different figures in flight; including a woman who escapes a plantation, a boy who seeks a quest, and a man who actually flies into the air like a bird. Yet I would argue that the focus of these narratives is not on the event of flight itself, but on the larger implications of that flight. Only a text written with the perspective of historical distance can ascertain the long-term effects of resistance. My reading suggests that modern revisions of the slave narrative offer a different interpretation of what flight meant to the individuals at the time, and to the generations that came later. What we see is a growing emphasis on the narratives of flight themselves. In the moment, the act of flight is significant. But after the fact, it is the story of that flight, and the retelling of the story, that matters most of all. The story of flight serves as a reminder for later generations how one can create an alternate space for self-determination.

The neo-slave narratives of Toni Morrison demonstrate how narrative flight continues to be a central symbol of resistance, especially when the nature of the threat remains embedded within our domestic and national culture. Reminiscent of Saidiya Hartman’s journey to Ghana, Toni Morrison has explained that her intention when writing about the past is “to translate the historical into the personal.”125 Through her novels, Morrison seeks to create moments of identification for modern readers by focusing on the details that shape the humanity of her characters. In her essay, “The Site of Memory,” Morrison declares that she wants to remove the veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate,” a reference to the coded silence of narratives in which the reader is left to wonder at what has been withheld—either in the interest

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of protecting the reader or author. According to Morrison, nineteenth-century slave narratives were limited in what they could convey about the interior lives of slaves, since “the slave wanting to tell his story had to follow conventions agreeable to a white audience and shaped by the discourses which defined minority experience within that society.”

Morrison acknowledges her freedom to inhabit the moments and thoughts suppressed by the limitations of early forms.

While all of Morrison’s novels explore the effects of slavery upon American identity, I will demonstrate how *Beloved* (1987) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) convey this history through revealingly different portrayals. Both novels can be considered neo-slave narratives, but *Beloved* adheres more closely to the traditional definition of the genre in its depiction of antebellum slavery and the decade immediately following Emancipation. Written through the perspective of the twentieth century, *Beloved* reveals how expectations of freedom were complicated by the realities of history. Physical flight from danger only achieved a limited degree of safety. Certain threats remain viable, long after immediate danger has passed; and these often pose the greatest danger to one’s survival and well-being. Therefore flight’s significance becomes more metaphorical than literal. *Song of Solomon* exemplifies a broader realization of the genre in featuring a protagonist several generations removed from his family’s slave past, whose introduction to a new narrative of flight broadens his understanding of his own place in history.

**Beloved**


And in all those escapes he could not help being astonished by the beauty of this land that was not his. He hid in its breast, fingered its earth for food, clung to its banks to lap water and tried not to love it.  

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

They hoped they were safe, but the wall’s very presence reminded them that they were not.  

—Saidiya Hartman

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1988) is lauded as a profound example of the postmodern slave narrative in its depiction of a community of former slaves in Reconstruction-era Ohio. Morrison based her protagonist Sethe on Margaret Garner, a young slave woman who, after escaping with her children in 1856, killed her two-year old daughter rather than see her returned to slavery. The novel moves between three distinct time periods: Sethe’s years as a slave on the Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky, her desperate flight to freedom, and her present-day life in 1873 at the house at 124 Bluestone Road, Ohio. By layering these three distinct temporalities on top of one another, Morrison dismisses the concept of a past that exists separately from the present, and instead explores how history is embedded within the concrete domestic spaces of our ordinary lives. In doing so, she complicates what it means to flee danger. In *Beloved*, the threats of the past remain viable in the physical structures of the present.

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As discussed in Chapter One of this study, much of the tension of the Gothic text explores the ways in which the home, an assumed site of sanctuary, actually poses a danger to its inhabitants through supernatural (whether real or implied) threats. Morrison structures *Beloved* in much the same way by illustrating how Sethe’s past is actually embedded in the physical space of her home. The way she negotiates this space illustrates the conditional nature of freedom, and the limits of her agency as a “free” person. While Sethe’s traumatic, yet initially successful, flight from slavery transforms her on a personal level, any sense of peace is destroyed when Schoolteacher and his nephews find her one month later. The shock of their arrival lies not in the invasion of the sanctuary of 124; it is how their appearance reveals the true fragility of her peace. Sethe, and Baby Suggs realize that they were never safe, and thus were never fully free. This event forces Sethe to reassess the limits of her liberation, and the true achievement of her flight.

*Beloved* opens with the simple declarative sentence: “124 was spiteful” (3). Each of the three sections of the text begins in this manner. Part Two warns: “124 was loud,” and the final section reveals: “124 was quiet.” These sentences anchor an otherwise expansive, non-linear narrative to the fixed structure of the house at 124 Bluestone Road, and imbue that structure with a life and emotional journey of its own. This house forms the center of the novel as the site in which Sethe must negotiate both her past and present simultaneously. Morrison purposefully locates this conflict in the very home that once represented freedom for Sethe. In her flight from the Sweet Home Plantation, she hopes to secure a safe space for her children. By 1873, this same house functions more like a prison than a sanctuary. Sethe’s two eldest sons flee “the moment

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130 Morrison, 169, 239.
the house committed what was for [them] the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time,” and Sethe is bound to the site of her past crime, forced to live in quiet penitence at the mercy of her dead child (3). By creating such a rich and complex protagonist in Sethe, Toni Morrison is indeed able to “translate the historical into the personal,” but *Beloved* also achieves this aim by giving history itself a physical presence in the text through the incorporation of supernatural elements. Because of this, we can read *Beloved* not only as a neo-slave narrative, but as a Gothic tale.

As discussed in Chapter One of this study, much of the tension of the Gothic text explores the ways in which the home, an assumed site of sanctuary, actually poses a danger to its inhabitants through supernatural (whether real or implied) threats. Morrison structures *Beloved* in much the same way by illustrating how Sethe’s past is actually embedded in the physical space of her home. Memory and history manifest a physical presence long after the actual events have passed. Sethe describes this to Denver as “rememory:

Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who was never there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can’t never go there. Never. Because even though it’s all over—over and done with—it’s going to always be there waiting for you. (36)

For Sethe, spaces retain a tangible physical trace of the past.
Morrison isn’t the first writer to describe the traumatic history of slavery as “haunting” our present day lives, but in Beloved, she literalizes that metaphor with the introduction of an actual ghost, “full of a baby’s venom” (3). At the start of the novel Sethe has lived for eighteen years in a house that is haunted by the ghost of her murdered daughter and is expressly avoided by every other person in town. She and her last remaining child Denver endure the isolation of this space in a seemingly contradictory resigned defiance, refusing to leave a space of active persecution. Before her death, Baby Suggs expresses the futility of escaping the ghosts of the past, claiming, “‘Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief’” (5).

What further complicates the symbolism of 124 is that even while it is a daily trial, over time the house also serves to protect Sethe and Denver from the hostility of the community, bonding the two women in their dependence on each other. Sethe may have encouraged this isolation through her own pride, but she does not question the justice of ghost’s attentions. Denver retreats to the “protection” of 124 after she is asked a question to which she cannot, and will not hear the answer. Later, when Sethe realizes that her killed daughter has returned to her in the form of a young woman named Beloved, she revels in the privacy that 124 affords them. With eyes only for her adult “crawling already” baby, Sethe happily severs the few remaining ties she holds to the outside community in favor of the isolation of her home and its supernatural possession. In this way, Morrison subverts the usual formula of the haunted house and persecuted heroine. Instead of fleeing the danger of the space, Sethe embraces it, refusing to

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leave even when her life is threatened. This contrasts directly with the space Sethe does flee, suggesting that the action of the text is framed by Sethe’s path between these two homes.

124 Bluestone Road is mirrored by the other main domestic structure within the text: the Kentucky plantation of Sweet Home, where Sethe was once enslaved by the Garner family. It is this home, and the specific danger it poses, that Sethe bravely flees. Morrison purposefully juxtaposes these sites in order to complicate a binary equating one with bondage and the other with freedom. The irony of the name “Sweet Home” perfectly expresses the ambivalence of Sethe’s own feelings. Sethe is conflicted by the fact that memories of Sweet Home contain both beauty and horror. She remembers, “It never looked as terrible as it was.” Sethe feels guilty for the way her memory retains the beauty as well as, and sometimes instead of, the horror: “Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys” (6). Some of her happiest memories, including her love with Halle and her joy in her daughter’s sweet face, are rooted in the context of this site of suffering. At the same time, 124, the symbol of freedom, where Baby Suggs was able to build a life as a free woman, and where Sethe enjoyed twenty-eight days of “freedom” after her perilous flight, is burdened with the pain of the past, to the point that Stamp Paid notes with alarm “the voices that ringed 124 like a noose” (183).

The textual geography of Beloved therefore stretches between these two houses, and their respective effects as sites of love and pain. Sethe connects them in her own mind, and considers the means through which we claim spaces, and create meaning. At the suggestion from Paul D that she leave 124, she thinks to herself,
This house he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing... She who had never had one but this one; she who left a dirt floor to come to this one; she who had to bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner’s kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her. (22)

Here, Sethe articulates her definition of a “home.” The beauty of Sweet Home was what she brought to it: her love, her vision, her will. Sethe makes clear that her efforts to fashion a kind of dignity and beauty in her youth did not negate the ever-present terror of slavery. More importantly, even though she and Halle start their family at Sweet Home, Sethe knows that this space actively threatens the bonds of parents and spouses. The violence of Schoolteacher’s nephews confirms this; they not only attack Sethe, they “steal her milk,” and, by extension, violate her children in the same brutal act. Although she is still suffering the effects of this attack as well as a vicious whipping, all while nine months pregnant, Sethe never wavers in her resolve to flee Sweet Home for the promised sanctuary of 124.

Yet while Sethe successfully completes the passage from Kentucky to Ohio, she is conflicted about the meaning of her flight. Sethe adamantly tells Paul D “I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much!” (15). This statement reveals the nature of Sethe’s conflict. Flight changes her, but it does not
save her. And while she recognizes the necessity of that journey, she does not minimize what it cost her to flee. Significantly, the scars on her back are described as a tree: an image of stability, roots, and longevity. She bears this mark upon her back and yet she herself cannot see it. She can only feel the lattice of the scarred skin, she can only remember the pain of the lashes, and the excruciating healing process. In the same breath that she names her scars, she names the ghost. These are her burdens, these are the physical reminders she claims as hers. She cannot deny them, she cannot erase them. Therefore, when she mentions them as a reason for why she cannot flee again, Morrison is demonstrating how Sethe views flight through the perspective of time. She first describes her flight to Paul D from the perspective she held eighteen years ago, and then later she retells it within the context of the present day. Sethe reveals a different understanding of what that flight ultimately signified for her—personally, at that time, and now, with the distance of nearly two decades, and we are able to see how her understanding has shifted over time.

Sethe’s flight from slavery fundamentally changes the way she views her own subjectivity. The shocking act of killing her daughter is described multiple times throughout the novel through different perspectives, but it is in Sethe’s own telling that she connects her deliberate violence to her passage of flight. When confronted by Paul D with the newspaper clipping, rather than cite the example of Sweet Home’s degradation as justification for her actions, she describes her experience in fleeing the plantation. She begins gently, saying, “I don’t have to tell you about Sweet Home—what it was—but maybe you don’t know what it was like for me to get away from there” (161). She goes on to quietly claim the miracle of her achievement:
“I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, Go on, and Now. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right.” (162)

Sethe explains that this experience, the fact of what she was able to do in flight, was what changed her, irrevocably. It wasn’t the twenty-eight days, and it wasn’t, as it was for Baby Suggs, the feeling of her heart beating in her chest, and knowing that for once, it was her very own heart. The process through which Sethe claims ownership of her own will and self is in her flight from Sweet Home. She declares, “when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon—there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to” (162). Paul D acknowledges the truth of her words, that “he knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom” (162). Morrison situates freedom as a state of mind, and for Sethe it is the ability to claim her loved ones as her own, once she believes she is in a place that allows her to do so.

However the sanctity of 124 is compromised twenty-eight days later, when Schoolteacher arrives to recapture Sethe and her children. Later, after the horror of that day, and the events that followed, Baby Suggs tries to explain to Stamp Paid what had changed. It wasn’t just Sethe’s act, she claims, but that “they came in my yard” (179). She repeats this line, for emphasis, because in its simplicity it reveals the true terror of that day. Even as a free woman, there was nothing
stopping Schoolteacher, or any other white person for that matter, from desecrating her home. Any sense of power, or safety was revealed to be illusory. They were never safe, and they would never be safe. Baby Suggs realizes that the fiction of this “freedom” negates her work as a preacher, claiming, “the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count” (180).

124 Bluestone Road is physically altered by the events of that day as well. Later, Sethe looks out and “remembered when the yard had a fence with a gate that somebody was always latching and unlatching in the time when 124 was busy as a way station. She did not see the whiteboys who pulled it down, yanked up the posts and smashed the gate leaving 124 desolate and exposed at the very hour when everybody stopped dropping by” (163). This image perfectly illuminates the shift of that day. A fence delineates boundaries between spaces, and by enclosing a home, or yard within its perimeter, it suggests possession, if not ownership. The fence might serve in a protective capacity, but for 124, the latch on the gate signified to visitors a ritual in the “latching and unlatching;” they were welcome to come and go as they pleased, but they must demonstrate a certain respect to the division of that space. Schoolteacher and his nephews tie their horses to the posts, and destroy the fence altogether in their retreat; they desecrate the symbolic protection of 124, leaving it “exposed.” Both the loss of the fence and the act itself serve to reinforce the myth of 124’s safety. Sethe asserts to Paul D, “‘I stopped him,’ she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164). Safety, she implies, was no longer possible at 124, was no longer possible anywhere. Paul D is stunned by her admission, and realizes that he believed he had made 124 safe by driving out the ghost when he arrived. He now understands that Sethe lived with the ghost by choice, that she reconciled herself to the persecution out of a belief in the futility of further flight.
The suggestion that the past has a presence that can occupy physical space and “haunt” the living is reinforced throughout the text, not just through the character of Beloved, but by Sethe’s evolving relationship with her past, present and future. The way Sethe negotiates physical space illustrates her ability to exercise individual freedom. While flight from slavery transforms her on a personal level, the violation of Schoolteacher’s intrusion on her newly grasped peace forces Sethe to reassess the limits of liberation.

Morrison’s treatment of flight in *Beloved* directly responds to representations of Gothic flight. Sethe’s flight is significant and brief as it momentarily delivers her from the abuse of Schoolteacher and his nephews. Like the examples of Gothic flight from Chapter One of this study, Sethe seeks safety in the cover of wild and rural terrain on the outskirts of society where she would be immediately marked as a fugitive. Fortunately, Sethe encounters a fellow figure in flight, Amy Denver, and the text demonstrates how in the heterotopia created by their respective flights, these two women can exist separate from their respective political divisions, and care for one another as sisters. But, as we have seen with Gothic flight, the heroine must ultimately return to the space that originally threatened her. Morrison simultaneously replicates and revises this pattern; Sethe does not return to Sweet Home, but her arrival at 124 and the events that follow demonstrate that a total escape was never possible. Sethe retains the memory of what her act of flight meant to her, how it transformed the way she thought about herself as a human being. It is this memory that Sethe clings to, as she grapples with the overwhelming frustration of her blighted expectations. The memory of her flight, and the symbolic weight of its truth, holds a greater significance for Sethe as time goes on, than what the flight itself achieved.
In addition to flight, Toni Morrison incorporates other Gothic tropes, such as a vengeful ghost and a haunted house, in order to demonstrate the past’s physical grip on the consciousness of individual lives as well as its living presence as a historical legacy. Sethe is haunted by the ghost of her daughter, just as the community, and by extension the entire nation, is haunted by the scars of slavery. Beloved, the young woman who appears mysteriously, simultaneously embodies the individual spirit of Sethe’s murdered daughter as well as the collective identity of all lives lost to the slave trade. Beloved describes memories not just of her infancy with Sethe, but also the trauma of Middle Passage. Beloved’s role as the living symbol of both personal and historical tragedy allows the characters, and by extension readers of the text, to engage directly with an embodied past. In her article, “Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative” Cynthia Hamilton concludes that “Beloved comes to represent, for each character, the warping power of a past connected with racism and slavery, a past which must be confronted and exorcised. And for the reader, Beloved comes to personify the whole experience of American slavery.” The characterization of Beloved’s departure as an “exorcism” is interesting to consider, given the larger political implications. In this analogy, Beloved is not only a ghost that haunts 124 Bluestone Road, she is a demon who possesses this space for her own purpose. While we generally consider exorcism as a ritual to “cast out” a demonic presence, “exorcism” is derived from the Greek preposition *ek* with the verb *horkizo* which means ‘I cause [someone] to swear’ and refers to ‘putting the spirit or demon on oath,’ thus ‘invoking a higher authority to bind the entity…and command it to act contrary to its own will.’

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definition that I believe is more useful to our understanding of Beloved’s climactic confrontation. While it appears that Beloved has indeed been cast out, or driven away by the chanting of the gathered townswomen, the final section of the text hints that she lingers at the edge of memory, “like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep” (275). Morrison is not suggesting that the trauma of the past can simply be confronted and banished. I contend that her message is more complicated. When we revisit the past through narrative, we cannot help but seek our own likenesses on the page.

In the enigmatic epilogue Morrison repeats, “It was not a story to pass on” and then later, “this is not a story to pass on” (274-5). The line, read within the shifting context of the imagery in this section offers a multiplicity of possible readings. The text of Beloved does in fact pass on a tale of slavery, urging that we examine the lives and thoughts of these characters. The words could likewise suggest that it is a story we cannot afford to dismiss or forget. But the line also seems to insist that the story not be shared, not be told, just as the individuals involved “deliberately forgot” (274). Perhaps we don’t confront the past in order to vanquish it; we confront the past in order to gain control over it, so that we can bind it, and command it ourselves, that we might pass on our own story.

In Beloved, Morrison evokes Gothic tropes in order to directly engage with the metaphor of history as a haunting presence. In doing so, she complicates the idea of flight as an act of resistance solely because of its physical achievement: the crossing of a geographic border. Sethe flees slavery, only to find danger in the conditional freedom of life in both pre- and post-emancipation Ohio. I would argue that this subversive reading has its roots in the original Gothic flight of the eighteenth century, in which flight can be read as a temporary space of relaxed
restriction where individuals, (mainly female heroines) enjoy a brief period of autonomy. The heterotopia created by the act of flight reveals the fallacy inherent in maintaining a patriarchal hierarchy (the inherent inferiority of women). These individuals are transformed by the experience when they must inevitably return to the oppressive machine of domestic patriarchy. Morrison revises this model by emphasizing how the direct impact of Sethe’s flight upon her own subjectivity leads to her refusal to return to bondage. *Beloved* acknowledges the past’s grip on the present through the replication of oppressive patterns, but proposes that the memory of resistance, and the retelling of that resistance, can be a stronger force.

*Song of Solomon*

Their strategies for survival became our maneuvers for power.  
—Toni Morrison

In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground…the wings of all those other people’s nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him.  
—Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison’s third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), opens with Robert Smith’s suicidal plunge off the roof of No Mercy Hospital, and closes with Milkman Dead’s euphoric ascent into the air at Solomon’s Leap. In framing the text with two vivid yet sharply contrasting exhibitions of flight, Morrison purposefully situates Milkman Dead’s coming of age as a journey from the first act of flight to the last. Born at the moment of Smith’s failed “flight,” Milkman Dead is haunted by its implications, believing flight an ability forever denied to him. Milkman feels


trapped within the narrow expectations of his parents and sisters as well as the limited vision of his own immediate experience. It is only when he learns of an alternate narrative of flight that he is able to conceive of his potential as part of a broader historical and cultural heritage.

To counteract the image of Robert Smith’s doomed Icarus, Morrison invokes the myth of the flying Africans, emphasizing a reading of flight as a process of empowerment and individuation. *Song of Solomon* demonstrates how historical and cultural narratives have the power to inform rather than determine individual identity when Milkman discovers he can choose which mythology of flight will inspire his own story. The novel asserts that this process is selective; one is not passively defined by a distant past. Instead, one actively chooses a specific legacy on which to build. This process of selection allows individuals to contextualize their own places within history, and to free themselves from narratives that seek to narrow and limit their potential. Morrison demonstrates how in looking to the past, we must see ourselves not only in stories of bondage, but in stories of liberation. Morrison centralizes the trope of flight in *Song of Solomon* in order to reinforce the function of flight as an act of self-determination, rather than self-destruction. I am especially interested in how she expands this study beyond the act of flight, to the language of flight. *Song of Solomon* primarily explores the lives of those affected by the flights of others. How do stories about ancestry impact the way we construct a sense of self? How do stories of flight reflect a specific symbolic cultural resonance? How does the telling of the story of flight to successive generations become as important, if not more important, than the flight itself?

*Milkman Dead* repeatedly associates symbols of flight, such as wings, birds and planes, with freedom and power. However, ever since he first realized that “only birds and airplanes
could fly,” the world feels to him narrow and confined (9). Because of this stilted impotence, “he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother” (9). The perceived loss of this ability seemingly stunts Milkman’s will to grow as an individual, illustrated by numerous signifiers over the course of the novel. Milkman’s extended period of breast-feeding, the (resentful) coddling of his older sisters, the sexual availability of his cousin Hagar, and ready-made career working for his father all further facilitate his passivity.

Milkman’s perceptions of immobility are reinforced by his limited understanding of family history, and his place within it. *Song of Solomon* explores the complicated heritage of a family several generations removed from slavery, although Milkman has little knowledge of the family history that has been in part, erased by a clerical error. Years ago, Milkman’s grandfather Jake was incorrectly registered with the Freedman’s Bureau as “Macon Dead,” a name he doesn’t correct by the request of his wife, who “said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). This name change effectively resets the family line, and two new generations of “Deads” rise up to assert their own place in the world. Milkman’s father Macon imparts his life’s philosophy in two words: “Own things” (55). His drive to achieve financial prosperity, coupled with his marriage to Ruth Foster, the esteemed daughter of the town’s only black doctor, succeeds in establishing the Deads as one of the most prominent families in town. Milkman is raised in the cold formality of this marriage, enjoying the convenience of privilege, but also the stasis of having no conflict against which to define himself.

Milkman Dead’s lack of self-definition may be attributed to the environment in which he is raised. The old Foster house on “Not Doctor Street” is characterized by stagnation, sterility,
and hostility. His mother Ruth reveals that Macon ended their physical relationship when she was just twenty years old, after he discovered her kissing the fingers of her dead father. Her extreme loneliness, only mitigated briefly by the physical contact of breastfeeding her son, fills the house with unhappy longing. In her miserable lethargy, she cooks inedible meals, and confirms her continued existence only by looking at the water mark on the dining room table, a “visible object that assured her that the world was still there; that this was life and not a dream” (11). Milkman recalls how “the quiet that suffused the doctor’s house then, broken only by the murmur of the women eating sunshine cake, was only that: quiet. It was not peaceful, for it was preceded by and would soon be terminated by the presence of Macon Dead” (10). His mother and two adult sisters inhabit the house with seemingly no expectation for a release from this tension, or a better fate. Instead, they resign themselves to a lifetime in a house that acts as a shrine to the dead doctor, and a prison in which “solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear” (10).

The only family ritual that suggests a reprieve from this toxic stasis is a weekly car ride, but on these trips, Milkman is prevented, significantly, from experiencing the trip as productive. If he sat facing forward, “pressed in the front seat between his parents, he could see only the winged woman careening off the nose of the car” [emphasis mine] (32). Therefore, in order to have any kind of view outside, he takes to “kneeling on the dove gray seat and looking out the back window” (32). But “riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going—just where he had been—troubled him. He did not want to see the trees that he had passed, or houses and children slipping into the space the automobile had left behind (32). This image deftly illustrates Milkman’s anxiety; he cannot see the path forward, and the space where he had once been shows no mark of his presence. He is transported
passively, leaving no trace. While the winged hood ornament flies confidently forward, he exists neither in the past, nor the future.

It is finally at Pilate’s house that Milkman experiences a domestic space that is not confined and threatening. Long forbidden to him, his visit to Pilate “was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy” (47). His mother Ruth characterizes Pilate’s house similarly, remembering it as a “haven,” and “an inn, a safe harbor” (135). Morrison posits the old Foster house in direct contrast with the house where Pilate, her daughter, and her granddaughter make their home. The former exists as a tomb, where the memory of the dead doctor haunts the living and prevents them from speaking of the past. Pilate speaks freely of her history, her memories, and her knowledge of her ancestors, keeping the bones of whom she believes to be the man Macon killed as a sense of duty and responsibility, rather than out of dread or fear. While Macon aims to “own things,” Pilate and her family have no interest in materialism, and their few needs are met through Reba’s magical good fortune. Milkman remembers with shame his violation of Pilate’s home, wondering, “How could he have broken into that house—the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it. No soft worn-down chair, not a cushion or a pillow…but peace was there, energy, singing, and now his own remembrances” (301).

The movement of the text places Milkman on a path to ultimately flee the confinement of the old Foster house on Not Doctor Street, and test his place in the world. Morrison teases the reader by initially framing Milkman’s journey as a mythic quest for gold. One could argue that Morrison is deliberately evoking comparisons to Western legends, positing Milkman’s story as a classic bildungsroman in which he must break free of his family in order to achieve
individuation.\textsuperscript{136} And indeed, Milkman is eager to “feel the heavy white door on Not Doctor Street close behind him” (163). It is in that house he looks and feels “tentative… like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back” (69-70). Milkman wants to be perceived as a man, but the futile gestures of striking his father and disciplining his sister only serve to reinforce the stagnant cycles of the house, and his inability to alter them.

In Milkman, Morrison explores the effects of the imprisoning domestic on a male protagonist. Throughout this study, I have focused primarily on female characters, those figures most restricted by the order imposed by a patriarchal family structure, and (arguably) the most vulnerable under the institution of chattel slavery. Milkman’s struggles within the confinement of his home certainly follow a different trajectory than that of his mother, or his sisters. He is stifled, but still entitled. Yet the power available to Milkman through this narrow model is unfulfilling, and depressing. Without extending any effort, he might step into his father’s shoes and reproduce the same toxic violence that already permeates his home. I would argue that though Milkman enjoys a great deal of privilege, he is expected to assume a role already created for him; no one in his life expects him to do more, or be more. In this way, he shares certain similarities with the heroines of texts discussed earlier in this study. His very act of leaving this home transforms his narrative, and suggests that he wants to create a new relational space. In the process, he hopes to be defined differently within that space. I would also suggest that Morrison presents a very different perspective on the journey of a male protagonist. As I will discuss later in this section, Milkman’s transformation comes about not through his own heroic actions, but in

\textsuperscript{136} See Trudier Harris, \textit{Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison} (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1991) for more on how scholars have read Milkman’s quest within a classical literary framework.
learning of the acts of others, which will ultimately alter his perspective on home, family, women, and history. His story departs from traditional quest narratives in its emphasis on maturation through education, rather than experience.

In leaving the town of his birth, Milkman creates the fluid space of an open journey, and on multiple levels, takes flight. It is fitting that the first leg of his trip actually enables Milkman to fly: “The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability. High above the clouds, heavy yet light, caught in the stillness of speed … sitting in intricate metal become glistening bird, it was not possible to believe he had ever made a mistake, or could” (220). Morrison emphasizes the transformative quality of flight here, as Milkman feels, in flight, all the confidence and strength that elude him on the ground. The memory of this feeling lingers, and encourages him to proceed on his quest with a new sense of self. In flight, Milkman enjoys a liminal period of separation from the world, allowing him to be free, briefly, from the systems that order him. The knowledge of this broadens his perception of agency, for Milkman seems reborn as he begins the next leg of his journey.

This act of flight also triggers a process of self-discovery, in which Milkman is able to form a new identity separate from his life with an infantilizing nickname and the shadow of his father’s oppressive reputation. In the eyes of the strangers he meets throughout his trip, he is the inheritor of an esteemed lineage, and he thrives in the light of their respect. Milkman learns the truths obscured by his grandfather’s fateful name-change and finally connects the fragmented pieces of his father’s line. The experience of claiming this heritage gives Milkman for the first time in his life, a sense of purpose and fulfillment. “It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he’d heard the tremor in the word: ‘I
live here, but my people...’ or: ‘She acts like she ain’t got no people,’ or: “Do any of your people live there?” But he hadn’t known what it meant: links” (229). For the first time, Milkman has the ability to take control of his family’s history, instead of relying on his father or his mother to define the present through their grief-filled perspectives.

In gaining access to this broader history, Milkman uncovers an alternate narrative of flight: the novel’s central image of the Flying African. In Shalimar, Milkman hears children singing the same song that Pilate once sang to him:

\[
\begin{align*}
O \text{ Solomon don’t leave me here} \\
\text{Cotton balls to choke me} \\
O \text{ Solomon don’t leave me here} \\
\text{Buckra’s arms to yoke me} \\
\text{Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone} \\
\text{Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.}\end{align*}
\]

Milkman is incredulous to learn that this Solomon was one of the “Flying Africans” immortalized by his descendants in song. He questions Susan Byrd, one of the residents of Shalimar, “‘When you say ‘flew off’ you mean he ran away, don’t you? Escaped?’” (322). This distinction is important, since language denoting flight was interchangeable with language describing the escape of slaves. But Susan insists, “‘No, I mean flew. Oh, it’s just foolishness, you know, but according to the story he wasn’t running away. He was flying. He flew. You

\footnote{Morrison, \textit{Song of Solomon}, 303.}
know, like a bird. Just stood up in the fields one day, ran up some hill, spun around a couple times, and was lifted up in the air”’(322-3). Her description directly connects the Solomon of the novel to the historical record of a similar phenomenon: slaves who fled slavery by flying in the air, rather than fleeing on foot.

The myth of the Flying Africans exists in several variations. One version describes how, upon reaching the shores of the United States or the West Indies, captured Africans fly home, rather than live a life in slavery. In other accounts, slaves are described rising up from their work in the fields by speaking an incantation taught to them by a wise, older African—usually to thwart a cruel slave master.\textsuperscript{138} Morrison draws upon accounts and folktales first documented in interviews collected by the Federal Writers Project, and later published in works by Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Julius Lester and Virginia Hamilton, to represent the act of flight as a practice of freedom, as illustrated in Afrocentric folktales.

The myth of the Flying Africans, long passed down through oral tradition, appears in numerous documented accounts of former slaves and descendants of former slaves. \textit{Drums and Shadows} (1940), a collection of interviews of African American residents of the coastal regions of Georgia conducted by the Georgia Writer’s Project in the 1930s, contains repeated references to this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{139} One subject, Wallace Quarterman from Darien, Georgia, casually described an instance in which a slave flew, rather than be whipped again by a harsh overseer.

\textsuperscript{138} Another variation evolves from a historic rebellion at Dunbar Creek in St Simons Island, Georgia, where hundreds of newly arrived West Africans are said to have walked into the water and back to Africa. Some accounts interpret this as a mass suicide; others maintain the symbolism of a return through supernatural means.

\textsuperscript{139} Guy B. Johnson, Muriel B. Bell, and Malcolm Bell. \textit{Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes}. Spartanburg, S.C: Reprint Co, 1974.
He recalled, “dey riz up in duh sky an tun hesef intuh buzzuds an fly right back tuh Africa.”¹⁴⁰

When the interviewers expressed their astonishment at this statement, he replied, "Wut, you ain heah bout um? Ebrybody know bout um. Dey sho lef duh hoe stannin in duh fiel an dey riz right up an fly right back tuh Africa." While Mr. Quaterman admitted he did not witness this event personally, he asserted “I knowd plenty wut did see um, plenty wut wuz right deah in duh fiel wid um an seen duh hoe wut dey lef stickin up attuh dey done fly way.”¹⁴¹

Indeed, the interviewers found many persons who were familiar with the stories of flying Africans. Another woman, Pricilla McCullough, described how one day,

Duh slabies wuz out in duh fiel wukin. All ub a sudden dey git tuhgedduh an staht tuh moob roun in a ring. Roun dey go fastuhnfastuh. Den one by one dey riz up an take wing an fly lak a bud. Duh obuhseeuh heah duh noise an he come out an he see duh slabies riz up in duh eah an fly back tuh Africa. He run an he ketch duh las one by duh foot jis as he wuz bout tuh fly off.¹⁴²

In an entry from Sapelo Island, an elderly gentleman Shad Hall confirmed:

Doze folks could fly too…Duh massuh wuz fixin tuh um up tuh whip um. Dey say, 'Massuh, yuh ain gwine lick me,' and wid dat dey runs down tuh duh ribbuh. Duh obuhseeuh he sho tought he ketch um wen dey git tuh duh ribbuh. But fo he could git tuh um, dey riz up in duh eah an fly way. Dey fly right back tuh Africa.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 143
¹⁴¹ Ibid, 143
¹⁴² Ibid, 146
¹⁴³ Johnson, 160
What becomes increasingly clear, from just this brief selection, is how tales of Flying Africans are universally accepted within these communities. These stories have been passed down for generations and are retold with intimate familiarity. In fact, the telling of the tale to those left behind has become a narrative in and of itself. In an entry from St. Simons Island, one man, Ben Sullivan, asserted, “Ise heahd plenty Africans talk bout flyin. Deah’s plenty ub em wut could fly.” Another, Tom Floyd, remembered a specific figure, a root maker named Alexander, who was known to have this ability: “He wuz still libin wen I wuz a boy. Ise heahd em tell plenty uh tales bout im.”

Following the publication of these interviews, authors began to collect the tales in collections honoring African American Folklore. Julius Lester’s seminal work, *Black Folktales* (1969) includes the story, “People Who Could Fly.” This version describes how a young pregnant slave woman, struggling to work in the South Carolinian sun, was struck down by an overseer’s lash. A fellow slave, understood to have been a witch doctor back in Africa, begins whispering words to some of the slaves, who then pass them on amongst each other. When he calls out, “Now!” the young woman, and “all of the Africans dropped their hoes, stretched out their arms, and flew away, back to their home, back to Africa” (Lester 102).

Virginia Hamilton’s beautiful collection *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (1985) recounts a slightly different version of this tale, in which only some of the slaves had the ability to fly. Some “forgot about flyin when they could no longer breathe the sweet scent of Africa but they “kept their power…kept their secret magic in the land of

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144 Ibid, 173
145 Ibid, 175
147 For a similar version of this story, see also Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps, Eds. *The Book of Negro Folklore.* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1983)
slavery.” As the young woman (in this version, named Sarah) and the others rose into the air, “The slaves who could not fly told about the people who could fly to their children. When they were free. When they sat close before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did so love firelight and Free-dom, and tellin.” The act of repeating the stories, of passing them down, was an important ritual. Those who stayed behind bore the responsibility of telling future generations about the ones who flew.

The vivid imagery and symbolic richness of these tales certainly explains why many authors have included references to them in their own works. In her article, “If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature,” Gay Wilentz examines how the myth of the Flying Africans functions in the novels of several modern writers. Her findings revealed that what distinguished references in texts by women writers was an emphasis on the role of women in repeating the story of the flight. She explains, “Historically, in Africa and the diaspora, women have been the heritage bearers; they have passed on the orature to the children” (28). Novels by Paule Marshall and Toni Morrison “present the legend in its entirety as a life-giving force to build community strength and resist oppression. It is through the acknowledgment of one’s African heritage and the learning of the power of the ancestors that the African American community can achieve wholeness” (28). Because that power is derived from the stories of flying Africans, the sharing of the stories takes on greater significance. As Barbara Christian explains it, “people of African descent emphasized their power to determine

149 Ibid, 172.
151 Wilentz focuses on Ralph Ellison’s “Flying Home” (1967), Ishmael Reed’s Flight to Canada (1976), Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow (1983), and Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon (1977).
their own freedom, though their bodies might be enslaved." It is this aspect that is critical to our understanding of how the African flying myth impacted African American folklore. The story was passed down through generations who endured, and survived slavery. The flight itself did not alter the course of history. But the idea of flight retained its significance within the culture. The idea of that capability, that power, was what resonated in the stories, songs, and novels that followed.

However Morrison isn’t simply reiterating the historical significance of Afrocentric mythology. In her article, “Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon,” Susan L. Blake suggests that Morrison selectively manages her source material. Blake asserts that since Morrison is clearly aware of the different existing versions of the African Flying myth, her decision to portray Solomon’s tale as she does is indicative of her purpose. Morrison references and then alters the myth in her novel. The song, or myth of Solomon “emphasizes not where he is going but whom he has left behind.” Blake explains, “Milkman finds himself by going back into the past, but he does not stay there; he takes what will serve him and leaves. In the same way, Morrison has gone back to a folk story but taken from it only what suits her sense of contemporary reality” (82). Morrison has described Milkman’s journey as one in which he must escape a sort of “cultural prison,” and it is this phrase that suggests modern resonances and applications. What does the story of his ancestor reveal to Milkman about himself? How does this story in particular inspire him to take flight?

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152 Barbara Christian, Black Feminist Criticism. qtd in Wilentz. 1985
153 Susan L. Blake, “Folklore and Community in Song of Solomon” MELUS 7.3 (1980) 77-82
154 Blake, 80.
155 Blake, 80.
Morrison clearly makes a point of differentiating the mythology of flight in *Song of Solomon* from a more familiar Western tale: “The flying is not about Icarus, it’s about the African flying myth… I decided not to treat them as some Western form of escape.”¹⁵⁶ In the story of Icarus and Daedalus, Daedalus constructs a winged device for his son Icarus in order to escape their imprisonment by Minos on the island of Crete. According to the myth, against the warning of his father, Icarus flies too close to the sun, and the wax of the wings melts, thus plunging Icarus to his death in the sea below. The failure of his flight is attributed to a hubris that ultimately trumps the ingenuity of Daedalus’ design. By contrast, the myth of the Flying Africans centers on the Africans’ innate ability to fly. In these stories, flight is represented as a power contained within, to be accessed either by will or by language, serving to liberate individuals from the dismal fate of enslavement.

When Milkman realizes that he too, is one of Solomon’s descendants, and that the song even names his grandfather Jake, he is euphoric. “‘He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! goddam!’” he whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up *as though he too could take off*” [emphasis mine] (328). Milkman feels empowered simply by the knowledge of his ancestor’s ability. When he views his own image in the window of Mr. Solomon’s store, he discovers that he “was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (304). Milkman is profoundly affected by the revelation of his family history, and the novel illustrates how his view of himself, his family, and the world around him has forever altered. Susan Blake suggests that “The flight of the transplanted Africans dramatizes the communal identity of Afro-Americans in several ways. It establishes

“home” as the place of common origin and disassociates the Africans from the American plantation where their identity is violated” (77). For Milkman, the story of Solomon allows him to replace the confining, threatening space of the house on Not Doctor Street with a new point of origin. What is key, is that Milkman is the agent of this change. He decides his role within that story. Because of this, he sees his own relationship to space differently. In flight, one challenges spatial relationships by situating oneself as a figure in motion. By leaving his home, Milkman is no longer ordered by the rules of that space, and he himself must fashion a new sense of self. Milkman realizes that as an individual in flight, the landscape around him now evokes feelings of connection, where it had once only fostered isolation and alienation.

Morrison creates an original narrative of flight for Milkman. On the eve of his discoveries in Shalimar, he dreams of flight:

It was a warm dreamy sleep all about flying, about sailing high over the earth. But not with arms stretched out like airplane wings, nor shot forward like Superman in a horizontal dive, but floating, cruising, in the relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper. Part of his flight was over the dark sea, but it didn’t frighten him because he knew he could not fall. (298)

For Milkman, flight is not about fear, or the urgency of escaping danger. Nor does he evince the power hungry pride of other mythic figures. Instead, for Milkman, in flight, one is quietly confident in one’s innate ability to fly. In the alternate space of flight, he is separate from the dangers below, therefore he is calm in the certainty of his safety. He is peaceful, and effortlessly powerful. Upon waking, Milkman “still felt the sense of lightness and power that flying had given him” (298). I would argue that this sense of power transforms the way Milkman relates to the world around him. He returns home to his family with the knowledge that he is no longer
bound to that particular space. He accepts the responsibility of family as an advantage, rather than a burden. And I would argue that his final act, jumping into the air at Solomon’s Leap, indicates Morrison’s purpose in centralizing the trope of flight in the novel.

Historians have questioned whether the stories of Flying Africans were ever “true.” As folktales, they may be read on one hand as myths of escape, or on the other, as metaphors for suicide. Most ultimately conclude that in the end, the most important detail was that the figures in the stories “were no longer slaves.” I suggest that Morrison directly engages this question by beginning Song of Solomon with the doomed flight of Robert Smith. By bookending the text with the respective flights of Smith and Milkman, Morrison draws a clear distinction between one from the other. Smith declares in a note, “At 3:00pm on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all” (3). Indeed, wearing “blue silk wings” fashioned by his own hand, Smith plunges off the top of the hospital to his death. The inclusion of the silk implies we are meant to read Smith as more of an Icarus, than a Solomon. As a member of the Seven Days, he was expected to balance acts of racial violence perpetrated on blacks with responding attacks on whites. Smith’s flight is prompted by his own despair in the futility of justice, and his tragic attempt to free himself from the cycle.

On the other hand, the end of the novel dramatically concludes while Milkman is mid-flight, eliciting questions as to whether he indeed flies, or dies. Again, it could be argued that this is irrelevant. In learning the story of his ancestor’s flight, Milkman’s perception of his own capabilities expands. He is empowered not by the ability of flight, but by the story of flight. Throughout his life, Milkman is haunted that the moment of his birth is forever linked with

Robert Smith’s failure to fly. Once Milkman can conceive of flight as a literal possibility, he is liberated to believe in something bigger than himself. He sees himself as part of a larger history that reveals to him the possibility of his own legacy. He faces Guitar without fear, because in flight, he is certain of his own invincibility:

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (337)

Morrison demonstrates through the story of Milkman Dead how historical and literary narratives directly impact the way we view ourselves. We can only know ourselves through these stories, therefore when histories are silenced or untold, there is a stagnating effect on the capacity for individuals to envision their futures. Morrison incorporates the myth of the Flying Africans to illustrate how mythology has shaped the way we tell stories, and to suggest a different historical legacy on which to build. To see ourselves in these fantastic narratives allows us to see ourselves having significant roles to play in the world. Exclusion from these narratives implies irrelevance, and a denial of agency.

At the same time, Morrison is directly commenting on how we select and edit the historical record. How does family ancestry impact the life of the individual? Milkman learns a number of competing narratives about his family line, but it is the tale of Solomon and Jake that transforms the way he views himself and his relationships. It is meaningful to Milkman that Solomon flew. He views it, not as one who has been abandoned, but as one who has been uplifted, and inspired. The heterotopia of Solomon’s flight indeed serves as an embodied critique
of his own enslavement, but the audience for this message is not his oppressors. Solomon’s
descendants maintain the example of his act to refute paralyzing counter-narratives. The example
of Solomon’s flight proves it is possible to create a new space, a new legacy.

Earlier in this study, I examined how authors of eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts
used the tropes of Gothic and Sentimental flight to carve out alternate spaces in which
individuals could temporarily transcend an imprisoning domestic space. Significantly, these
examples also served to critique limiting portrayals of female victimization and chattel slavery,
revealing dominant narratives to be incomplete, and ultimately detrimental in their treatment of
these subjects. In the twentieth century, Toni Morrison reveals postmodern translations of earlier
genres, exploring how the trope of flight also offers transcendence from the imprisoning
narratives of history. In her work, she considers how flight retains a rich symbolic resonance, not
only as a means of escape, but as an act of resistance and self-individuation. Finally, she
illustrates how individuals must seize control of historical and cultural narratives that act to bind,
rather than empower. This too is a form of flight, meant to inspire modern readers to create new
mythologies of survival in order to break the patterns of oppression.
Chapter 4: Flight of the Body

The speculative hero/ine’s narrative is shaped from the standpoint of approaching other ways of knowing and other ‘ways of being nowhere.’ The feminist speculator flees the nowhere that is everywhere, a universe of false objectivity created by a consciousness Haraway calls ‘the perfect knower,’ who is blind to the fantasy behind his own utopian constructions.

—Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor

This is not about the past. This is about the present and the future.

—Octavia Butler

Criticism of Octavia Butler inevitably mentions (or marvels at) her unique status as a female African American science fiction writer, a rarity in a field dominated by white men. While Butler acknowledged her minority status within the science fiction community, she expressed a reluctance to identify herself in language derived from limited systems of categorization. Interviews given by Butler over the course of her career reveal that while she may have accepted the marketing labels of her publishers, she was quick to resist such pigeon-holing by reviewers and critics. What appealed to Octavia Butler about science fiction, first as a reader, and then as a writer, was the “freedom.”

Butler’s novels reveal her enthusiasm for

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159 Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor. Postmodern Utopias and Feminist Fictions (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) x


161 Octavia Butler, Interview with Rosalie G. Harrison. (1980). 4
transcending traditional boundaries of time, space, and the physical world through fiction. From her Patternist Series (1976-1984),\textsuperscript{162} chronicling the formation of a mutant society of telepaths over thousands of years, to the Xenogenesis Trilogy (1987-1989)\textsuperscript{163} depicting the reproductive merging of human and alien races, to the fantastic realism of Kindred’s neo-slave narrative (1979), or the post-apocalyptic vision of the Parable novels (1993-1998),\textsuperscript{164} Butler’s work reveals a dynamic creative force. Throughout her lifetime she repeatedly emphasized that while she personally identified with specific political categories, professionally she saw herself as a writer with the responsibility of simply telling good stories.\textsuperscript{165}

Butler was particularly sensitive to assumptions that as a writer of color, she wrote only about racism. In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin (1988), McCaffery declared, “In one way or another, all your books seem to explore different forms of slavery or domination,” to which Butler responded, “I know some people think that, but I don’t agree.” Nearly ten years later, Butler would emphatically state, “The only place I am writing about slavery is where I actually say so,”\textsuperscript{166} referring to Kindred (1979) and Wild Seed (1980), which both contain detailed depictions of eighteenth and nineteenth-century transatlantic slavery.

However, it isn’t difficult to see why scholars have long read Butler’s novels through a racialized political lens. Her writing, though varied in scope and form, consistently critiques

\textsuperscript{162} Patternmaster (1976), Mind of My Mind (1977), Survivor (1978), Wild Seed (1980)
\textsuperscript{164} Parable of the Sower (1993), Parable of the Talents (1998)
\textsuperscript{165} Butler famously described herself as "comfortably asocial—a hermit in the middle of Seattle—a pessimist if I’m not careful, a feminist, a Black, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty, and drive."
systems of social and political power. Her work contends that humans (and even non-humans) are ultimately hierarchical, and her novels and short stories all seem to explore different manifestations of social ordering. Butler’s resistance to racial classification may stem from concerns of a specific misunderstanding: that her models for oppression are based solely on the system of chattel slavery as it existed in the United States. In truth, Butler draws from a multitude of historical and contemporary models of political slavery as inspiration for her writing. Her frustration in being read primarily through a racial lens isn’t about a denial of the historical resonances in her depictions of power and oppression; it is that by only looking for one source, readers may ignore modern day manifestations of political, economic, and cultural slavery. In an interview with Jelani Cobb in 1994, she explains:

In *Parable of the Sower* I talk about the return of slavery, which is real ... You know, we already have situations where, here in Southern California, in the Central Valley, or in the South in some of the more rural areas where they’ll either bring in illegal aliens and work them or not pay them and forbid them to leave and generally mistreat them ... they’ll do it with Black people ... or they’ll do it with homeless people. (*Conversations 55*)

As a self-described “news junkie,” Butler was passionate about current events and global politics. She saw the potential for fiction to reflect and critique all models of human behavior from the past, the present, and the imagined future. It is this narrative bridge that establishes her as one of the most important writers of neo-slave narratives. Butler utilizes the historical model of American slavery to illuminate how antiquated structures of violent oppression have simply been repurposed by modern day society. Butler “incorporates postmodern literary techniques to
critique the notion that historical and psychological slavery can be overcome” (Steinberg 467). Many of her novels reflect a grim acceptance of this truth. However, these same texts offer glimpses of alternate forms of agency that ultimately expose the limitations of political systems dependent upon the supplication, rather than the participation, of their subjects.

I’m interested in Butler’s personal resistance to categorization, because I believe her work emphatically critiques how bodies are ordered as a means to limit and oppress them. Butler utilizes the expansiveness of the science fiction genre to explore new ways of exposing the systems through which humans are raced, gendered, classed, and even “bodied.” This freedom allows Butler the mobility to move between different subgenres in order to realize her artistic vision. In each of her novels, Butler examines the ways in which society orders individuals through domestic structures, and how individuals express resistance to this process through different forms of flight. However, because her work reflects such a wide range of literary influences, it also effectively demonstrates the ways in which different forms of narrative reconstitute the trope of flight as a heterotopia.

In Chapter Three of this study, I discussed how Toni Morrison explores questions of race and history through the genre of the postmodern slave narrative. Postmodern or neo-slave narratives depict the experience of slavery through a modern point of view, while responding to and revising the tropes of the genre. As a result, Morrison’s work offers a new perspective on the narrative trope of flight. While nineteenth-century slave narratives employed Gothic and Sentimental fictional tropes to emphasize the humanity of their subjects as they chronicled their escape from bondage, twentieth-century neo-slave narratives confront the realization that
emancipation signified only a conditional form of freedom, and therefore emphasize the symbolic resonance of flight over its purported achievement.

In tracing the path of influence of Gothic and Sentimental flight from the eighteenth century to the twentieth, this project concludes by considering how another American author, Octavia Butler, reinterprets the trope of flight through the genre of science fiction. The genre of science fiction, or speculative fiction, (though Butler disagreed with this classification for her work), creates a separate space within literature for authors to move between more strictly defined genres in order to enjoy uninhibited room for creation. Famed science fiction writer Lester del Rey once identified the difficulty of defining science fiction as a genre. He wrote, “the trouble comes from the fact that there are no easily delineated limits to science fiction.” Butler’s writing exemplifies this freedom, particularly in how she challenges the boundaries posed by genre and realism.

Butler’s novels are richly intertextual, and a reading of her use of flight evokes the influences of earlier narrative styles. Throughout her body of work, Butler envisions flight in a number of different contexts. Some characters flee perilous homes on foot, as in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts discussed earlier in this study, while others struggle to resist constrictive bonds of history like Morrison’s protagonists. Like Morrison, Butler is interested in the link between history and race, but the freedom afforded to her within science fiction allows her to construct complex political allegories of individuals resisting systems of oppression through fantastically entertaining stories. In addition to engaging with previous forms of narrative flight, Butler further develops the trope by extending the limits of earlier genres.

works of science fiction, Butler’s novels explore the effects of destabilizing the physical limitations of the human body. Characters in her novels time travel, read minds, and share the pain of others as if it was their own. Some Butler characters even fly into the air, emerging from myths as actualized agents of flight.

I have argued that the process of flight creates a heterotopia, a new relational space, which is achieved when an individual temporarily exists as a body in motion, in-between systems of regulation. Butler considers the potential of flight when the body itself can be read as a site of change. Butler suggests that one can alter the relational dynamic not only through traversing physical space, but also through time (as in time travel), consciousness (as in telepathy), and perception (as in hyper-empathy). Stacy Alaimo agrees that Butler “rewrite[s] the body as a liminal, indeterminable space that disrupts the opposition between nature and culture, object and subject.”

If individuals are primarily ordered by the domestic according to their bodies, Butler ultimately “disrupt[s] historically ingrained patterns” considers how the body resists ordering through an expanded range of ability and mobility (Alaimo 51). In doing so, she fashions new forms of flight.

Kindred

The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians

promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us.\textsuperscript{169}

—Michel Foucault

“I’d rather see the others.”
“What others?”
“The ones who make it. The ones living in freedom now.”
“If any do.”
“They do.”
“Some say they do. It’s like dying, though, and going to heaven. Nobody ever comes back to tell you about it.”\textsuperscript{170}

—Octavia Butler, \textit{Kindred}

In Octavia Butler’s \textit{Kindred} (1979), Dana Franklin is inexplicably torn from her California home in 1976 only to find herself on a Maryland plantation in 1815, moments later. Octavia Butler’s use of time travel creates a new form of neo-slave narrative; instead of a historical account of the period, as in Margaret Walker’s \textit{Jubilee} (1966), or a pseudo-autobiographical narrative like Ernest Gaines’ \textit{The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman} (1971), or even a novel of “remembered generations” like Gayl Jones’ \textit{Corrigedora} (1975) or Toni Morrison’s \textit{Beloved} (1987), \textit{Kindred} makes possible what had previously been unimaginable: a contemporary individual able to narrate the slave experience from the perspective of participant.\textsuperscript{171} The process of time travel allows people to physically experience a time and place once conceptualized only as an abstraction. Writers employ this construct in order to achieve a bi-temporal consciousness that simply setting the narrative in that period from the beginning would not produce; characters must now interpret a new environment through the lens of their


\textsuperscript{170} Octavia E. Butler, \textit{Kindred}. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.) 145.

primary cultural origin, creating “hybrid categories of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{172} Their existence as physical beings within this new world is significant—they draw breath, respond to sensory stimuli, and feel pain. Because of this, the body itself conveys its own narrative of experience that can operate separately from the mind’s conscious perception.

In merging multiple genres, Octavia Butler radically revises the trope of flight within \textit{Kindred}. Isiah Lavender III suggests that “despite being classified as a neo-slave narrative, \textit{Kindred} is the gateway to science fictional accounts of slavery as it contests and expands the boundaries of sf with unambiguous racial subjectivities.”\textsuperscript{173} While she will utilize more “traditional” forms of narrative flight in works such as \textit{Wild Seed}, \textit{Patternmaster}, and \textit{Parable of the Sower}, which I will discuss later in this chapter, \textit{Kindred} depicts a deconstructed trope of flight. Butler’s neo-slave narrative presents an alternate reading of the modern individual’s relationship to the past. Time travel may enable the premise of the novel, but the rest of the text hews closely to nineteenth century slave narrative source material.\textsuperscript{174} I suggest that Butler adheres to self-imposed restrictions in her own storytelling, in order to depict the limitations of physical flight, and emphasize the internal conflict of the modern individual.

\textsuperscript{172} Mehaffy, Marilyn and AnaLouise Keating. “Radio Imagination: Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment” \textit{MELUS} 26.1 (Spring 2001) 47


\textsuperscript{174} However, Butler explains that she had to present a ““cleaned-up, somewhat gentler version of slavery, for there was no entertainment in the real thing.” She stated on several occasions that writing \textit{Kindred} was not a pleasurable experience, because she was trying to achieve a certain level of realism. Incidentally, \textit{Wild Seed}, which she wrote after \textit{Kindred}, was her “reward” to herself, because of its fantastical nature, even though it still dealt with slavery from a more historical, rather than personal level. See: Randall Kenan. “An Interview with Octavia E. Butler.” \textit{Callaloo} 14 (Spring 1991): 495-504.
Butler claims her inspiration for the novel can be traced back to an incident she recalls from her years as a student at Pasadena City College. One of her peers announced to her: “I’d like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can’t because I’d have to start with my own parents” (McCaffery 21). This sentiment stayed with Butler, and forced her to come to terms with her own conflicted feelings about the way her mother supported their family through what appeared to be, in the eyes of a child, humiliating domestic labor. Butler’s later appreciation and respect for her mother’s sacrifices led her to question modern misconceptions of perceived passivity and victimhood. In an interview with Randall Kenan, Octavia Butler explained that “Kindred was a kind of reaction to some things going on in the sixties when people were feeling ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery” (496).

This objective, to test a twentieth-century person’s ability to survive in slavery, is represented in the text through a series of physical and emotional challenges. Butler directly addresses the most immediate expectation, of flight, with a resounding denial. In Kindred, no one successfully flees from slavery. No one. Even though there are several attempts throughout the novel, each time the fugitive is caught, and punished. Dana expects that she would have an advantage over other slaves like Alice, thinking:

I probably knew more than she did about the general layout of the Eastern Shore. She knew only the area she’d been born and raised in, and she couldn’t read a map. I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn’t done me a damned
bit of good! … Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me to escape. (177)

Butler demonstrates, quite decisively, that flight was hard. She also illustrates, through Dana’s subsequent punishment, and the persistent memory of that punishment, what was at stake for slaves who attempted to escape. Not only was flight itself difficult, but failure meant torture, or death. Butler painstakingly describes the slave community at the Weylin plantation and the personal relationships between family members. Individual flight was one thing, but ties to children or spouses made it an even more daunting prospect. Slave owners knowingly exploited this, as evidenced by Rufus’s smug statement, “‘Man marries, has children, he’s more likely to stay where he is’” (139). Dana recalls the examples of historical figures who fled and survived with a newfound sense of awe at the enormity of their achievement.

By refusing to depict a successful flight attempt in her neo-slave narrative, Butler eliminates the expectation that slavery can be circumvented. Her choice shifts the focus of the text to one of its most important themes: survival. This reflects, on one hand, a reiteration of her goal to explore how a modern individual would survive as a slave, but it also magnifies the means through which slaves of the time period survived on a daily basis. Through each character, Butler demonstrates how individuals make choices every day to survive, even if those choices appear from the outside to be acts of submission. Dana wonders why Sarah, the cook, doesn’t poison the Weylin family after her children are sold, until she realizes that Sarah’s “obedience” protects Carrie, and the other slaves. Kindred reveals the perverse contradiction of antebellum slavery; a prosperous plantation offers a greater security to its slaves; a faltering business means the selling of slaves and the separation of families. Therefore persons were
motivated to enrich the very system of their enslavement. On an individual basis, the novel shows each character carving out a space in which they might live, and even love. Butler wanted to set the events of the novel early enough in the nineteenth century to dismiss the possibility of the Civil War. Emancipation is not on the horizon.

Butler decisively reveals that the novel is not about liberation, because the central premise demonstrates that even in the twentieth century, Dana and Kevin are not free from the legacy of slavery. There is no liberation from history; not even the passage of time can earn that absolution. Octavia Butler purposefully eliminates the temporal distance between ancestor and descendant to create this disorienting self-consciousness. *Kindred* forces its contemporary protagonists, Dana and Kevin, to confront the shocking truths of their heritage; Dana must reconcile preserving the life of her white, slave owning great grandfather while coming to terms with her new enslavement, and Kevin must resist association with white patriarchal power in order to actively implement his twentieth century ideals. Neither finds resolution or catharsis through his or her experiences, and both return to 1976 as shaken shells of their former selves. Once they bear witness to history firsthand, any illusion of maintaining distance between centuries is destroyed.

Rather than reinforcing their identification with the twentieth century, the process of time travel serves to destabilize any sense of security or peace Dana and Kevin feel in their own time. After Dana returns from her first passage, she worries, “‘I feel like it could happen again—like it could happen anytime. I don’t feel secure here’” (17). Kevin experiences an even more severe reaction to his return home after being trapped in the nineteenth century for five years, muttering, “‘If I’m not home yet, maybe I don’t have a home’” (190). Not only is the peace of their home
disrupted, so is their connection to it. Over time, the Weylin plantation, the site of their suffering, becomes more familiar to them than the new house of their own time. Dana recalls, shuddering, “I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home” (190). Kevin concurs, reluctantly, “‘I’ve got no love at all for that place, but so help me, when I saw it again, it was so much like coming home that it scared me’” (192).

This bi-temporal tension anchors the central conflict of the text. Dana and Kevin are caught in between these two dimensions. Dana struggles to consciously separate her rational perception of herself as a twentieth century free black female, from her growing acclimation to physical subjugation in the nineteenth century. Although intellectually she feels distance from the slave experience, her body is just as vulnerable to enslavement as the bodies of her ancestors. She is initiated swiftly to violence of the time. But even though the physical threats to Dana are considerable, her greatest challenge lies in resisting a mental identification as a slave.

It is this struggle that constitutes Dana’s true flight within the text. Dana must maintain a precarious state of liminality between her nineteenth and twentieth century selves. Allowing herself to adapt, relax, and inhabit one of those identities fully would place her in even greater danger. On the one hand, Dana must use the knowledge and expertise from her own time to prove her invaluable place on the estate; her ability to heal (in comparison with nineteenth-century medicine), read, write, and type earns her an increased degree of agency and protection. This serves her well during her preparations for her failed flight. Dana’s ability to occupy various roles within the household means she has more mobility on the property than most. She realizes,
“my freedom of movement was more useful to me now than it had ever been. I could go where I wanted to and no one said, “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you working?” (171).

On the other hand she must play her role as a slave convincingly in order to ingratiate herself amongst the slave community, knowing the value of making friends and allies, as well as the need to corroborate Kevin’s invented history explaining their arrival in Maryland. At first Dana wonders at her ability to acclimate to life on the plantation, until she realizes, “We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we waited to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them… We never forgot that we were acting” (98). Gradually, Dana feels less and less like an observer. When she observes the children mimicking the slave market, or when she is forced to watch a whipping, Dana feels her sense of distance painfully compromised. In order to survive, Dana must remain in a state of flux between these two identities.

Initially, Dana feels confident that she can remain emotionally separate from the surreal conditions of the nineteenth century, viewing them as temporary circumstances to endure until she can return to her “true” life. Sherryl Vint suggests that the text interferes with Dana’s efforts to maintain a mind/body split by continually reminding her of her own physicality. She is not a witness, she is a participant, and by the end of the novel, her body has been literally inscribed with the marks of the whip, the boot. Butler draws upon the mechanism of time travel to convey this lesson, to bridge the gap between a modern day intellectualization of history, and a physical experience of history that cannot be articulated in language, and must be conveyed through the

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175 Sherryl Vint. "‘Only by Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives" *Science Fiction Studies* 34.2 (July, 2007): 249.
body. In “A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry’s *Stigmata,*” Lisa Long remarks that Butler “dramatize[s] a pedagogy of African American history grounded in physical wounds and psychological violations. Ordinarily, history has no body to penetrate its victims/pupils; these authors imagine history as a bodily force equal to the psychological traumas and national crimes they seek to teach and authenticate” (461). Long comments that Dana’s in-between state is continually challenged through the site of her body, stating, “her place in time may be fluid, but flesh does not give” (474). Or at any rate, it does not give easily. Dana’s body is the means through which she is transported back in time, experiencing nausea and dizziness to reference the experience of middle passage. She is summoned to save her ancestor Rufus, whose bloodline flows through her veins. *Kindred* reminds the reader that history is not abstract. History is physical, and it is experienced not through the unreliable written word, but through the truth of the body itself.

Dana’s efforts to maintain distance between her physical and cognitive experiences of slavery falter after she is brutally whipped for attempting to escape. Dana hopes the pain will be enough to send her back to 1976, a passage only gained when her life is being threatened. But unlike the first time she faces a whipping, she is not granted this reprieve, and instead she must bear the pain of her beating and endure a torturous recovery. She understands now that the whipping will not kill her; she will survive, and her body will live to suffer the pains of another day of enslavement. When Dana instinctively shudders at the thought of risking another beating in a future escape, her thoughts punish her: “*See how easily slaves are made?*” (177). Dana tries to resist, but “Butler shows that disciplinary power produces slave mentality” (Vint 249).
Interestingly, Dana’s struggle to maintain her twentieth century subjectivity creates the source of tension underlying her relationship with her ancestor, Alice. Not only do they bear a physical resemblance, but at times they are seen within the text as the same woman. Rufus casually remarks, upon finding Dana and Alice sitting together, “‘Behold the woman’….And he looked from one to the other of us. ‘You really are only one woman. Did you know that?’” (228). Dana is more disturbed, however, by Alice’s quiet reaction to Rufus’ words: “All that means we’re two halves of the same woman…” (229). It has been suggested that we are meant to find in Alice Dana’s “mirrored image,” her second self, her enslaved alter-ego, and “an obvious counter-part.” These claims might be supported by the fact that throughout the text, Dana and Alice simultaneously work to nurture and destroy each other in an oddly Freudian battle for dominance. However, I would argue that Dana’s friction with Alice does not stem from the trauma of recognition, but from the very opposite; Dana does not see herself in Alice, works to actively resist identification, and Alice knows it.

At a crucial turning point in the text, Alice asks Dana what it is like to be a slave. Appalled, Dana “managed not to look surprised,” answering “‘I don’t know.’” Alice responds, “‘How could you not know what it’s like to be a slave. You are one’” (156). Dana is shocked to see herself through Alice’s eyes. She has always viewed herself as separate from Alice, even when Alice was a freewoman. Now that Alice is subject to Rufus’s control, Dana can more

176 An extended look at Dana’s relationship with Alice as a double or mirror, can be found in Adam McKible’s “These are the Facts of the Darky’s History: Thinking History and Reading Names in Four African American Texts” in the African American Review (1994). Sandra Govan’s “Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Novel” from MELUS (1986), Missy Dehn Kubitschek’s Claiming the Heritage: African-American Women Novelists and Writers (1991), Christine Levecq’s Power and Repetition (2000), and Dorothy Allison’s “The Future of Female: Octavia Butler’s Mother Lode” in Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (1990)
comfortably reassure herself that she is “not Alice,” whereas Butler seems to code Alice as “slave Dana.” If Dana works to maintain a separation from her free mind and enslaved body, it might resemble a Cartesian mind/body dichotomy. In this sense, as Stacy Alaimo explains, “the idealized version of nature is associated with the human spirit, while the debased version of nature is associated with the human body” (50). Dana must differentiate herself from Alice, and the troubling similarities of their situations, by viewing her as defined by the limitations of her physicality, whereas Dana exists separately, and in spite of those temporary restrictions.

The uncomfortable displacement of suffering onto Alice reminds Dana of how her liminality affords her the privilege of assuming she is immune to such hardship. Scholars are often critical of Dana’s assessment of rape as a fate worse than death, in assertions that echo the language of sentimentalism. Vint reminds us that “Unlike Sethe, Dana does not undergo the two things most specific to the female experience of slavery: rape and motherhood” (253). But Alice does, and it is interesting that Butler allows Dana to witness (and even facilitate) these acts from a safe distance. Only the pain of whipping is borne, because she expects to heal, and avoid its repetition by returning home.

Dana’s flight ends when she is forced to either kill Rufus, or submit to him sexually, which Dana believes would signify her final identification as a slave. Rufus intends for Dana to replace Alice, and when presented with this future, she is able to take his life. Until this point, she had been able to maintain a precarious space in between competing subjectivities. To

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177 I struggle to reconcile Dana’s rationale that her ancestors’ superior strength or endurance made them better able to endure rape. The parallels with eighteenth-century Richardsonian heroines, or Harriet Jacobs in the nineteenth century feel very immediate, and I wonder if Butler is purposeful in this reference, or if she simply avoids Dana’s rape for the same reasons.
become Alice would signify her own death, and in line with the text’s thesis, Dana chooses to survive.

As a result of her time travel, Dana is confronted with a surreal set of paradoxes that serve to destabilize her understanding of history, rather than reaffirm it. Unearthing the past is not a cathartic exercise meant to bring a healing perspective to modern day dilemmas, according to Butler. In *Kindred*, revisiting the past is destructive. On her final trip back to 1976, Dana loses her left arm symbolically and literally to the death grip of her white ancestor, Rufus. Butler’s message is clear: “Antebellum slavery didn’t leave people quite whole;” likewise, to observe from a safe distance (the twentieth century) is impossible (Kenan 498). Rather than offering insight into contemporary issues of race, and gender, “*Kindred* focuses our attention on the fact that the future is not sufficiently different from the past; that, despite the Emancipation Proclamation, systemic racism persists in ways akin to the continuation of slavery” (Vint 243).

Dana’s discovery of her white ancestry symbolizes a silent history of miscegenation. Her goal to preserve her family lineage makes her complicit in the systematic rape of her ancestor, Alice, thereby suggesting the uncomfortable truth that her very survival is dependent upon the subjugation of her antecedents. Butler sends her protagonist back to her genealogical roots not to resolve the questions of the twentieth century, but to force her to reexamine the foundations of her self-identifying codes of race and gender at the risk of her own life. Rushdy explains that:

> By showing the pain involved in recovering the past, Butler attests to a deep contradiction between seeking to recall and understand the past as a means of “possible self-recovery,” a way to become “whole,” and the destructive potential historical excavation harbors for the contemporary African American subject…
but Butler is also commenting on the necessity of that excavation, both for individual subjects and for national histories. (108)

Likewise, Vint explains that a more expansive narrative form allows Butler to position her heroine in this unique space between subjectivities, since “combining the fantastic and the realistic modes enables past and present to be mixed in such a way that the reader cannot simply treat the story as happening in a reality ontologically distinct from our own” (Vint 243). Dana acts as a surrogate for modern readers to experience slavery as a “non-slave” in a way that is precluded from reading historical accounts. Butler acknowledges within the text the privilege of that distance, which is why Kindred should ultimately be classified as a “grim fantasy.”

Patternist Series

Octavia Butler’s Patternist series consists of the novels Patternmaster (1976), Mind of My Mind (1977), Survivor (1978), Wild Seed (1980), and Clay’s Arc (1984). It chronicles a narrative arc spanning more than a thousand years, in which a new race of humans with special physical and mental abilities evolves to become the dominant life force on Earth. The series begins with Doro, a thousand year-old spirit who exists by moving from body to body, killing those whose skin becomes his temporary shell. Doro uses his immortality and apparent invincibility as an opportunity to locate and breed humans with special abilities, focusing specifically on those with psionic powers. In Mind of My Mind, Doro’s efforts have succeeded in creating a community of telepaths, who are then psychically connected to each other by Mary, his most powerful progeny. Mary ultimately kills Doro through the strength of the telepathic

pattern, and she takes control of the network. *Patternmaster*, the final book, concludes hundreds of years beyond Mary’s lifetime, in which all humans are either patternists, who have telepathic abilities and are connected and controlled through the network by a patternmaster, or mutes, those without psionic skills, who serve as slaves.

Even though *Wild Seed* begins the series chronologically, Butler wrote and published *Patternmaster*, the final installment, first. This not only suggests that she may have already outlined the novels that would textually precede *Patternmaster*, but that she envisioned the series with the ending already in place. Additionally, Butler wanted readers to be aware of the conclusion of the larger narrative as they read earlier installments. This is a unique way to structure a publication schedule, and I would argue it has significant bearing on how we should read the series as a whole.

In Chapter Three of this study, I discussed how in neo-slave narratives, strategies of resistance take on new meanings in the context of a broader understanding of history. Knowing as they did that flight from bondage led ultimately to retranslated forms of oppression, how did authors reframe the meaning of flight? In this section, I will discuss the first and last books in the chronology of the series, and consider how *Patternmaster’s* depictions of flight from hierarchical oppression should inform our understanding of the images of flight in *Wild Seed*. Furthermore, I would suggest that by presenting the culmination of the Patternist series first, Butler places a greater emphasis on the patterns revealed by the path, rather than the resolution of a specific plot point. Indeed, the bleak nature of *Patternmaster’s* futuristic vision seems to compromise the intent of Doro’s project: the creation of a superior race of powerful individuals. Instead, as Jo Walton points out, the Patternist future envisioned by Doro, and later Mary, is
essentially doomed, which “means she wrote the earlier books knowing everything would fail.” Walton continues, “Mutes are all slaves and so are most Patternists. Patternmaster is about the desire of one powerful Patternist to be free, and successful, but we see a lot of people with no hope of freedom.” Viewed in this manner, the series emphasizes Butler’s belief that humans are ultimately hierarchical, and over time, systems of oppression will simply be reproduced along different lines of stratification. Wild Seed and Patternmaster both explore questions of individual autonomy within systems of enslavement. The backdrop of the transatlantic slave trade in Wild Seed provides a purposeful context against which to measure Anyanwu’s efforts to resist Doro’s tyranny, and the futuristic construct of the Pattern creates a new framework of control that both tempts and terrifies Teray. In both texts, Butler reinforces that the act of flight does not achieve freedom from these systems, but it does provide a vital space of liminal agency. Furthermore, the act of flight serves an embodied critique of societies dependent upon hierarchical violence.

**Patternmaster**

Sometimes, one must become a master to avoid becoming a slave. —Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*

The futuristic world depicted in Octavia Butler’s *Patternmaster* (1976) is ruled by a strictly defined hierarchy. Power is determined by telepathic ability; those who have it are considered “patternists,” while those without are “mutes.” Mutes are slaves who serve at the

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180 Ibid
mercy of the patternists, since their thoughts and actions can be manipulated at whim. In this fashion, Butler conceives of an alternate basis through which subjugation is implemented; to rob someone of control over their own mind robs them of any sustained subjectivity, and humanity. Although she does not specifically ascribe race as a determinant of discrimination, in *Mind of My Mind* (1977) Butler makes clear how she means to connect race and power. When Doro first refers to those without telepathic powers as mutes, he shrugs it off as “convenient term.” Emma (Anyanwu, of *Wild Seed*) responds angrily, “I know what you mean, Doro. I knew the first time I heard Mary use it. It means niggers!”

Yet the patternists must also conform to a rigid social structure. Their collective consciousness forms the “pattern,” “a vast network of mental links that joined every Patternist with the Patternmaster” (19). Each patternist is bound to this network, and subject to the will of the Patternmaster, who can absorb their energy in order to, in theory, defend against attack. The society is further divided by “Houses,” which are actually vast compounds ruled by “Housemasters.” Within these houses, many patternists exists as “outsiders,” who serve as slaves to the Housemaster. This culture is ultimately united against a common enemy, the Clayarks, a race of humans infected by the Clayark plague, an extraterrestrial disease responsible for wiping out half of the earth’s population and mutating the rest.

Within this hierarchy, Patternist society is fiercely competitive, and individuals learn from an early age that they are expected to dominate those of weaker ability, or face subjugation in turn. This struggle for power comes at the expense of individual family bonds, as siblings are expected to kill each other for supremacy, and spouses are commonly divided when roles are reassigned. The result is a constant struggle for individuals to define their relative autonomy

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within a hierarchical order that demands their submission. Within this context, the novel follows Teray, a young man eager to establish his own path to becoming a Housemaster. Instead, he is forced to become an outsider in the house of his power hungry brother, Coransee. Teray is not strong enough to best Coransee in a psionic fight, and therefore must accept his subjugated status, knowing “Outsiders were not free to father children as they wished, and of course they had little or no say in where they lived or how long they lived there. They were property” (30). Teray must also relinquish his wife, Iray, to become a concubine of Coransee, after which he is forbidden to be with her. He questions, “But what reason could there be for denying a man access to his chosen one, his first, while permitting him so many others? What reason, but to remind him constantly that he was a slave?” (30).

Though the world of *Patternmaster* revolves around the fantastic element of telepathic ability, Butler’s distribution of power reproduces familiar structures. Power is enacted through domestic structures, and while Housemasters can be male or female, the examples represented throughout the novel speak to a highly patriarchal manifestation of male Housemasters with multiple wives, and countless other women expected to serve their sexual appetites and demonstrate their submission. The only path towards autonomy requires the violent defeat of one’s superiors, but even this achieves only a limited degree of independence, since all are still bound within the network of the pattern, and subject to the will of the Patternmaster.

It’s fascinating that Butler envisions the evolution of her community of telepaths to take this form. In each of the texts examined in this chapter, Butler explores different ways of empowering her characters with an enhanced sense of empathy. Whether through time travel, or telepathy, through shapeshifting or the ability to share physical pain, Butler considers the effect of blurring the physical and mental boundaries that separate human beings. Yet in *Patternmaster,*
rather than a fostering increased empathy, the powers of the patternists only trigger primal survival instincts. In this world, one must kill or be killed, enslave or be enslaved. Butler situates Teray’s quest for independence within this dreary landscape of the future, while questioning whether in fact the autonomy he seeks is even possible in such domestic stratification.

Teray determines quickly that he must flee Coransee’s house if he is to have any chance of survival. Not content to dominate his brother through his power, Coransee wants to impose mental controls in Teray’s mind in order to instill a permanent subservience. Teray resists, claiming, “You’re asking me to step from physical slavery into mental slavery” (46). He understands that his refusal to accept the controls implies the intention of a future challenge. As a possible threat, Teray knows Coransee plans to kill him, but even so, he stands firm: “I couldn’t accept the leash” (48). Teray flees with Amber, a self-described “independent,” a rarity in this society. She maintains this relative independence by the nature of her unmatched abilities as a healer. Teray “had heard of such people—Houseless wanderers, usually possessing some valued skill that made them welcome at the various sectors. And possessing strength enough to make holding on to them not worth Housemaster’s trouble” [emphasis mine] (67). Amber is able to maintain a tenuous sense of independence because she is not bound to a House. Her relative freedom, while made possible in part through her considerable powers, is also determined by her mobility. To join one House would then define her in a position of submission to the Housemaster. Amber agrees to flee with Teray because she recognizes that like Teray, her refusal to accept Coransee as her master is a sign of defiance he will not abide. She knows that Coransee intends to force her to yield to him, and she would “rather run away from him than fight him” (108). Teray concurs that Coransee “has a habit of trying to domesticate people” (108). This language directly links the position of the individual within Coransee’s house, as one
subject to his control. Teray and Amber hope that flight from this house to the possible sanctuary
of Forsyth, the site of the Patternmaster—Rayal (and Teray’s father)—will free them from a fate
of bondage or death.

However, it seems clear, even to Teray and Amber, that the prospect of achieving
sanctuary is slim. Teray considers, “he would run away, escape to a sector where Coransee had
less influence. He was not certain how much good that would do if and when Coransee
succeeded Rayal. In fact, it might not do any good period, since Housemasters had a tradition of
returning one another’s runaways” (75). Teray might physically leave the territory under
Coransee’s direct control, but he can never detach from the pattern. Sanctuary is not a viable
possibility. Knowing this, Teray and Amber take flight anyway, and in their passage of flight,
Butler suggests how the trope of flight makes possible a liminal space of agency unobtainable in
the text through any other means.

In flight, Teray and Amber openly defy the authority of Coransee. In doing so, they also
challenge a system that demands blood as payment for autonomy. There is no space in which
individuals may exist independently; therefore it is only in the heterotopia created by their flight
that Teray and Amber are able to enjoy control over their own actions. This passage, though
fraught with the anxiety of peril, enables a new period of growth and creativity. As Teray and
Amber develop trust, respect, and love for one another, a level of connection which would have
been denied to them under Coransee’s surveillance, they are also able to grow as individuals.
Under Amber’s direction, Teray learns how to utilize his powers and tap latent abilities in order
to grow even stronger within the pattern. In the imprisoning environment of Coransee’s house,
he had been denied any opportunity of furthering his training, since increased strength would
render his submission even more unlikely. Through Amber, Teray is also able to develop his
abilities to harness the power of other patternists, prompting him to comprehend, for the first time, that he might be able to defeat Coransee in battle. Before his flight, not only did Teray lack the skills and experience of Coransee, but he could not envision himself as a viable contender for the role of Patternmaster. In flight, Teray learns of his own strengths, and is therefore able to recognize Coransee’s weaknesses when they are exposed.

It is the act of flight that ultimately incites the final confrontation. Teray wonders why Coransee did not simply kill him when he had the chance, when he was weak and at a disadvantage. Amber explains, “Why should he have? You were still being a good, respectful outsider. Still doing as you were told. There was always the chance that you might come to your senses and submit. But then you had to go and run away—to Forsyth, yet, and with me” (160). By fleeing, Teray defies Coransee’s authority, and therefore declares himself as a competitor for Rayal’s power. Yet while the space of flight enables Teray to enjoy a brief period of connection with Amber and his own individual growth, he is inevitably captured by Coransee. Rather than achieving his liberation, the flight provokes a violent confrontation with Coransee, which ends in Coransee’s death. While Teray is the victor of their struggle, entirely due to the growth and education gained through flight, it means that he must accept control of the pattern from Rayal, and bear the responsibility of ruling the Patternist society. Though enormously powerful, the Patternmaster is bound to the minds and lives of the entire civilization. In this sense, it is hard to view Teray’s final state as liberatory. In his struggle for survival, he must also sacrifice his freedom. He is no longer enslaved to another human, but he must embody the same system of subjugation that once threatened his own liberty. Butler emphasizes without subtlety, that within a system of such rigid hierarchical violence, even those who might seek to exist separately will eventually be reabsorbed into its structure.
Although the novel largely follows Teray’s development, the character of Amber presents an interesting alternate representation of individual power. Unlike Teray, Amber is in full possession of her abilities from the beginning of the text; she is confident in her power, and committed to achieving her own objectives. Amber, too, aims to be a Housemaster, and refuses to submit to any man who wishes to subjugate her, including Teray. When he proposes that she join him as his lead wife, should he become the Patternmaster, she definitively rejects him, stating:

“Because I want the same thing you want. My House. Mine”

“Ours...”

“No.” The word was a stone. “I want what I want. I could have given my life for you back there if we had to fight. But I could never give my life to you.”

“I’m not asking you for your life,” he said angrily. “As my lead wife, you’d have authority, freedom...”

“How interested would you be in becoming my lead husband?”

“Be reasonable, Amber!”

“I am. After all, I’m going to need a lead husband.” (134)

Teray does not recognize that in his own quest to win his autonomy, he seeks to compromise Amber’s. In fact, his statement, “Be reasonable, Amber” suggests that he is not even capable of seeing his own hypocrisy. The suggestion of serving as her “lead” husband appals him, because he does not question the patriarchal privilege of a male Housemaster’s expectations of possessing a female concubine. Amber not only challenges this division of gender roles, she also complicates its heterosexist implications with her acknowledged bisexuality.
In *Changing Bodies in the Fiction of Octavia Butler: Slaves, Aliens, and Vampires* (2010), Gregory Jerome Hampton argues that Amber is the true hero of the novel. While much of the conflict of the text revolves around two brothers fighting for control of their father’s kingdom, Amber is the only character who negotiates her independence successfully. Teray can only think in binaries of freedom and bondage, of power and powerlessness. Amber repeatedly positions herself in-between warring polarities to find a space in which she can act and think freely. Her fluid sexuality embodies this very mobility, and frees her from the limitations of a domestic patriarchy.

Furthermore, it is Amber who teaches Teray how to defeat Coransee. She is more powerful, and yet she does not view Teray as a threat she must vanquish in order to survive. She is secure in her power. In fact, after Teray’s final confrontation with his brother renders him dangerously weakened, Amber heals him, when she might have killed him and taken his place as the true inheritor of the Pattern. Hampton explains:

> Despite the fact that Amber has proven herself to be the most able person to succeed Rayal, because of her wisdom and strength, she decides to pass the position of power to a lesser candidate, the father of her child. In doing this Amber continues to distinguish herself as a clever negotiator of power in a patriarchal and heterosexist society.  

While the text concludes with Teray looking to become the next Patternmaster, Amber positions herself as a powerful, independent figure. Teray even realizes, “If he could not make her his wife, he would be wise to make her at least an ally” (194). Her example serves to reinforce

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Butler’s criticisms of hierarchy within the text. When power is predicated upon the submission of the weak, that power is ultimately proven unstable, as Coransee is undermined by his ability to only wound, but not to heal. Amber’s skills as a healer prove to be a more sustainable and productive means of power.

In *Patternmaster*, Butler demonstrates that in a society dependent upon hierarchical violence, the only space for an individual to truly exist separately from the machine of the domestic is in the liminality of flight. The act of flight primarily benefits Teray, who has resisted supplication and is denied any path to autonomy or self-individuation. Amber, who already enjoys an advanced level of self-possession, finds in flight the intellectual and emotional companion of her choice, while negotiating her own independence.

**Wild Seed**

The body is a crucial site for contestation and transformation, precisely because ideologies of the body have been complicit in the degradation of people of color, women, and nature.184

—Stacy Alaimo

You are a powerful woman. You could live in any place I chose.185

—Octavia Butler, *Wild Seed*

In *Wild Seed* (1980), Octavia Butler establishes the origins of her *Patternist* series amidst the context of the seventeenth and eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade. Like *Kindred*...

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(1979), *Wild Seed* functions as a neo-slave narrative through its depiction of slavery in the United States. However, Butler uses this historical narrative as a purposeful backdrop for her bizarre and compelling story of two individuals possessed of supernatural abilities, who engage in a centuries-long struggle over competing visions of co-existence. Doro, a thousand year-old spirit, occupies human form by inhabiting the bodies of his victims. He demands total submission from all whom he encounters. Anyanwu, a three hundred year-old woman healer with the ability to transform the cells of her body into any living form, is the first individual to ever challenge Doro’s deadly authority.

Butler constructs a parallel narrative of slavery within the historical realism of the text. Doro discovers Anyanwu in Africa and forces her to leave her home, transporting her to the United States aboard a slave ship in order to establish her as a submissive breeder of genetically superior children in one of his “colonies.” Anyanwu eventually realizes that in order to be free of Doro, she must take flight. As in *Patternmaster*, Butler incorporates the narrative trope of flight as an act of resistance against an imprisoning domestic structure. Yet again, Butler emphasizes that this is a liminal period that, rather than achieving Anyanwu’s permanent liberation from Doro’s tyranny, serves to expose the limitations of his power, and the advantages of hers. Butler demonstrates through Anyanwu’s flight how Doro’s violent power, while terrifying and absolute, can only serve to reproduce systems of violence. In reading *Wild Seed* and *Patternmaster* side by side, the connection between Anyanwu and Amber is eminently clear, as each emerges as the most powerful agents by pursuing paths that are not dependent upon the subjugation of others.

In the characters of Doro and Anyanwu, Butler posits competing constructions of power. As a spirit, Doro can take the life of any human by simply entering his or her body. The ability is
absolute and cannot be challenged, and because of this Doro is feared and obeyed by all whom want to live. Doro also maintains a mental awareness of individuals which enables him to locate someone simply by focusing on their psychic energy. Yet apart from this power, Doro must endure the physical limitations of the human body. He cannot imbue his human shells with any special abilities, and as they decompose, he is susceptible to ailments and injury until he takes another body. Anyanwu, on the other hand, knows no physical limitations. Because she can control every cell in her body, she can repair any injury, stave off any illness, and create antibodies to do the same for others. She can also transform her body to take any living shape, from an eagle, to a leopard, to a young man. She is capable of great physical strength and, if attacked, uses this strength to defend herself. However, she prefers to live unobtrusively, raising her family (or families, as she continues to outlive them) and protecting her community.

Yet even with all of her abilities, Anyanwu must submit to Doro’s demands, because he wields his power through the threat of violence. Unable to kill him, Anyanwu can only hope to protect the lives of her descendants through her cooperation. Though fearful, she is intrigued by the prospect of sharing her life with someone whom she will not outlive, and who promises to give her children she “will never have to bury” (22). She initially views Doro as a husband, and expects to maintain a similar degree of autonomy as she enjoyed with past husbands. When he questions her loyalty, she warns him that he “has” her “as much as any man could” (27). Butler often switches perspective between Anyanwu and Doro, to allow the reader to see how each views the other. Doro’s unspoken response is chilling:

That stopped him. There was no challenge in her voice, but he realized at once she was not telling him she was all his—his property... She had power and her power had made her independent, accustomed to being her own person. She did
not yet realize that she had walked away from that independence when she walked away from her people with him. (27)

Doro prizes Anyanwu’s abilities as a valuable addition to his genetic project, but he views her as “wild seed.” Her power, though exciting, means she is more likely to challenge him when others would not. He plans to “tame” her wildness by “domesticating” her. Doro believes that the most effective way to gain her obedience will be to establish her as a wife and mother, thinking “once she was isolated in America with an infant to care for, she would learn submissiveness” (27).

Butler interweaves two systems of colonization here. Doro expects to subjugate Anyanwu as a slave and as a wife. In the process, her experience replicates certain aspects of middle passage. Though she does not wear chains, she travels on board a ship carrying slaves bound for sale in America. She is told she must learn English, and relinquish the tongue of her ancestry. Anyanwu realizes that “with less experience at absorbing change and learning new dialects if not new languages … she would have been utterly confused. She would have been frightened into huddling together with the slaves and looking around with suspicion and dread” (93).

Anyanwu is shamed for the ease with which she bares her breasts and is told to wear the costume of a western upper-class woman. In trying her new clothes for the first time, Anyanwu claims, “I am like a prisoner. All bound.” Doro’s son Isaac responds, “You’ll get used to it. Now you can be a real lady” (101). Isaac’s embarrassment at his own words tellingly reveals how the two identities are conflated. To be a “real lady” is to be a prisoner. Anyanwu demands that he define “civilization,” a word she has heard used on the boat to describe American culture. He

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186 This is reminiscent of both Pamela (1740) and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) in which plans to isolate and imprison the heroines are framed as acts that would make them “ladies.”
attempts to soften the implications by responding wryly, “Civilization is the way one’s own people live. Savagery is the way foreigners live” (102). Butler’s irony here is hardly subtle. Doro is the agent who teaches Anyanwu how to be feminine, how to be civilized. He instructs Anyanwu how to fasten her clothes, and he even dresses her hair, describing how she should maintain it. In the process of molding her to conform to western standards of feminine beauty and behavior, he is also teaching her about obedience through rituals of culture. In Chapter Two of this study I argued that it was possible to compare narrative representations of political and chattel slavery while acknowledging the crucial differences in both states. Butler does something interesting here—she subjects Anyanwu, an incredibly powerful figure, to both systems of cultural oppression.

Like Dana in Kindred, Anyanwu experiences the gradual progression of her enslavement with dread. When Doro makes clear to her that she must marry his son or die, she thinks, “she knew now how the slaves had felt as they lay chained on the bench, the slaver’s hot iron burning into their flesh. In her pride, she had denied that she was a slave. She could no longer deny it.” (130). She finally accepts Isaac as her husband and lover, to “make the children who would prolong her slavery” (131). It is significant that this is the moment she considers herself a slave: the act of becoming Isaac’s wife, and the mother of his children. By forcing Anyanwu to conform to the machine of western patriarchal domesticity, Butler reinforces the parallelism of chattel and sex slavery.

However, Anyanwu does not accept this conditioning as passively as Doro assumes. Though Doro intends to reshape Anyanwu according to his vision, he underestimates her self-possession. Her strong will to survive, and her efforts to protect the lives of others, prompts her
cooperation with Doro. Within the space of this cooperation, she claims certain terms. One of these conditions is to keep her original name. When one of Doro’s American colonists remarks on the oddity of this, Anyanwu responds, “He has not changed his own name. Why should he change mine?” and ignores the look of pity she receives in return. (111). Anyanwu eagerly absorbs instruction about western ways of dress and speech,

thinking about what she might have to do to herself if someday she decided to vanish into this land of white people that she was approaching ... It was always useful to be able to camouflage oneself to hide or to learn the things people either would not or could not deliberately teach her about themselves. (87)

Anyanwu consumes this knowledge in order to protect herself, should she choose to flee. It is part of Anyanwu’s nature to welcome learning, to absorb and catalogue new forms of life and culture.

Doro’s plan to “domesticate” Anyanwu succeeds, in part, because she grows to care for Isaac, and their marriage takes the form of a partnership. Because of their complimentary physical abilities, they enjoy a mutual respect and contentment that is only disrupted by Doro’s periodic interference. While Isaac is alive, Anyanwu remains in the colony of Wheatley, and submits reluctantly to Doro’s breeding demands. Doro uses Anyanwu cruelly, frustrated by his failure to command her complete subservience. He is aware that unlike any other individual under his control, Anyanwu possesses the ability to flee from him, and the fact of her power compromises his ability to dominate her completely. Anyanwu complies with domesticity while it suits her, but after Isaac is tragically killed, she takes flight.
In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu flees Doro’s enslavement, and in doing so, directly defies his authority. She understands that the consequences for those who try to escape him are devastating; he takes pleasure in wearing the bodies of those who run, thus making examples of them and discouraging future attempts. For Doro, her flight will signify more than her absence, it will be a declaration of defiance he cannot tolerate. Doro’s dominance is predicated on inspiring submission through fear, and he cannot allow his authority to be questioned, let alone circumvented by one of his “breeders.” Yet because of her unique abilities, Anyanwu successfully takes flight from Doro and her life of servitude.

In expanding the limits of the physical body, Butler creates a character in Anyanwu who can flee by actually flying. Since Anyanwu can transform herself into any living creature, she takes the form of a bird and flies far away from Wheatley, and more importantly, from Doro’s reach. Doro cannot “sense” Anyanwu when she inhabits the form of an animal, which means he cannot find her, and most importantly, he cannot kill her. It is only in flight that Anyanwu is impervious to Doro’s menace. In this construct, Butler illustrates the limitations of Doro’s violent power. In flight, Anyanwu enjoys a unique state of creativity that Doro is helpless to match. He realizes this weakness when Anyanwu transforms into a dolphin during their voyage across the Atlantic: “In her dolphin form, and before that, in her leopard form, Doro had discovered that his mind could not find her … And if he could not reach her, he could not kill her” (89) He concedes, “Anyanwu had too much power,” knowing “if Anyanwu ever discovered that limitation, she might run away from him whenever she chose. She might go the

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187 Butler offers her own response to the Myth of the Flying Africans in the character of Anyanwu.
moment he demanded more of her than she was willing to give” (88-9). Here, Butler shows that Doro’s power to kill is actually compromised by Anyanwu’s ability to create, and innovate.

Butler reinforces the premise that flight creates a separate space of freedom and creation. Anyanwu demonstrates her full autonomy through such a literal example: she not only determines control over her actions, or her movements, but she literally determines her shape and cellular structure. She has flown as a bird before, for pleasure, thinking of “the days at home when she had watched eagles fly until she could no longer stand to only watch. She had killed an eagle and eaten and learned and flown as no human was ever meant to fly” (81).

Butler also illustrates how Anyanwu’s ability to transcend her physical form expands her capacity to empathize and identify with other living creatures. While her powers might have alienated her from humanity, as Doro’s do for him, hers serve the opposite purpose. Anyanwu’s body functions, according to Stacy Alaimo, as “a place of liminality, connection, and knowledge” (51). Her experience as a dolphin reflects this:

… She stared out at the sea where several large fish were leaping into the air and arcing down again into the water. She had watched such creatures before, watched them longingly. She thought she could do what they did, thought she could become one of them. She could almost feel the sensation of wetness, of strength, of moving through the water as swiftly as a bird through the air. She longed to try, and she feared to try. (77)

Anyanwu is inspired and exhilarated by the power of other living creatures. Their power does not compromise hers. Instead, she looks to join them and share with them their joy of movement. She demonstrates curiosity, creative ambition, and courage, claiming “fear never kept her out of
the sky. Nor would it keep her out of the water” (81). After her experience as a dolphin, she has a newfound understanding of their species. She reveals, “Swimming with them was like being with another people. A friendly people. No slavers with brands and chains here. No Doro with gentle, terrible threats to her children, to her” (84). Anyanwu’s abilities make it possible for her to conceive of alternate structures of community and coexistence, whereas Doro is forced to reproduce the same structures of oppression that ultimately isolate him, and weaken his connection with humanity.

Anyanwu flees Doro first as a bird, and later as a dolphin, knowing that as long as she is in motion, Doro cannot kill or re-enslave her. This passage of flight restores Anyanwu’s autonomy, but at the price of human companionship: “Briefly, she wondered how long she could endure being away from kinsmen, from friends, from any human beings. How long would she have to hide in the sea before Doro stopped hunting her—or before he found her” (196). In flight, Anyanwu is able to enjoy a freedom of movement and thought she has not known since Doro first took her from her home. Yet she recognizes that the liminal space created by the heterotopia of her flight cannot be sustained indefinitely. Even in Africa, when she used to fly for recreation, she understood the transient nature of this act, remembering, “She had flown away, escaping her town, her duties, her kinsmen. But after a while, she had flown back to her people. Where else could she go?” (81). For Anyanwu, her gifts of empathy and connection make it impossible for her to remain cut off from family and community for too long. However, when she considers the prospect of capture, Anyanwu considers, “if she had to run for a century, never stopping long enough to build the tribes that brought her so much comfort, she would do it. He would not have her life” (197). She claims he was never “her god” but that all the same, “running was heretical” (197).
Anyanwu recognizes that the act of her flight marks her for death, should Doro ever find her. When he eventually does, it is because she finally caves to her yearnings for family and human connection. Though she is able to create this community according to her own desires, she builds the domestic structure of a Louisiana plantation, and it is there that Doro is finally able to reclaim her. Anyanwu’s earlier plans of assimilation serve her well, as she manipulates the antebellum politics of the south to claim authority over the lives of those individuals she collects (and protects) in her guise of a white slave-owner. While in some ways she continues Doro’s vision of creating a race of people with special abilities, here she refutes his system of submission through fear by fostering a community of compassion and equality. Doro notices her work with respect, remarking,

“You’ve had more success than I have,” he said. Your son seems controlled—very sure of himself.”

“I taught him to lift his head.” (209)

After Doro brings death to her carefully tended community, Anyanwu resolves neither to flee, nor to submit. She decides to end her own life, rather than endure the continued yoke of Doro’s bondage, or spend her days in the isolation of flight. Her act of flight created a space of mobility and freedom, but it deprived her of sustained human connection. Again, Anyanwu’s gifts reinforce an alternate model of power. Doro is powerless to keep her alive, since his abilities only allow him to kill. Like Amber, Anyanwu negotiates a means to effect her will without imposing hierarchical violence like Teray, Coransee, and Doro. Doro attempts to tell her not to die, and she simply responds, “don’t say no to me anymore,’” she said softly. “I don’t want to hear you telling me what to do anymore” (275).
Reading *Wild Seed* through the perspective of *Patternmaster* presents a discouraging projection of the future. Butler begins and ends her series with depictions of slavery and violence. Yet it is significant that Amber does not take control of the Pattern. If she did, it would only make her complicit in a system that she abhors. In the vein of Audre Lorde’s essay, “The Master’s Tools,” Butler wants to assert the potential of alternate spaces for women to demonstrate power and agency without being absorbed into the very system that seeks to order and oppress them. Although the act of flight affords individuals a liminal space in which to explore forms of agency previously denied to them, the effects of this period are not erased when the flight ultimately ends. Butler makes an example of this argument, by asserting that the stagnant properties of hierarchical power ultimately fail to produce new results, whereas opportunities for creativity, connection, and empathy are possible within the space of motion.

**Parable of the Sower**

[Seeds] have no ability to travel great distances under their own power, and yet, they do travel. Even they don’t sit in one place and wait to be wiped out.\(^{189}\)

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

There I was, speaking a language I hadn’t realized I knew.\(^{190}\)

—Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

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\(^{190}\) Ibid, 270.
Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) imagines a not so distant future in which the United States, while still recognizable, is devastatingly altered by the inevitable progression of man-made environmental, health, and economic crises. Yet Butler’s contribution to the growing canon of dystopic warnings is a memorable outlier because of its unusual protagonist and layered intertextuality. Butler situates Lauren Olamina, the teenage black female narrator of the text, at the center of several overlapping narratives. While captivating as a post-apocalyptic tale, *Parable* reflects the literary influences of each genre examined throughout this study, from Gothic and Sentimental fiction, to slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Lauren’s journey throughout the text embodies the progression of narrative flight, and ultimately envisions its next transfiguration in the religion of Earthseed.

Though set in the future, *Parable* contains few fantastic elements, and resembles the grim realism of *Kindred* more closely than the expansive vision of the *Patternmaster* series. Even Lauren’s unique physical characteristic, hyper-empathy, the ability to experience the pain and pleasure of those around her, serves a similar function as Dana’s time travel in *Kindred*. Butler facilitates a new means through which a character might feel what others feel. Raised in the twentieth century, Dana must experience slavery firsthand in order to truly understand the perspective of one who is enslaved. In *Parable*, Butler asks whether someone would be less willing to cause pain if they were able to feel the pain of others. Rather than pushing her towards a protective isolation, Lauren’s gift strengthens her resolve to build a community of shared goals. She, better than most, understands that human existence depends upon reciprocity. Causation for the country’s ills might be traced back to a persistent denial of this truth, and Butler emphasizes this again through the medium of the body.
Constructed entirely through journal entries, the first half of *Parable of the Sower* contains Lauren’s descriptions of life within her walled neighborhood in Robledo, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. In the second half of the novel she depicts her flight from Robledo after her community has been burned and raided by gangs addicted to the illegal drug Pyro, which gives users intense sexual pleasure from watching fire burn. A short coda concludes the text as Lauren forms a settlement with the transient followers she has collected along her journey, calling it “Acorn.”

Behind the protective walls of her gated community, Lauren dreams of flight. In her journal, she details dreams in which she is “learning to fly.” She insists:

No one is teaching me. I’m just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a very subtle image, but a persistent one. I’ve had many lessons, and I’m better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I’m still afraid. I can’t quite control my directions yet. (4)

Lauren acknowledges that the vision lacks subtlety, since her waking thoughts revolve around a different form of flight. When she is old enough, she plans to flee her community in search of a better life. Lauren believes the walls surrounding their small, middle class neighborhood facilitate the illusion of protection, and worse, identify their community as a target for thieves. For Lauren, the walls make her feel trapped, and vulnerable, and she describes the neighborhood as “an island surrounded by sharks” (44). Rather than taking comfort from the protection of the walls, she knows that their penetration is inevitable. She acknowledges, “Our land sharks are on their way in. It’s just a matter of how long it takes for them to get hungry enough” (44). She dreads the idea of an existence spent passively waiting for catastrophe, and questions the quality
of a life spent sequestered and afraid. She asks, “What does it mean if you’re damned lucky to live in a cul-de-sac with a wall around it?” (73). Lauren’s youth gives her a unique perspective on a post-apocalyptic existence. Rather than fostering a trusting acceptance of her conditional safety, the fact that Lauren has no reference for a different way of life makes her better equipped to conceive of radical change. She finds herself at odds with the adults of the community, including her own father, who still cling to the routines of the past. Free of this nostalgia, Lauren is eager to adapt to the changing times as she sees communities such as hers slowly becoming obsolete. However, because of her age and her gender, she finds her concerns either belittled or ignored. She is made to feel as if her warnings are needlessly incendiary. Where she hopes to inspire preparedness, her father cautions she will only cause panic. Frustrated, Lauren yearns for action. In her restlessness, she envies birds their ability to fly, and dreams of her own future flight, in a state “caught between terror and joy” (4).

Butler’s vision of the future reflects a firm continuation of twentieth-century gender roles. The social structure of the walled community, and the society beyond for that matter, is firmly patriarchal. As the daughter of community’s leader, Lauren is expected to demonstrate both public and private submission to her father’s authority, even when she fundamentally disagrees with his vision for the future. Within the community, one man, Richard Moss, lives with multiple wives, one of whom he purchased from her mother when she was only fifteen. When Lauren assumes control of the schoolroom, she is disrespected by her peers. Lauren is expected to marry young, and raise children, even while she wonders “How in the world can anyone get married and make babies with things the way they are now?” (77). It is clear to

191 Though she exhibits great compassion for children throughout the novel, and hopes to be a mother someday, Lauren’s refusal to marry, or have children in such oppressive and uncertain
Lauren that the only way for her to achieve any kind of autonomy is for her to leave her home, and she is torn between a desire to protect her family and her need to flee the confines of the neighborhood.

Lauren recognizes that an insistence on stasis endangers, rather than protects their community. From a young age, she finds herself detaching from the sermons of her father’s Baptist faith, in favor of a belief system derived from an observance of the natural world. In her journals, Lauren sketches out the beginnings of what she will eventually call “Earthseed,” a religion that worships the concept of change as the most powerful force in life. In verse, she tentatively writes,

_All that you touch_
_You Change._

_All that you Change_
_Changes you._

_The only lasting truth_
_Is Change._

_God_
_Is Change._

_Earthseed: The Books of the Living. (3)_

conditions is reminiscent of Hannah Crafts in _The Bondwoman’s Narrative_. 
This worldview reflects Lauren’s embrace of change as a natural state. She later describes this as comforting, and that her beliefs actually empower her to participate in an ongoing process, and thereby have a hand in shaping the future. To resist, or deny change leaves only the option of passively waiting for one’s own extinction. She insists that “Intelligence is ongoing, individual adaptability” (25).

Lauren names her budding philosophy “Earthseed.” Inspired by the example and purpose of seeds, she admires how in order for plants to grow, to thrive, they must continue to spread in search of new and favorable environments. Of seeds she reasons, “they have no ability to travel great distances under their own power, and yet, they do travel. Even they don’t sit in one place and wait to be wiped out” (68-9). From this she asserts, “I am Earthseed. Anyone can be. Someday, I think there will be a lot of us. And I think we’ll have to seed ourselves farther and farther from this dying place” [emphasis mine] (69). While one might argue that plant seeds themselves are hardly the agents of their own dissemination, in Lauren’s analogy, she claims agency for individuals as seeds, and envisions their movement as a purposeful act of survival. Furthermore, in identifying as a seed, she evinces a positive belief in her ability and the ability of others, as Earthseed, to create new life through the natural process of adaptation to a changing environment.

In contrast to Lauren’s expansive and dynamic vision of survival, there is a countermovement in the text growing numbers of people respond to concerns for individual safety by championing more restrictive forms of governance and individual mobility. The election of President Donner on a platform of “putting people back to work” reveals a populace so desperate for employment, they don’t see the danger in his promise to “suspend ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental, and worker protection laws” (24). Examples such as
Richard Moss illustrate how quickly civil rights are compromised in the face of economic deprivation: his well-paying job as an engineer enables him to “pick up beautiful, young homeless women and live with them in polygamous relationships,” claiming that “God wants men to be patriarchs” (32). Yet the most severe response may be found in the example of the town of Olivar, a coastal community that has recently been privatized. In exchange for surrendering complete governance of their town to the company KSF, the citizens of Olivar will be protected by KSF’s considerable security forces. In the meantime, KSF will also oversee management of the city’s local industries, including a valuable desalination plant. To live and work in Olivar will come at a cost: low salaries, high rent. Lauren recognizes that “anyone KSF hired would have a hard time living on the salary offered. In not very much time, I think the new hires would be in debt to the company. That’s an old company-town trick—get people into debt, hang on to them, and work them harder. Debt slavery” (107). While Lauren’s father sees the danger of such a progression, other families desperately compete for entry to Olivar, willing to sacrifice their freedom for promised safety. In *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: “We’ll not go home again”* (2010), Claire P. Curtis demonstrates how Butler revises a traditional interpretation of the social contract in *Parable of the Sower*. While many novels of the genre maintain a Hobbesian depiction of humanity (“nasty, poor, brutish and short”), Butler rejects this as a totalizing narrative of catastrophe. Instead she suggests that people ultimately crave community, and a principle based, rather than property based contract, even though each of these are subject to “fractures” and “contestations.”

She explains, “Some people seek to solve fear by denying vulnerability whereas others seek to solve fear by abdicating responsibility for their

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own vulnerability.” The first describes Lauren’s neighbors in Robledo, who reject her warnings for the future and accuse her of trying to scare them. The second speaks to the growing numbers of people willing to sacrifice democracy in order to feel safe. Lauren rejects both options, knowing that to recognize vulnerability leaves her better able to adapt, and survive, while the loss of one’s autonomy leads to an inevitable loss of liberty.

To this end, Lauren’s dreams of flight embody her eagerness to leave, to move, to change. Lauren does not view flight as an act of escape, but as an act of evolution. Lauren recognizes that within walls of the compound, she is ordered by a strict domestic code that will never allow her to explore the full extent of her intellectual, spiritual and creative potential. Furthermore, the structure of the society within the compound is resistant to the changing life forces that threaten the survival of every person within its walls. The very system that protects them ultimately dooms them by leaving them unprepared for the danger outside. Her plans to leave the walled compound symbolize her recognition of the threat of this domestic space, and her ambition to shape her own future.

The first half of Parable of the Sower draws heavily upon Gothic and Sentimental narrative tropes. As a young woman coming of age, Lauren is at odds with a domestic structure that seeks to confine and order her through specifically gendered codes. These restrictions, while justified as protective measures, serve to reinforce traditional religious, economic and political systems. While her sexual subjugation is not forced, it is expected, and like her eighteenth-century literary predecessors, Lauren understands that the life she wants is not possible within the walls of her childhood home. The only possibility of achieving autonomy is to venture into

193 Curtis, 146.
the space beyond the walls. What awaits her also reflects an integration of both Gothic and Sentimental tropes. Gothic heroines flee primarily through terrain on the periphery of civilization, occupying the wooded or mountainous landscapes that enjoy a form of wild lawlessness. Sentimental heroines, on the other hand, seek refuge in urban areas, in which they have to closely adhere to social rules and expectations, so as not to draw attention to their precarious state of flight. Lauren understands that her own flight will incorporate aspects of both trajectories. In flight, she expects to travel on the old freeways which are no longer populated by vehicles now that no one can afford the machinery or gasoline. Now occupied by fellow travelers on foot, survival along this path will depend upon navigating a terrain not governed or protected by any enforceable laws. At the same time, she perceives that specific codes dictate behavior on the highway, and any deviation from them could threaten her survival.

When her Robledo community is finally overrun in a terrifying attack, Lauren’s careful preparations pay off and she is able to escape her burning home with a pre-packed bag of supplies and money. The second half of the text chronicles Lauren’s passage of flight, as she seeks a sanctuary in which to build her Earthseed settlement and thus “seed herself.”

Butler draws parallels between Lauren’s journey and the tropes of flight as represented in nineteenth-century slave narratives. Lauren plans to travel north, where she has heard there is promise of greater opportunity (72). She draws upon information gleaned from her brother Keith on how to survive beyond the walls. And significantly, Lauren reveals to her traveling companions Harry and Zahra that she intends to travel as a man, recalling the example of Ellen
Craft and the numerous individuals who were able to pass as a different gender, or race in order to safely navigate passage to the North. 194

As I have discussed throughout this study, the passage of flight creates a heterotopia in which individuals enjoy a more fluid expression of identity, separate from the restrictions of domestic or political oppression. In Parable of the Sower, it is in flight that Lauren is finally able to thrive, because she is no longer defined by the limited role imposed upon her by the walled community in Robledo. In flight, we see Lauren emerge as the confident, capable leader of a motley group of refugees and fellow travelers, who for the most part, accept her authority with little argument. Those who present the most conflict are those still operating under biases of sexism and ageism. In fact, one of the individuals who struggles most to accept Lauren’s leadership is Harry, a young man she has known her whole life. He still sees her through the lens of the old neighborhood, and it takes him time to acclimate to her new identity in flight. Harry feels betrayed by Lauren’s assertions of authority, and accuses Lauren of having hid her true nature back in Robledo. This is especially compounded when Lauren reveals her hyper-empathy, or her “sharing” abilities. In a way, there is truth in his accusation. It is only in flight that Lauren is free to reveal her true self. Harry’s inability to adapt to a new life in flight leads him to ultimately betray Lauren’s masculine disguise, thus threatening her efforts to protect herself, and the group. Harry also rebels initially, against Lauren’s vigilant distrust of everyone. He is trusting because he is confident in his own abilities and “he has not yet learned that he is vulnerable” (Curtis 144). Harry does not want to consider that he too, might be considered weak by an outside predator. He eventually adopts a stance of macho concern for Zahra to explain his

concessions to Lauren’s security measures. Zahra, on the other hand, a survivor of childhood poverty and abuse recognizes in Lauren’s behavior the traits necessary for survival.

In Robledo, Lauren possesses an intellectual understanding of racism and systematic oppression, but in flight she encounters fellow travelers who have firsthand knowledge of such depravity. Lauren notes the diversity in the people she passes:

The freeway crowd is a heterogeneous mass—black and white, Asian and Latin, whole families are on the move with babies on backs—or perched atop loads in carts, wagons, or bicycle baskets, sometimes along with an old or handicapped person. Other old, ill, or handicapped people hobbled along as best as they could … (158)

The space of flight acts as a leveling agent, in which social and political hierarchies of the communities left behind have no bearing on a populace in motion. Survival on the freeway depends less upon established forms of power, and more on immediate demonstrations of strength. Those in flight have already survived some form of tragedy, to put them on this path. Of the individuals who eventually join Lauren’s group, several are former slaves fleeing devastating conditions. One couple, Travis and Natividad, share how they were the servants of a wealthy family. Travis reveals that he taught himself to read, even though it was forbidden. Butler is quick to emphasize, through Lauren’s reflection, that this was reminiscent of how slaves achieved literacy during the time of chattel slavery in the United States. She acknowledges, “The son of the cook marrying one of the maids. That was like something out of another era, too” (196). Emery Solis and her daughter Tori were the victims of debt slavery after the farm that employed them was sold to a larger conglomerate which only paid wages in
company scrip. Since wages were “never quite enough to pay the bills,” and failure to pay debts would result in prison sentences, workers could be forced to work in horrific conditions without legal protections (259). In flight, Emery and Tori have a chance to start over, and define themselves separate from a self-perpetuating system of economic oppression.

In gathering potential followers, Lauren must explain her religion of Earthseed to others for the first time. As fellow figures in flight, they are open to hearing an alternate vision for the future. When some prove receptive, Lauren marvels that “Earthseed is being born right here on Highway 101” (200). However, she must repeatedly reassert that Earthseed is not a belief system that simply demands passive obedience, like many organized religions. She insists, “Worship is no good without action. With action, it’s only useful if it steadies you, focuses your efforts, eases your mind” (197). It is this active participation that Lauren finds most compelling about Earthseed. She preaches passionately, “Nothing can stop Change, but we all shape Change whether we mean to or not” (235). Lauren’s vision for Earthseed is continually reflected in how she leads her followers in flight. Personal responsibility is essential, interdependence fundamental. Though they look to her for leadership, she would argue that she shapes the movement of the group, rather than defines it. Each individual is expected to contribute to the community and to care for others.

Though many are skeptical, it is Bankole, Lauren’s future husband, who presents the greatest resistance to her vision. Born in the 1970s, Bankole has witnessed the slow dissolution of society as he once knew it, and it is difficult for him to accept Lauren’s worship of “Change” as a viable basis of belief. In response to his jeers, Lauren quietly declares, “Fixing the world is not what Earthseed is about” (247). For Lauren, Earthseed describes a process, not the solution.
In celebrating change, rather than resisting it, in viewing one’s strength as derived from the ability to participate in that inevitability of change, Earthseed embodies the characteristics of flight. If flight offers an individual the space to demonstrate a new form of agency in the liminal space between static structures of domestic order, Earthseed takes this premise to the next level, proposing a way for individuals to adopt a way of life based on those same principles, without the physical peril of literal flight. Throughout her time on the road, Lauren has grown into a confident leader. She endures repeated challenges to her authority, her judgement, and even her physical endurance, and she demonstrates each time a consistent and compassionate competence. It is this time in flight that reinforces for her, the truth of her beliefs. She has grown a great deal since she dreamt of flight as a child, unsure of her direction. Lauren issues Bankole an ultimatum: “I need you to understand me,” she tells him, continuing, “I need you to take me the way I am or go off to your land by yourself.” (248). Ironically, Lauren is uncompromising when it comes to her vision of shaping Change, and working towards the destiny of Earthseed.

On the morning of her sixteenth birthday, Lauren wakes up with the epiphany: “The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (75). This realization confirms the yearning she feels when she considers the endless potential of what might be discovered in the solar systems beyond her own. If the purpose of Earthseed is to embrace change and the progression of natural development, she believes it is only inevitable that human beings expand beyond the Earth. In doing so, they will seed themselves, or seed Earth, on other living planets. Again, the language of her vision contains parallels to the passage of flight. When she first conceives of this plan, she ponders, “I think people who traveled to extrasolar worlds would be on their own—far from politicians and business people, failing economies and tortured ecologies—and far from help. Well out of the shadow of their parent world” (74). Even then, Lauren perceives of the
necessity for her community to thrive in a space somehow separate from already existing systems of oppression and corruption. If in the liminality of flight, Lauren will enjoy the freedom to define her ideas and shape the community she believes possible, the only way to sustain that space is to extend the range of flight to an entirely new world system entirely.

It is this vision, and the brief glimpse of Lauren’s fledgling Earthseed community, Acorn, that reflect twentieth-century neo-slave narrative revisions of the trope of flight. These texts reconceive of flight with the knowledge that the act of flight alone does not achieve liberty. With this understanding, authors explore alternate meanings of flight beyond a physical passage of escape. Lauren envisions launching Earthseed on Bankole’s land with the hope of creating an isolated, independent colony separate from the corruption and poverty poisoning the nation around them. Sadly, upon their arrival, they find Bankole’s family has been killed, their home burned, and the local authorities are more threatening than protective. Butler emphasizes that there is no idyll awaiting them; their flight is not over. Lauren herself acknowledges that the destiny of Earthseed does not describe a final paradise. In fact, such a prospect seems wildly implausible. She concedes, “I know it won’t be possible for a long time. Now is the time for building foundations” (199). However, she boasts, “After all, my heaven really exists, and you don’t have to die to reach it” (199). It is interesting that she refers to the eventual aim of Earthseed as a heaven that “really exists.” Her religion does not promise a utopia. As I discussed in Chapter One of this project, the word utopia simultaneously means “good place,” and “no place.” Earthseed is grounded in the natural world, therefore Butler is wryly pairing a scientific description of “the heavens” (other planets) with the Christian concept of “heaven” (pearly white gates). Lauren’s confidence that Earthseed must eventually continue to spread and
to seed other worlds, balances a confidence in the unwavering progress of change, with a fatalistic view of salvaging human life on Earth.

**Epilogue**

In reviewing Marge Piercy’s groundbreaking novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Gloria Steinem wrote recently, “Most science fiction, future fantasy, or speculative fiction … takes us into a utopia we want, or a dystopia we don’t, and then leaves us to contemplate how we got there.” \(^{195}\) The greatest horrors of Butler’s dystopic *Parable* series simply replicate past expressions of oppression from history. Systems of political slavery, debt slavery, and sexual slavery are not Butler’s original creations; she challenges the complacency of contemporary opinions that these institutions pose no threat to more “enlightened” or “evolved” societies. On the contrary, Butler illustrates how oppression is retranslated by every successive generation, and that practices of freedom and creation remain vital in culture and deed.

Yet I would propose that in her works, Butler also evinces optimism for the future. In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren’s pragmatic philosophy doesn’t disavow all past forms of life and knowledge. She champions evolution, not extinction. In naming her belief system Earthseed, with its destiny to “take root among the stars,” she demonstrates that the seeds for a new civilization must come from Earth, from those who bear the history of the past within them. Therefore in order to survive, we must embrace change, and take flight.

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