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Coming to Terms with Slavery in Three Modern
Novels: Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, Valerie Martin's
Property, and Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench*

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Introduction

Slavery is one of the aspects of human existence that still continue to generate reactions and cause debates, as well as raise new questions that once answered, offer valuable insights into the nature of a challenging and somewhat peculiar institution. Literature, due to its ability to depict history and move beyond it into the psyche and complex layers of the lives of all those participating in the slavery system, be it oppressors or oppressed, has had an important word to say about the way discourses on slavery were and still are constructed. Historical facts about slavery should not only be learned about, but an extensive understanding is required and works of fiction certainly contribute to this process. It is extremely interesting that novels on slavery continue to appear on the market even nowadays, so many years after its official abolition. This raises a very relevant question, namely, what motivates writers to continue to write about slavery in a society that has apparently long managed to deal with all the aspects and consequences of this institution. Additionally, it is also worth investigating why it is still so difficult for African Americans to completely come to terms with slavery and ultimately move on to living a life that is no longer haunted by the memories of the past.

There are many unspoken things relating to slavery, many “mysteries” that continue to be revealed in fiction. My thesis analyses the representations of slavery in three modern novels that are similar in many ways, but at the same time fairly different in their approach and in the viewpoint adopted by the narrator. *Kindred* was written in 1979, *Property* in 2003 and *Wench* in 2010, so one of my interests is detecting any changes that might have occurred in the fictional representations of slavery from the 1970s until the present. The analysis is divided into six chapters which address the themes which occur in all the books and which illustrate how these three American novelists have imagined the institution of slavery and the experiences of those involved in it. These topics are: women slaves as narrative protagonists and with it the attempt to give a voice to the voiceless and stress the hardship that females, in particular, endured during slavery; the unbalanced relationship between master(s) and slave(s); the difficult situation of the children resulting from these relationships; violence and physical pain as experienced by the institution’s

victims; slave rebellions and runaways; and religion in connection with the role it played in forming slaves' beliefs, attitudes and values, but also as a "justification" of the slaveholders for their behaviour.

Much has been said and written about slavery. Much more than historians, politicians, writers or ordinary people can grasp and put into words has in fact happened. This peculiar institution impacted nations and many generations of people in different ways. The voices of the victims are heard indirectly through literature, a powerful tool that still continues to shed light on the significance and consequences of slavery on the human condition.

Slavery has impacted literature in a variety of ways, and in order to gain a thorough understanding of the reasons that contemporary writers have for writing about it more than one hundred fifty years after its abolition, it becomes essential to give an account of the narratives that dealt with this institution over time. Slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, slaves' autobiographies and fugitive tales are all important influences on the modern novels about slavery discussed in my thesis, and it is therefore significant to define and describe in detail the function and the relevance of these models incorporated into the new works on slavery. Moreover, slavery has been the main topic of several historical novels in the last decades, and presenting some of the main aspects and characteristics of this genre is essential in order to properly understand *Kindred*, *Property* and *Wench*. The past and the pivotal role it plays in understanding the present, as well as the motivation behind the choice of many contemporary writers to deal with certain historical events are included in the theory available on historiographic metafiction, which constitutes an important part of the next chapter.

Slavery and the way scholars thought and wrote about it over time, slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, the historical novel and historiographic metafiction are some of the main concepts that are discussed in detail in the first chapter in order to lay the foundation for the insights into the important contribution of Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez to the recent literary discourses on the "peculiar institution".

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Slavery

Slavery is not a concept that needs extensive definitions, neither is it a historical event that most people do not have sufficient knowledge about and therefore, do not speak of. Many are aware of what slavery was all about, and in fact, scholars still discuss it and make attempts to understand better its implications. However, since slavery is considered by many historians one of the “most ubiquitous institutions in human societies”, an “embarrassing historical phase”, utterly “undesirable” and even regarded as “a necessary evil” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 1-2), the institution also generates a sense of national shame and is, hence, a taboo subject for many Americans. This undoubtedly applies to several other nations that also had slaves. Ryan argues that slavery certainly remains “an ugly, gaping crack in the mythology of the United States, a troubling subject that it is safer to avoid or, at least to politely sanitize” (1). He also suggests that although people do not desire to remember it, they cannot evade the fact that slavery was “fundamental to the creation of the United States” (2). Furthermore, Ryan states that it is hopeless “to forge a viable future for ourselves unless we face up to and come to terms with the traumas and burdens of the past, however much we would prefer to repress them” (2).

1.1.1. Perspectives and debates

A brief overview of some of the main perspectives on slavery is given in the next paragraphs in order to have a concrete picture of the variety of opinions and debates that the institution gave birth to. Diderot recognises slavery as an “affront to the liberty of man” (27). Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette¹ emphasise its importance by stating that as an institution, slavery “often played a central societal role” since it interacted with and influenced “other aspects of social relations” (2). Slavery was significant in earlier times and this “is seen in the frequency of concern with defining, and either defending or attacking, the slave system” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 5). We now find

¹In their introductions to the different sections about slavery, the editors refer to slavery in general. However, the information provided fits into chattel slavery. Therefore, it is used in this thesis to illustrate the experience of the American peculiar institution.

unfathomable “the matter-of-fact attitudes” in the past “towards slaves and slavery”, but they nevertheless existed, and in order to grasp these perspectives, one must study “such day-to-day beliefs and actions of the slaves, slave-owners and other non-slaves in their historical context” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 2-3). Slavery had only “few critics before the nineteenth century” and it “must have seemed to most of the world’s peoples as simply a fact of life, something that had always existed and always would exist” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 57).

Since slavery caused a deep sense of embarrassment for the enslaved and their descendants, it became extremely hard for these people “to confront the continuing cultural and psychological results of the unbalanced master-slave relationship” and as a result, slavery was marginalised as “part of the historical record everywhere” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 2). Nevertheless, in the past decades, “the attention given to the economic, cultural, and political role of slavery” in various societies has greatly increased. Slavery is no longer considered an “isolated institution”, but is seen “as a central aspect of a society” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 2). The “existing records and writings” have been reinterpreted by historians and they have found several new sources of information which are used in order to revise the past (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 2). However, before reaching this stage, historians had lost hope as regards “recovering the experience of slavery from the slave’s point of view” since “most slaves throughout history” were not able “to record their thoughts and feelings about their bondage” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 225). It was masters who produced “almost all the documentary evidence”, but “during the last quarter of the twentieth century”, a “remarkable outpouring of scholarship on slavery” has managed to amplify “the voice of the slave” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 225).

A debate that went on at the beginnings of American slavery had at its centre the argument that “racism emerged from slavery, rather than preceding it and justifying it” (Countryman 12). The “which came first dimension” of this issue, Countryman argues, is perhaps “impossible to resolve” (12). Still, it is obvious that “American slavery subordinated one race to another” and “the racism that

developed from racial subordination” remains stark since it “influenced every aspect of American life” (Genovese, “Roll, Jordan, Roll” 36-37). Also, a “historically unique kind of paternalist society” was created in the Old South and “the racial distinction between master and slave” increased “the tension inherent in an unjust social order” (Genovese, “Roll, Jordan, Roll” 37). Fields, quoted in Rushdy (*Neo-slave Narratives* 22) refused to see race “as something having to do with how white people view black people” and argued that there has “never been a way of identifying Afro-Americans in this country apart from their identification as a class [...]”. Omi and Winant (quoted in Byerman) see race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (14). This definition points to the fact that “black bodies, both male and female”, are the “sites of conflict over identity, exploitation and relationship”, aspects that are particularly evident in African American historical narratives. Jordan observes that “color and slavery [...] are inextricably linked in American history” and that “race and color are meaningful qualifiers of inferiority and grounds for subjugation” (2).

Elaborating on the discussion about the perspectives on slavery and race, Mitchell states that it is race that has shaped America’s “history and identity”, and slavery, “in complex ways”, has become “synonymous with race” because “slavery may be read as a crucial metonym of our social history” (Preface xi). Bromell writes about the “antebellum efforts to understand slavery” and especially “the relation between slavery and race” and he argues that although the escaped slave was delivered from the tough labour of slavery, slaves were never freed “from the bodily racial identity” that “racism and race consciousness promote” (8).

1.1.2. Historical facts about slaves

Slaves were “property” and all their “movements and behaviour [...] were legally controlled by owners” who made them “rightless” and who considered them to be “ignorant, backward, lazy, and untrustworthy” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 1-2). Therefore, the fate of most slaves was a “combination of economic exploitation, psychological distancing, and cultural degradation”

(Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 2). These views were justified by a concept that Aristotle himself developed, namely that of the “natural slave” that stated that “those enslaved merited that status because it was appropriate to their innate characteristics” (in Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 2). Slaves were “totally dishonoured, stripped of all claims to respect, and open to complete exploitation” since “somebody else was in control of their lives” (Countryman 6). Being black meant being inferior and already in the fifteenth century blackness was regarded as “the handmaid and symbol of baseness and evil, a sign of danger and repulsion” (Jordan, quoted in Higginbotham 88). One of the main strategies employed was convincing blacks that “they are inferior to all others” so that they would “feel hopeless about their fate [and] become submissive” (Higginbotham 95). Thomas Jefferson explained that “blacks [...] are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Higginbotham 96) and Andrew Fletcher believed that if masters were to abuse their slaves it would “[...] proceed, for the most part, from the perverseness of the Servant” (Morgan 126).

It is not generally known that the U.S. economy was dependant “in its early years on the creativity and ingenuity of enslaved people” (Sale 358); the “appropriation of the slave’s productive and reproductive capacities” by violent masters can be considered “the central experience of slavery” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 225). Slaves not only played an important part in the development of America, but their lives also “fuelled the imagination” of a number of African American writers who have “dramatised the institution of slavery and/or the legacies of slavery”, predominantly “the pain and shame of the past” in their works, Mitchell observes (3). She also notes that the “infinite pain and shame of slavery” remain very present “in the American consciousness”, explaining herself by offering several examples of cinematic representations that “give dimension to the institution of slavery for contemporary viewers” (3). The next section deals with some of the facts that contributed to the dynamic relation between slavery and literature.

1.1.3. Slavery in literature

McFeely, quoted in Sekora (670) mentions that there has been “no escape from the slave in American literature” and argues that slavery has remained “close to the consciousness of Americans, white and black, ever since”. Slavery, as a subject, is “far from being exhausted [...] because it is more and worse than anything anyone can say about it” (Sekora 670) and some reasons for the continuous preoccupation of novelists with this institution are: “America has been engaged with tales of bondage” from the earliest decades, African American slave narratives being “the major form of those tales” (Sekora 670). Second, “most of the writers of the nation” showed an interest in the literature of slavery during that half century. Third, it seems that they “remained absorbed in the issues raised by slavery” even after the Civil War. Fourth, the narratives of former slaves served as “the Book of Job for the American consciousness” for many decades (Sekora 670). Slavery had “replaced captivity as a central metaphor of American history” and only few writers could ignore it (Sekora 670). The period between the Civil War and the 1930s saw the publication of over fifty autobiographies by former slaves that revealed a different view of “the central experience of slavery from their antebellum predecessors” (Sekora 671). The more pragmatic postbellum conception looked not “so much at the facts of slavery”, but rather at “how the memory of slavery modifies white attitudes in the present” (Sekora 671).

The 1960s were characterised by “a renewed sense of oppression and a flood of historical fiction about slavery” (Sekora 672). The development of this “considerable body of African American writing about slavery” was undoubtedly influenced by the “transformations in American life during and since the mid-1960s” (Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative” 88). One of the main factors was the Civil Rights Movement that forced revisions of the American slave past. People of African descent were empowered to undertake innovative “historical and fictional explorations into the slave past” (Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative” 89).

Toni Morrison, for example, wrote that it was her job to “‘rip that veil’ behind which the very attempt to tell the truth of slavery ironically conceals it” and added that the most intriguing part of slavery “has generally been ‘kept veiled’”, but “the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features”. She “willingly take[s] the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn” (quoted in Ring and Plasa 77 and 91). It has to be mentioned that “an intellectual change in the academic study of the American past” occurred, and together with “the social movements of the decade”, (Black Power particularly) influenced the way slavery was fictionally represented “from the late sixties to the present” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 3). Interestingly, a “renewed respect for the truth and value of slave testimony, the significance of slave cultures, and the importance of slave resistance” invigorated “the study of American slavery” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 4). Historians, cultural workers and social scientists contributed to the development of discourses on slavery by generating “new methodologies and [...] new visions of America’s antebellum past”, by producing “new fiction about slavery” and by employing “terms from the historiography of slavery” in order to create conceptual portraits of what they called the “black psyche” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 6).

“By the end of the 1980s, [...] American chattel slavery” had been represented in various writings both “in the form of [...] historical representations” and “in fictional works carefully tracing the courage, love, and anxieties of enslaved men, women and communities” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 227). Scott observes that the “artistic impulse to revisit this ineffable, sublime terror” of slavery is “a critical and creative practice” which demonstrates the “hidden transcripts of resistance to be found in those subordinated experiences of enslaved peoples” (quoted in Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 227). The ability of authors of contemporary African American narratives of slavery to be “experimental [...] in developing diverse forms to tell a story that many [admit to be] the most difficult of their careers” (Toni Morrison describes this in her novel *Beloved* as the “unspeakable things unspoken” and “not a story to pass on”²), is assuredly one of the most exceptional features of their work. The three major forms that novelists usually employ are “the historical novel”, “the pseudo-

² In Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative” p.90

autobiographical slave narrative” and “the novel of remembered generations” (Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative” 90). Also, there are two main themes included in these authors’ writing: “the black and commodified body of the slave” and its meaning to American culture and ways of reconciling “an oppressive past” (Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative” 91).

Ryan notes that writers and readers alike, despite being profoundly disturbed by the peculiar institution, are nevertheless “irresistibly drawn to [slavery], [...] compelled to search for some kind of meaning in its vicious exploitation, senseless cruelty, incomprehensible suffering, and massive hypocrisy” (2). He adds that “the impossibility of thinking about slavery is matched only by the impossibility of not thinking about it” (2). His central argument is that African American writers enter into a “dynamic dialogue” with white-authored versions of slavery rather than only resisting and presenting alternatives. Therefore, novelists of all races are involved in “existing historiographical debates” (2).

Several recent works of fiction emphasise slavery as a “discursive field” by relying upon “intertextual signification” and “other self-conscious techniques” but at the same time provide “believable portrayals of slavery”, “realistic characters” that arouse the reader’s empathy, and a well-informed “engagement with debates about the historical reality of slavery” (Ryan 144). Women authored much of this literature; in fact, they continue “to challenge the previously marginal status of black females” in fictional works about slavery (Ryan 144).

To sum up, slavery continues to be an attractive topic for writers and readers alike. First, although many find the institution disturbing and are therefore ashamed to talk about it, there is significant evidence that the American slave past has, nevertheless, generated deep interest for many generations. The “peculiar institution” has been a dominant and popular theme in American fiction because the lives of slaves gave birth to some exceptional works that have had an important word to say about the true nature of slavery. Second, several writers and historians stress the importance of accepting and comprehending the wounds of the past in order to move forward into a successful future. Third, the degree of acceptability that slavery enjoyed in the societies of the past

remains incomprehensible and even shocking for us today. Fourth, another fact that is worth noting here is the difficulty that former slaves and their descendants faced in making sense of the memories and burdens of the past. The status of the slave as chattel, possession, and a mere thing even, is another intriguing aspect of the institution which generated intense debates about the relationship between slavery and racism. Lastly, several attempts to understand slavery from the slave's perspective have been made and this is still a priority of literary works today, as my analysis of the three chosen novels will demonstrate.

1.2. Slave narratives

Slave narratives "have provided some of the most graphic and damning documentary evidence of the horrors of slavery" (see Andrews 667). The merit of these narratives was the fact that they exposed the "inhumanity of the slave system", while giving at the same time "incontestable evidence of the humanity of African Americans" (Andrews 667). The status of this "highly conventionalised genre" as literature "was long disputed", but "the literary merits" of several narratives, named in the coming paragraphs, and the strong influence they had "on the development of African American fiction" are extensively recognised today (Fritsch 537).

Even after the Civil War, when slavery was "officially banned", and the African Americans had officially been guaranteed citizenship, former slaves still recorded "their experiences under slavery" (Andrews 667). It was their great desire that "the newly united nation" would not forget what had endangered its formation and that "the ex-slave population" would clearly show its dedication to progress for both blacks and whites (Andrews 667). It seems that "most major writers of African American literature before World War I", independent of whether they were "born in slavery or not, launched their literary careers" through some form of slave narrative (Andrews 667). Furthermore, the relevance of this type of writing is emphasised by the fact that "the ex-slave

narrative remained the preponderant sub-genre of African American autobiography” after slavery was abolished in North America (Andrews 668).

Another interesting characteristic of these texts is that the earliest slave narratives had clear similarities with “popular white American accounts of Indian captivity and Christian conversion in the New World” (Andrews 668). “A new demand for slave narratives” that were supposed to emphasise the tough realities of slavery itself came in the early nineteenth century, mainly generated by the “rise of the militant antislavery movement” (Andrews 668). It was the abolitionists’ conviction that, once people “who were ignorant of or indifferent to” the sorrow of African Americans in the South, read “the eyewitness testimony of former slaves against slavery”, their hearts would be touched and their minds changed (Andrews 668). In the late 1830s and early 1840s the first slave narratives appeared and they “set the fashion” for the “standardised form of autobiography in which personal memory and a rhetorical attack on slavery blend to produce a powerful expression tool both as literature and as propaganda” (Andrews 668). Interestingly, the antebellum slave narrative “carried a black message inside a white envelope” (Andrews 668).

1.2.1. Themes and structure of slave narratives

As far as the thematic repertoire of these narratives is concerned, the “vitality of the slave culture” and “the function of the slave community in providing slaves with physical survival resources” were some of the main themes emphasised in slave narratives (Rushdy, “Neo-slave narrative” 534). Many slave narratives had “a series of letters and attestations of character” appended in order to prove “the reliability and good character of the narrator” (Andrews 668). These were written by whites and included in the preface of the book, calling the attention to “what the narrative will reveal about the moral abominations of slavery” (Andrews 668). Slavery was portrayed in these works “as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth” (Andrews 668). Some of the things that motivated the narrator to escape were mostly personal crises, like “the sale of a loved one, or a dark night of the soul

in which hope contends with despair for the spirit of the slave” (Andrews 668). Oftentimes, the slaves were impelled to flee “by faith in God” and by their “commitment to liberty and human dignity comparable to that of America’s founders” and hence they undertook an “arduous quest for freedom” (Andrews 668). In several narratives, after freedom was attained by the slaves reaching the free states, a dedication of “one’s future to antislavery activism” would also occur (Andrews 668).

The problem of slavery was addressed in the slave narrative “with unprecedented candour” and one of its main objectives was “unmasking as never before the moral and social complexities of the American caste and class system” in both the north and the south of America (Andrews 669). Most post-Civil War slave narratives depicted slavery as a “crucible in which the resilience, industry and ingenuity of slaves was tested and ultimately validated” (Andrews 669). For many writers, slavery was the “focal event” in American history (Sekora 672).

The elements that compose the historical context in which antebellum slave narratives are located are extremely important. These include “the effects of slavery as a total system” and the schemes of the Abolitionist movement, which on the one hand made possible the liberty of many slaves and the writing of their life stories, and on the other hand restricted “the speaking and writing self” (Ring and Plasa 118). The slave narrative is considered “a historically specific document” but as autobiography, it represents “the writing of the self once abject into history” (Ring and Plasa 118).

As regards the structure of slave narratives, literary critics have identified a certain degree of uniformity that “is not fixed”, but dependant on the perspective from which it is looked at. (Ring and Plasa 122) Gates (quoted in Ring and Plasa) believes that there is a “‘shared pattern’ of African/slave-culture” which functions as a “communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual’s autobiography” (122). Gates and Davis (in Ring and Plasa) observe that slave narratives reflect more than “polemical demands of Abolitionist discourse”, being “symptomatic of the development of a distinct black literary

tradition" (122). Olney (in Ring and Plasa) discusses the "repetitious nature of the slave narrative and the constraints upon its form", identifying "elements common to all narratives as well as the sequence in which they are likely to appear" (123). He also describes what he calls a "master outline" which, in his opinion, is "a means of identifying and reading the slave-narrative genre" (Ring and Plasa 123). The revelations that former slaves included in their writing about slavery almost always "had to counter prescriptivism as well as ignorance and prejudice" (Ring and Plasa 124).

According to Bell, some black writers strongly maintain their liberty as individual artists to choose their own "subjects, form, and style", but they manage to use "their distinctive voices" both "within and against a narrative tradition of continuity and change" (285). Some novelists even "combine elements of fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest against racism and to justify the deeds, struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people". Recurrent motifs of these writings are "the power of faith, messianic hope, self-reliance or direct action, and the lynching ritual" (Bell 285).

Benesch commented on Henry Louis Gates's remark that, since the former slave has been "forced to act as the notorious Other of Western discourse", he "finally turned into a sort of cultural super ego, a relentless critic and deconstructor of white society" (255). History, or the way in which we make sense of "the past as essential to our notion of the self", is one of the main targets of the slave's critique, this thematic focus having been developed since the first slave narratives (Benesch 255). Another feature which is worth noting is that a fugitive slave narrator could gain the right to author a text only by white patronage. Even if this was difficult, the narratives of Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb or Harriet Jacobs are concrete proofs of the fact that ex-slaves did successfully author "highly complex, double-voiced narrative strategies" (Benesch 256).

Moody refers to other characteristics of antebellum narratives of slavery: "scenes of physical and psychological torture and deprivation"; "depictions of gruelling labour"; "the sale and separation of slave families and further assaults

to their integrity”; “descriptions of the narrator’s and other slaves’ sufferings”; “yearnings for literacy” and reflections on how “slavery hardens white peoples’ hearts towards the blacks” (Moira Ferguson, quoted in Moody 110). More than just documenting slavery’s “legal, psychological, communal, spiritual, and ethical damages to black people”, the genre specifically deals with “the harshness and severity” of the “diverse forms of labour” that slaves had (Moody 115). These themes are also represented in contemporary works on slavery, as emphasised in my discussion of *Kindred*, *Property*, and *Wench* in the following chapters. Moreover, slave narratives also depict attempts to escape enslavement and the state of “degradation of the fugitive”, most of the times in a representation full of “anxiety and despair” (Moody 110). Apart from being focused on stories of “unfathomable pain, injustice, and atrocity”, these narratives also present reports of “exceptional triumph over both the obstructions of adversity and the inadequacies of language” (Moody 110).

An essential characteristic is “the dual voice of experiencing and narrating self” (Fritsch 538). The slave narrative also shares “stylistic and structural elements with the adventure story” because of its “focus on rescue and escape”, but also with the sentimental novel due to its “appeal to readers’ sentiments” and complex characterisation (Fritsch 538). Another aspect exposed by slave narratives is the difficulty of black men and women “in establishing a viable romantic relationship” because of the slave masters’ indecency who abuse women and destroy family bonds (Dandridge 7). The role of testimony is central in the slave narrative and Mitchell argues that in order for the survivors to continue to survive after the trauma, testimony remains their vital tool. Every testimony needs an audience, so the role of the witness is relevant here; the reader is the one to hear the story of the survivor “without resisting emotionally” (Mitchell 148). Butterfield (quoted in Jones 59) writes about the “little choice” that slave narrators had when setting their story “down on paper”; they needed “to adapt the literary forms and traditions of white American culture”. Which forms of white culture “served as models for early African American writers” became “a central concern of the scholarship [...] on the slave narratives” (Jones 59).

Some of the ambitions of the genre were “to control, to shape and even to alter and transform” the thinking of free people about the institution and all those who have suffered under it (Moody 113). Additionally, it was also attempted to “arrest whites’ production of racist stereotypes” (Moody 113). Another meaningful achievement of the slave narratives is that it “gave blacks the opportunity to reveal and express their interiority and consciousness”, stressing the pursuit of significant, worthy lives by the slaves, who were intelligent and skilled, a proof of this being that they translated their lives into “powerful rhetoric” (Moody 114). An important characteristic of the slave narrative is that it exposed “the atrocities of slavery”, above all “with respect to family ties”: selling someone from one’s immediate family at a young age or selling away one’s children. Paradoxically, these narratives both unveil and mask the horrific effects of slavery that, as Harriet Jacobs writes, “no pen can give an adequate description [...]” of (quoted in Moody 114).

Another recurring theme in the narrative of former slaves is the strong belief in “the black woman’s voice in interpersonal contexts” or in the vernacular talk; some of the aspects that could be listed here are: “verbal warfare, speaking up [or] talking back to challenge authority figures” (Moody 123). According to Braxton (quoted in Moody) this is a “form of slaves’ resistance” and “is seen as a weapon of self-defence” (123).

To sum up, it can be argued that the slave narratives “advance[d] the cause of the abolition” by focusing primarily on “the agonies of slaves” and their drastic effects on the individuality of black people (Mitchell 146). More recent writings, the neo-slave narratives, advance a different cause: the liberation of its readers from the “shackles of the past” by making them consider slavery as a whole (Mitchell 146).

1.3. Neo-slave narratives

1.3.1. Definition and coinage

“Neo-slave narratives are modern or contemporary fictional works” dealing with representations of “the experience or the effects of New World slavery” (Rushdy, “Neo-slave narrative” 533). These narratives have “fictional slave characters as narrators, subjects, or ancestral presences” and they stress the fact that “slavery as a historical phenomenon” has “lasting cult meaning and enduring social consequences” (Rushdy, “Neo-slave narrative” 533). Another characteristic of these writings is that they present the slave culture as a very vital one, therefore preventing slaves “from becoming the docile or absolutely servile automatons” that the plantation romance tradition often stereotypically depicted (Rushdy, “Neo-slave narrative” 533). There are two main types of neo-slave narratives: “historical novels set in the antebellum South” and “social realist or magical realist novels set in the post-Reconstruction or the twentieth century America” that nevertheless deal with the noticeable effects of slavery on contemporary African American individuals (Rushdy, “Neo-slave narrative” 534). These narratives are influenced by a variety of eighteenth and nineteenth century forms of American writing, among which the antebellum and post-bellum slave narratives and abolitionist fiction, to name but a few. Their history tends to be divided into two periods: before and after 1966. “Neo-slave narratives that dealt with the legacy of slavery” were more popular than “historical novels about slavery” (Rushdy, “Neo-slave narrative” 534).

The term “neoslave narrative” was coined by Bernard Bell, who defined it as follows: “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (in Ryan 187), but this is a rather general definition that does not necessarily apply well to some novels about slavery. Rushdy gave a more specific definition of neo-slave narratives: novels that “assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice” of their nineteenth century antecedents. If we apply this definition, very few texts meet the criteria (quoted in Ryan 187).

1.3.2. Influence on contemporary literary discourses

The authors of the neo-slave narratives played an important role in critically commenting on “the historiographical tradition” that had represented slavery in a romanticised way due to “the exclusion of first hand African American perspectives” on the institution (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 6). This was achieved “by using a form of writing that had been excluded from the academic study of slavery for so long” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 6). Some of the most significant concerns of these narratives are questioning the acquisition of “subjective knowledge within a predetermined form of writing”, dealing with the constitution of historical subjects by “employing or revisiting a set of ideologically charged textual structure”, discussing the significance of modern writers’ decision to adopt “the voice of a fugitive slave” and use the form of previous slave narratives, as well as presenting the implications of postmodern authors’ negotiation and reconstruction of “a pre-modern form” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 7). In addition, “the relationship between the history of slavery and the social significance of contemporary racial identity” is another main interest of neo-slave narrative writers (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 22). These works “play with, partly dismantle, and partly demonstrate the implacability of [the] original identity” of a slave (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 22).

Neo-slave narratives, as part of “the body of African American writing about slavery”, contributed to “the transition from [the] previous generation’s shame” - that very many black Americans admitted to have felt – “about their slave heritage” to the pride that they later experienced when they made sense of “the humanity and dignity of their enslaved ancestors” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 227). Neo-slave narratives were mobilised by the existing discourse on slavery and they referred critically to any negations of the pain of slavery (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 229).

Rushdy observes that the writers of contemporary neo-slave narratives try to “recuperate voice and body, challenge appropriation and commodification, and experiment with the tension between a literacy that captures and an orality that liberates” (“The neo-slave narrative” 102). Memory plays an essential role in the

process of recovery and it is also one of the strategies employed to recall the past, making it possible to be healed from its pain. The fact that authors share the stories of slavery with their readers represents an attempt “to heal a nation” that unfortunately, in various ways, still fails to acknowledge “its original wound” (Rushdy, “The neo-slave narrative” 103).

Ryan mentions that there is “an overemphasis” on the “neoslave narratives” as a “generic category” in recent critical studies, which shows that scholars attempt to create “a coherent black literary tradition concerned with slavery”, in opposition to the “white canon” on the same subject (188). He also disagrees with “the suggestion” that recent slavery novels by black writers are “formal and thematic [...] equivalents or direct descendants of the fugitive slave narrative” because he considers the neoslave narrative to be “a novelistic genre”, while previous works were “autobiographical anti-slavery polemic” (188). It is mandatory for authors of “new slavery fiction” to differentiate their works “from prior literary discourse about the institution” because of the danger of transforming slavery into something “commonplace and overly familiar”, this leading to a decrease of the impact that slavery has on readers (Ryan 189). He notes that in those historical novels that work with “traditional forms and familiar archetypes, habituation is at risk of devouring slavery, rendering it conventional and our response to it automatic” (Ryan 189). Such an outcome is the result of the constant employment of conventional, “long established strategies” for depicting slavery in literature. In order to avoid this, one of the strategies used by modern fictional works on slavery is “intertextual critique” that “disrupt[s] and defamiliarise[s] existing means for representing slavery” but that does not always present slavery in atypical and exceptional new ways (Ryan 189).

The aspects discussed so far demonstrate that neo-slave narratives differ from the previous writings on slavery and the main points, summed up and emphasised for greater clarity, are the following. First, more recent narratives present “the personal and the emotional” side in their depiction of slavery, recalling “how little we know” about the institution, especially if our knowledge only includes facts (Mitchell 6). Writers attempt to challenge us in our thinking

and remind us not to limit ourselves to a single perspective while constructing “our individual response to the past” (Mitchell 12). Second, authors of neo-slave narratives do not imitate previous texts, but rather “reaccentuate” them; they “reply” to them, using strategies that appeal to contemporary readers in an effort to elaborate on discourses of “resistance, survival and recovery” (Mitchell 13). In addition, these texts try to recover the past through the use of “imagination” and “memory” and explore “how the past relates to the present and the future” (Mitchell 17). Fourth, in order to enable their readers “to go beyond the events of slavery”, several neo-slave narratives make use of intertextuality as a means of creating new spaces for understanding a distinct time (Mitchell 17). Fifth, neo-slave narratives are characterised by disrupting history and not only presenting it; the focus is on those things which have “not been told”, which have been “ignored”, “silenced”, or “forgotten” (Mitchell 21). Sixth, one important merit of these narratives is that they examine “how race operated and operates in American history, society, and culture”, providing the possibility of experiencing healing from “a past marked by [...] shame and pain” (Mitchell 150).

1.4. Singularity versus multiplicity in fiction about slavery

The first part of the chapter has primarily dealt with presenting the existing discourses on slavery and their relevance in the time when they came into being. It then moved to briefly describing the relationship between slavery and literature, including some of the main aspects involved in depicting a central historical event in fiction and emphasising the role that African American writers played in the development of the literary forms that narrated facts of the peculiar institution. A discussion of the characteristics of slave narratives followed and ultimately, a presentation of the significance of neo-slave narratives in coming to terms with a disturbing past, together with their principal attributes and their innovative contributions to the literary discourse on slavery. It has been mentioned that many (black) writers have attempted to diminish the superficial or hegemonic perspective on slavery included in the works of white historians and writers over time, and therefore, concentrated on producing texts that

signalled the horrific nature of the institution by giving a voice to the voiceless and including for the first time the perspective of slaves. In other words, literature on slavery has been a great deal about removing those mentalities that were oppressive and that failed to acknowledge the real importance of slavery and to see the other side of the coin, namely the complexities of the painful institution reflected in the lives of the victims. The 1960s are seen as years that brought a severe breakup in the nature of the discourse on slavery and this period is considered fundamental for the future evolution of literary works dealing with slavery.

While several cultural workers and literary critics share this view, Ryan develops a counterargument whose key facets are listed in the next part of this chapter. The first thing he criticises is the common assumption of the existence of “a stark binary opposition between authentic, contemporary, subversive, black-authored fiction about slavery on one hand, and a traditionalist, monolithic, racist historiography created by whites on the other” (4). He rejects the belief of previous criticism according to which contemporary novels reject and go beyond “established discourses about the past”, arguing that, in fact, “fiction actively engages with existing historiographical debates” (4). Second, Ryan disapproves of the view that many people have of the 1960s as the time which twisted the nature of slavery discourse and claims that there are “significant continuities” in the way the institution was represented over time (4). Concerning black and white writers, he does not see them as being “essentially isolated” from each other, but rather points to the huge possibility of “productive exchange” between them (4).

Nonetheless, Ryan takes into consideration the fact that in the last few decades, several writers have “critiqued and presented compelling counternarratives to a long-lived and oppressive historical hegemony” (4). For example, Mitchell examines the reimagination of slavery by black women “from an African American and female perspective” (7) and Rushdy writes about the ingenious discourse on slavery authored by blacks which became visible in the late 1960s as a counternarrative to a continuing and racist “dominant

hegemonic discursive formation' in American culture" (13, 56)³. Similar views are shared by postmodern literature scholars as well, among whom Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon have made some of the most significant contributions. The former refers to the contemporary historical novel as revisionist fiction that takes a critical position as far as received ideas are concerned, "demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past" (McHale in Ryan 5), while Hutcheon notes that the "unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives" of traditional historiography have generated new discourses: "we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as well as the much sung few, and I might add, of women as well as men" (quoted in Ryan 5). These and other studies enquire into the ways in which contemporary counternarratives - written most of the times by African Americans, women and other traditionally marginalised people - challenge and offer variants to a "long-dominant white, racist, patriarchal historical metanarrative" (Ryan 5).

Third, Ryan argues that if contemporary literature disrupts a "dominant cultural hegemony", a "coherent orthodoxy as a given" must exist, which is certainly not true for history since it is not and has never been a "series of agreed-upon facts and dominant master narratives" (5). He suggests that history is a "network of ongoing debates and continually contested interpretations" (5). Then, Ryan also refers to the "conflicting opinions and clashing narratives" that have always characterised the discussions on American slavery and opposes the existence of a "single predominant metanarrative" (5). His argument is backed up by examples from the antebellum era when American culture involved a diverse mixture of rival discourses on slavery: "memoirs of escaped slaves", arguments promoted by "advocates of slavery", the white liberal abolitionist attitude in fiction and nonfiction, dramatic abuse of militant African Americans, "pro-slavery novels", and African American writers' fiction (5).

Furthermore, Ryan states that there never existed a "coherent, single master narrative of American slavery" (6), thus contradicting all previous scholars who wrote extensively about the contrary. It is true - according to Ryan- that certain

³ Discussed in Ryan p.4

discourses “have a greater [...] influence than others”, but this does not mean that there has been a “dominant cultural discourse about slavery [...] in the United States before [...] the civil rights movement, and the development of contemporary African American literature” (6). Making such a claim reveals an attitude of striving to praise “the achievements of recent black novelists” and to amplify the focus on the “distinctive and innovative” characteristics of new writings on history (6). There are two categories of historical perspective that should be considered here: the logical push of traditional historians to frame “‘the truth’ about the past” and the postmodern acknowledgement of the unfamiliarity of the past, with an emphasis on the artificiality of any constructed historical narrative (Ryan 6).

The argument that modern African American reinterpretations of history are unprecedented is countered by Ryan, who believes that this only overlooks the achievements of numerous African American historians who dealt with the historiography of slavery “between the 1860s and 1960s” (8). Another critique is aimed at Rushdy’s judgement that “African American fiction in general has undergone a virtual renaissance since the sixties” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* 3). Ryan concludes that “a powerful body of black writing was produced between 1945 and 1968”, a fact that cannot be so easily dismissed (9). Additionally, the assertion that one’s attitudes toward slavery are completely dependent on one’s racial identity is held to be “too simplistic and essentialist” (10). Ryan strongly believes that the views on slavery have changed considerably from one generation to the other and hence, it cannot be said that there has ever existed a “hegemonic consensus of opinion” on this topic at any time in history (12-13).

Ryan’s conclusion is that the existence of a “tangled web of competing discourses” negates the possibility of discussing an “orthodox version of the past” (15). Moreover, solutions to the various problems in representing the peculiar institution need to be found and the central aspects of this issue are: First, finding ways to sensibly depict a terrible event like slavery without making it look too sensational or trivial, but at the same time not diminishing its impact. Second, knowing how to “portray history in fiction” to the extent that a decision

has to be made between opting for presenting the historical “truth” or approaching history largely “as a discursive field” (15-16). Ryan stresses the importance of “a careful negotiation” between approaching history traditionally and in a postmodern way, attributing this merit to American fiction that has successfully found the balance between the idea of “history as past reality” and “history as a series of discursive conventions” (16).

In summary, there are two principal lines of thinking that enter the debate about the historiography of slavery and about the possible perspectives on the role of African American writing. A numerous body of scholars argues that there has always existed a master narrative, a hegemonic category that discriminated the black writers and refused to perceive slavery the way it actually was, while Ryan is convinced that the discourses on the peculiar institution are vast and complex, and certainly not exclusively monolithic and racist. Exceptional works by black writers have also been created before the 1960s and this achievement should not be overlooked nor should it be stated that white-authored fiction fails to illustrate slavery as an authentic and significant historical phase.

These two positions are undoubtedly very crucial to a thorough understanding of the previous discourses on slavery, influencing the way in which readers relate to the works of fiction about the peculiar institution. However, rather than dealing with finding a solution for this ideological debate, what I will be pursuing is inquiring into the implications of the continuity of including slavery in modern fiction. In other words, what I will look at is the effect of representing slavery in modern works of fiction and analysing the way this is achieved by contemporary writers. Whether previous discourses on slavery are totally valid or not or whether the peak of African American writing about the institution was reached after the 1960s or much earlier, are aspects that are not necessarily central to answering my research question. What is more relevant is analysing the strategies that are employed in the representation of a highly significant historical event in fiction and what kind of an effect it produces in terms of reworking the past in order to make a difference in the present and positively influence the future. There is a clear intention in these texts to revise, re-examine and restate the “hows and whys” of slavery, this fact pointing to a still

existing desire to emphasise the emotional and experiential level to which we do not have access via history. This is where literature plays an essential role. Three of the many writers that have been depicting slavery in their works are being “interrogated” in the following chapters.

In order to lay a good foundation for the coming analysis of the reasons that Butler, Martin and Perkins-Valdez have to write back about such an extensively disputed historical phase as slavery, a brief discussion of the historical novel genre is required, as well as an overview of the relationship between fact and fiction. The importance of revealing the past through contemporary works of fiction and the outcome of such a choice is also included in the next section of the chapter.

1.5. The Historical Novel

Although we think the past is gone and the future is not yet here, if we look deeply, we see that reality is more than that. The past exists in the guise of the present, because the present is made from the past. In this teaching, if we establish ourselves firmly in the present and touch the present moment deeply, we also touch the past and have the power to repair it (Thich Nhat Hanh quoted in Jordan 231).

This quote is a good starting point for the next two sections of the chapter that deal with the importance of the past and simultaneously emphasise the connection between former events and the present in terms of articulating observations about why fiction is often incorporating central historical events in the representation of the text world.

The historical novel genre centres traditionally on the existence of great historical figures, employing historical research (Sale 358). The portrayal of a specific period of time as a “broad and many-sided picture of the everyday life of the people, the joys and sorrows, cries and confusions of average human beings” is at the centre of the historical novel (Lukács, quoted in Hofmann 19). In order for a truly historical novel to be developed, there has to exist a historical awareness, not only in the writer, but also on the reader’s side. Scott (quoted in

Lukács) argues that history always focuses on historical crises presented as “coinciding with” or determining personal crises in the lives of novel protagonists (in Hofmann 19). This is an aspect that applies to *Kindred*, *Property* and *Wench* as well since slavery was undoubtedly one of the major historical crisis that America has experienced. These three novels depict severe personal crisis in the protagonists’ lives as they are facing the horrific realities of the peculiar institution from the position of the unfortunate victims. As the historical events are correlated with the lives of individuals, the main focus is moving from re-telling the events to foregrounding a “poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events”, the readers having the impression that they are re-experiencing “the social and human motives which led men to think, feel, and act just as they did in historical reality” (Lukács, quoted in Hofmann 20).

It has not been easy for critics and literary historians to give “a clear-cut definition of the historical novel” because it can be problematic to distinguish it from “related genres such as the romance, the social novel, the fictional biography, and the novel of education and development”, because all these include “historical detail” in their story (Hofmann 22). What the historical novelists are aiming at is recovering what has actually happened and then drawing “an imaginative picture” of these historical events’ consequences in “the private lives of people” (Hofmann 24). Collingwood (quoted in Hofmann 24) believes that historians and novelists both “construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives and analysis of character”. There have been several “different impulses and influences” that the historical novel emerged from, and “a variety of forms with diverse narrative features” were developed in accordance with the aims and interests of authors (Hofmann 27). While some writers imitated Scott and his form of the historical novel, others used elements from other forms and borrowed from other genres (Hofmann 27). Historical fiction can be divided into two main categories that have developed over time: the “realist presentation of relatively recent history” and the presentation of events from a “remote past” (Hofmann 27). Lukács coined the term “teleological concept of history” by which he refers to the fact that the past has a direct link to the present and things of

the present are thought to have developed from certain past events (quoted in Hofmann 27).

Fleishman (quoted in Hofmann 30) suggests that the historical novel opens the way for readers to not only understand the people of the past, but actually understand themselves and the time they live in better. This is a relevant point for my discussion about slavery, of course. The historical novel has to be perceived as “a web of fiction and history” (Hofmann 32). Schabert (quoted in Hofmann 32-33) offers three different ways in which story and history function together in this genre. First, the plot and the characters may be influenced by the historical material. Second, the historical material forms the world of experience in which the fictional plot is set. Third, it is also possible that the fictional plot is set in the present of the writer and stresses “the preoccupation” or in some cases even “obsession with the past” (Hofmann 33). A process of “discovery, research, coming to terms with and mediating of history” is initiated, this being called the “reflective” historical novel (Hofmann 33). Although the authors of *Kindred*, *Property* and *Wench* do not create characters that are preoccupied with researching slavery, they do attempt to make sense of the implications of the institution in the lives of both the oppressed and the oppressors by depicting dramatic situations that allow readers to reflect on these experiences.

A further feature of historical novels is that authors “let the past speak”, insisting that what is said is very distinct “from the dominant discourse” (Byerman 24). This is perhaps another reason why so many literary workers choose to reinterpret history in their writings. It is impactful to use certain strategies in order to allow the past to speak and point to things that are opposed to the hegemonic beliefs rooted in the culture. In doing so, authors assume that they offer new perspectives on topics too long seen from a single point of view, namely that of the hegemonic figure. Janik stresses the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary existence and observes that several modern historical novels “are not written from, in, or of a perpetual present; in their various ways they insist upon and demonstrate the validity, necessity, and

difficulty of acknowledging, confronting, and dealing with the past, both private and public” (188).

There is a dynamic relationship between every work of fiction and its readers, authors contributing through their writing to an increased understanding of several aspects of life. The level of historical knowledge that the readers gain after reading historical novels is influenced by the historical knowledge that they already have and by the type of questions that they ask. The active role of the reader is important therefore in order to deeply comprehend the period of time narrated in the novel (Hofmann 41). History, just like fiction, “is seen as a verbal construct” and is consequently, very probably distorted in a deliberate way (Hofmann 48). In the modern and postmodern historical novel, history is composed of patterns which appear again and again in the present in a more or less arbitrary way. A good example of this is the inclusion of “abrupt time-shifts” that disrupt the chronological order that exists in the traditional historical novel (Hofmann 50). Therefore, “past and present planes of action” are spontaneously juxtaposed without offering an “explicit connection” (Hofmann 50). This is a pattern that appears in one of the three chosen novels, namely in *Kindred*, where the relevant relationship between past and present time plays a determinant role in the representation of slavery, as illustrated in the analysis included in chapter 2.

According to Green, the historical novel received “adverse criticism” because historians have the tendency to dislike the fact that it is “taking liberties with fact” and that it is “inventing and reshaping events without due regard for historical accuracy” (1). However, literary critics have often commented on the drastic constraints that this genre places on itself by dealing with “verifiable characters and situations” (1). Moreover, those authors who wrote about their own time and about things they had personally experienced were thought to produce more useful works than those who used “imagination and fantasy” to draw a picture of the past (2).

As regards the historical novel in African American literature, the focus is “on the lives of everyday, often enslaved people” who lived lives that “had not been recorded” because they had not been considered worthy of attention by the writers of history (Sale 358). In these novels, “European American methods of keeping record” are challenged and the making of history in terms of “who and what are important” is evaluated (Sale 358). Despite the fact that the African American historical novel only “came of age after 1970”, black literature “has been concerned with history-making” from its very beginning (Sale 358). The fictional tradition that started with Frederick Douglass’s book in 1853 criticised “official versions of history” and introduced “the perspective of enslaved and free” black people (Sale 358). These novels manage to connect “historical events to imagination, and present to past” (Sale 358). Two time periods are most often represented in African American historical novels: “the antebellum south and the early twentieth century” (Sale 358). Since many parents “hid from their children” the awful conditions of their early years on the plantation it is not unexpected that one major priority for the coming generation was “to renovate in fiction this recently suppressed past” (Sale 358).

“The choice to write historical narratives [...] must be understood historically”, Byerman suggests, because the main interest is in “the philosophies of history and the ideologies of the present that inform the choices of subjects by authors” rather than in “the history portrayed within the texts” (5). However, my analysis is not based on this argument despite the fact that it probably reflects the truth as far as the theme selection for some historical novels is concerned. In the case of the three novels discussed here, it is not necessarily the ideologies of the present that influence the interests of the writers, since slavery was not as debated in 2003 or 2010 (the publication years of *Property* and *Wench*) as it was in the 1960 and 1970s. Nevertheless, novelists continue to include this central theme in their modern historical novels. The attention given to the “peculiar institution” has experienced continuity over time and from their first works, slavery was one of the central themes of historical novels authored by African Americans, in an attempt to stress the oppression of the blacks and their unspeakable suffering. Those whose stories were “invisible” are to be seen at last, even “if only in fictive representation” (Byerman 6). Thomas Holt observes:

Our task, then, is twofold: to put black people at the centre of their history and to put the black experience at the centre of American history, by reinterpreting that history in light of that experience. We can write no genuine history of the black experience without attempting to see our ancestors face to face, without straining to hear their thoughts and desires, without groping for the textures of their interior worlds. But having done that, we then must establish linkages between that interior world and the exterior developments and movements in the larger world; for only in that way can history ay any claim to centrality in the national experience (quoted in Byerman 20).

One possible answer to the significant question of why it is necessary for contemporary fiction writers to revisit history once again can be found in Holt's above-mentioned quote in which he defines the purpose of historical writing. In addition, African American writers find it essential "to question and validate history at the same time" (Byerman 22). They need "to speak for the historically silenced" and the speaking has to be done in a way that is "not distorted by the contemporary American cultural and social discourses [...]" (Byerman 23).

Although the past provides useful material for many novels, it is nevertheless a distinct reality from the present and in the case of slavery, it is obvious that modern whites are not responsible for what has happened in a very "distant time" and blacks should not expect the society to acknowledge "claims based on history", regardless of the level of pain defining their history (Byerman 33). However, the past is not to be "ignored" or "indulged" for it "contains models for healing" (Byerman 37); recovering this past only happens if people "face a complex history that is neither victimisation nor brave defiance" (Byerman 71). Themes like "the black family" (in fact one of the most debated subjects of the last decades in history), "bodies, sexual identities, and repression" have been employed in African American literature (Byerman 75). These topics stand in connection with history, and family especially becomes a means of grasping the relationship between self and the past (Byerman 125). "Self, race, and history are constructions that have a direct impact" on people and Byerman suggests that the essential point is how these have been constructed over time (127). He argues that every narrator is attempting to "work through the narratives, rituals, ideologies, and self-projections that are presented to him in order to generate a version of reality that makes sense of black experience" (127).

1. 5. 1. Fact versus fiction

The next part of the chapter explores the nature of the relationship between history and story, between fact and fiction. As already mentioned in the previous section, the merging of these two elements is a pivotal aspect that needs additional explanation because it sheds light on the purposes of writers to incorporate previous historical episodes in the fictive world.

In order to start off the discussion about the differences, on the one hand, and the correlation on the other hand, between history and literary works, it is relevant to present the observation that Wallace made about the term historical fiction. “In itself, [historical fiction] is a kind of oxymoron”, that unites “‘history’ (what is ‘true’/ ‘fact’) with ‘fiction’ (what is ‘untrue’/ ‘invented’, but may aim at a different kind of truth)” (Wallace x). It is rather discernible that there is a degree of tension between these two categories and Jordan considers this aspect when she refers to fact and fiction as “the war words in the debate about privileging history over fiction in the effort to disclose the ‘truth’ about the past” (7). It is assumed that fiction, and especially historical fiction, “is not true by definition”; it is just “a product of the imagination which may or may not” employ real events for creative or other goals (Jordan 7). As a result of this thinking, fiction cannot claim to disclose “the reality of the past”. History, in contrast, has a “special status as documented fact, largely provable, and, therefore, objective truth delivered for posterity” (Jordan 8). These premises have been challenged several times by both writers of historical fiction and contemporary historians (Jordan 8).

Doctorow states that “there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only one narrative” and that “history belongs more to the novelists [...] than it does to the social scientists” (quoted in Jordan 9). This controversy surrounding the two terms also includes the following opinion: “neither history nor fiction is itself a stable, universally agreed upon, concept” and truth and reality likewise (Turner, quoted in Jordan 9). Then, stressing the similarities that history and fiction have, despite the many differences, Jordan refers to the fact that “history shares with fiction a mode of

mediating the world for the purpose of introducing meaning, and it is the cultural authority from which they both derive that illuminates those facts so that they can be perceived” (9).

Literature stands in a complex relationship with history, and regardless of the extent to which fiction and fact blend or resist each other, it is certain that the past is a fascinating terrain for many writers who chose to interpret it and in this way draw the attention to specific circumstances of the past that are relevant in their time. William Faulkner starkly argued: “The past is never dead. It is not even past.” (quoted in Mitchell 42), and James Baldwin observed: “History... is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, and history is literally present in all that we do” (quoted in Mitchell 1). These assertions stress the central role of the past and of history as a whole in all aspects of life, so it is understandable that writers find them attractive and try to represent these essential aspects the best they can. Francis Parkman comments: “Faithfulness to the truth of history involves far more than a research, however patient and scrupulous, into special facts. [...] The narrator must seek to imbue himself with the life and spirit of the time. [...] He must himself be, as it were, a sharer or spectator of the action he describes” (quoted in Jordan 1).

Authors who comprise historical moments in their writing “do not read or misread history”, but in fact “imagine” it (Jordan 6). This comment is particularly indicative of the way in which writers fictively construct slaves in their books. “The slaves and [...] the historicocultural matrix in which they reside [...] are based wholly on [...] observations and perceptions of the past [...] colored by the imagination of the author” (Jordan 7). History as both text and context is a relevant element that is noticeable in the historical novels that paint a vivid portrait of the experiences of African Americans and that imagine slavery “as a site of memory” (Mitchell 6). Barbara Christian stresses the need to recuperate history and claims that “[r]e-memory is a critical determinant in how we value the past, what we remember, what we select to emphasise, what we forget...” (quoted in Mitchell 10). Williams, quoted in Widdowson (494), categorically

stresses the significance of stories and works of fiction in the process of making sense of history and addressing relevant issues that have oftentimes been left out by the dominant voices of the past: “There is a sense ... in which history which is both recorded and unrecorded can only find its way through to personal substance if it then becomes a novel, becomes a story”.

Tompkins and Easthope refer to literature and history in terms that are particularly relevant for this discussion about the positions that fact and fiction occupy, and their reflections are worth including here: “Literature is by definition a form of discourse that has no designs on the world. It does not attempt to change things, but merely to represent them, and it does so in a specifically literary language whose claim to value lies in its uniqueness” (quoted in Easthope 46). Historical narratives often depict the challenges and difficulties of living in a society that was greatly divided; it is arguable whether literature indeed only represents things and does not attempt to change them, as Tompkins’s above-mentioned statement suggests. Drawing the attention to controversial issues such as freedom, identity, and human rights, to name but a few, (in the case of narratives about slavery, for example) is in itself a strategic movement that leads to changes of opinion in the readers’ minds. Things and mentalities of the past can obviously not be changed any more, but our perception of history can undoubtedly undergo change through analytical and well-reflected works of fiction.

The second argument that sheds light on this is: “History is real but only accessible to us discursively, in the form of historical narratives, as a construction of the historical” (Easthope 157). This construction generates the existence of “two positions available for the subject” (Easthope 157); Althusser refers to the work of Lacan and consequently names the two meanings for the term “subject”. The first is “a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author and responsible for its actions” and the second “a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his [sic] submission” (in Easthope 157). These two contrastive definitions of the subject are applicable to slavery and stress once again the well-known hierarchical gap that defined a significant part of the past.

To sum up, history and story co-occur in literary works dealing with the past, and an interesting point that is relevant for the discussion of the reasons that writers have to reinterpret slavery in modern novels is the inescapability of the past (Lowenthal, epigraph). We “lack any identity” without the past and, without it, “the present would make no sense” (Lowenthal, epigraph). Therefore, the necessity to “reshape the past” in order to clarify present time positions arises and this is done through memory and historical events of former times since both “shed light on the past” (Lowenthal, epigraph). Lowenthal refers to the past as “a foreign country”, a time “distinct from the present” but also “increasingly manipulated by present-day aims” (epigraph), and argues that writers often create books in an attempt “to profit from the past and to avoid its trammels” (xx). One further purpose of writing about the past is illustrated by Croce who states that “the writing of history liberates us from history [...] (quoted in Lowenthal 233). If writing is a form of removing hurtful things that have long tormented the lives of people, in an attempt to ease the haunting memories of the past, then the process is indeed very complex and will continue to bring to light new perspectives. Lowenthal cleverly comments on this by stating that “history is never wholly sealed off; however keen our present retrospective insights, new consequences of past events will ever continue to emerge” (234).

1.6. Historiographic metafiction

The term was introduced by Linda Hutcheon (1988; 1989) as “an umbrella category for postmodernist forms of art and literature that combine documentary historical actuality with formalist self-reflexivity and parody” (Nünning 216). Historiographic metafiction explores both “the status and function of narrative as an ideological construct shaping history and forging identity rather than merely representing the past” (Nünning 216). There is a connection between historiographic metafiction and the historical novel; the emergence of the former “coincides with the rise of the historical novel as a literary genre” (Nünning 216). Historiographic metafiction draws the attention of readers to the fact that history, despite existing as a “continuous collective process”, can only be accessed as a narrative “produced by human beings who remember, interpret, and represent

events from a particular point of view” (Nünning 216). What this concept deals with is “not so much historical events and facts”, but the “reconstruction of the past from the point of view of the present” (Nünning 216). One of the most specific characteristics of historiographic metafiction is that it “plays with the ambiguous status of historical characters and historical fact within the framework of a fictional story” (Hofmann 31).

One of the themes of novels of postmodern historiographic metafiction is “the truth and lies of the historical record” (Hutcheon, quoted in Hofmann 54), a topic notably crucial for my discussion of the illustrations of slavery in modern novels. Secondly, again very central to the argument of this thesis is the fact that another interest of these works is “the type of history that has little or no voice in historical record” (Hofmann 58). Writers often choose neglected historical subjects in order to reverse things a bit. Then, many novelists wish “to revise [a] historical record” that has long marginalised several categories of people by completing the record and adding that which was excluded (Hofmann 58). This fits in with Widdowson’s (493) discussion of the feminist coinage, ‘herstory’ replacing ‘history’ (or ‘his-story’) “in order to challenge a situation where women were ‘hidden from history’ [...]”. In his opinion, contemporary novelists employ fiction “to excavate the past for a ‘hidden history’, to voice or revoice those previously rendered voiceless by their oppressors, to articulate [...] ‘a counter-culture of the imagination’ in order to ‘redefine history’ or defeat ‘historylessness’ [...]” (493).

Historiographic metafiction also takes a stand as regards the perspectives on literature, history and how they link. Hutcheon comments that “the postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication; historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction” (4).

Another argument is that

Historiographic metafiction [...] employ parody not only to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the "history of forgetting" (Thiher 202), but also, at the same time, to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality (Hutcheon 11-12).

These views indicate that there is a level of interdependency and correlation between fiction and history, both reshaping the past "in the light of present issues", and this "interpretive process" is exactly what historiographic metafiction signals (Hutcheon 22). With history and literature, "[...] there is no question of a hierarchy, implied or otherwise. They are both part of the signifying systems of our culture. They both make and make sense of our world [...]" (Hutcheon 28).

Widdowson provides a thorough analysis of the characteristics of the sub-genre of contemporary historical writing, namely 're-visionary fiction', which he defines as "novels which 'write back to' – indeed, 'rewrite' – canonic texts from the past, and hence call to account formative narratives that have arguably been central to the construction of 'our' consciousness" (491). He argues that rather than merely "destroying myths and illusions about the past, novelists are using fiction as history to explore how the scars of the past persist into the present, how the past's presence in the present determines the nature of that present" (492). He suggests that we must ask ourselves whether these writers are actually making "displaced and oblique comment on their own present by ironically counterpointing it with the past" and if this is the case, "we might regard the tendency to write fiction-as-history as just one more aspect of postmodernism" (492).

The central views included in this last section of chapter 1 can be summed up as follows: recent works of fiction dealing with significant historical events succeed in shaping history and forging identity, not only focusing on mere representations of the past. We can access history by means of narratives in which people remember, interpret and represent the past from a certain

perspective. The past is reconstructed from the present's viewpoint through the works of several authors who insist on the necessity and difficulty of both confronting and dealing with the past. In conclusion, what this chapter purposed to bring into focus is a presentation of the former perspectives on slavery, both as an institution and as an important theme in literature, together with more recent debates on the significance of African American literature. Another central aspect was the insight into the characteristics of slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, historical novels and historiographic metafiction as genres and subgenres that have visible influences on the modern writings of Butler, Martin and Perkins-Valdez. In terms of the connection that is established by authors between earlier events and present-day attitudes, it seems that the wounds of the past persist into the present; the presence of the past in the present influences the nature of the present itself. This means that as far as slavery in the three chosen novels is concerned, what is achieved is the "penetration" of a remote past which continues to have an impact on the present by remembering, challenging dominant discourses and reinterpreting essential beliefs that emphasise the urgency of encountering history.

2. Analysis

2.1. Brief summary of the novels

The three novels discussed in this chapter have been chosen according to several criteria. First, according to subject: slavery and its implications. Second, according to publication year, since I wanted to deal with modern novels in order to investigate the way slavery is depicted in recent works of fiction and to explore the aspects connected with the writers' interest in this particular historical phase. Third, according to the similarities which unify the books in terms of the central themes and their general focus, so that a feasible comparison can be made. Fourth, according to the variety of narrative perspectives and strategies employed in presenting complex pictures of life in the peculiar institution, so that the range of attitudes and story characteristics are as diverse as possible. *Kindred*, *Property*, and *Wench* are modern fictional writings that deal with resembling themes; the following six appear in different proportions, but are pivotal for the novels' standpoints: enslaved women as protagonists, master-slave relationships, mixed children's situation, physical violence, slave rebellions and religion. They are tools employed for the depictions of slavery that appear in all three novels, but that differ in their level of complexity.

Kindred presents the story of Dana, a black woman married to a white man and living in the 1970s, who is drawn back to a nineteenth century slave plantation by her ancestor Rufus whenever his life is in mortal danger. She becomes a slave and faces many terrific situations before returning to the present without her left arm. *Property* deals with slavery on a Louisiana sugar plantation where white Manon lives an unhappy life which only gets worse after Sarah, the slave girl that she was given as a wedding present, gives birth to Walter, the master's son. Told from the mistress's perspective, the novel is very insightful into the nature of slave-master relationships. *Wench* tells the story of four slave women who get to know each other at the Tawawa resort in Ohio, a real historic establishment in the 1850s. Wealthy plantation owners used to bring their enslaved black mistresses in the summers for a so called "holiday", continuing their extramarital affairs far from plantation life and their spouses. The central

character is Lizzie, the mother of two, who believes she is in love with her master Drayle. The time spent with the other slave mistresses: Mawu, Sweet, and Reenie change her in the end; her emotions are stirred up by her friends' escape attempts and she has to decide for herself if she will follow or continue her life as a slave.

2.2. The choice to write about the past

Kindred, *Property*, and *Wench* are set in nineteenth century America, and with some exceptions, most of the action takes place on slave plantations.⁴ Whenever novelists write about former historical moments, they have certain reasons to do so; in the case of slavery, an extremely disturbing phase in American history, the choice to explore, recreate, and connect with the past has to be given special attention. Revisiting slavery by writing modern novels signals, among many other things, that African American history has been marginalised and the books discussed here specifically emphasise the role that black women had in that history by putting female characters at the centre of action. This aspect will be referred to in greater detail in the next section.

Chapter 1 gave an extensive account, among other things, of the characteristics of the slave narrative and the historical novel and the features listed there are relevant when discussing the novels and the way they make sense of the past. Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez refer back to previous forms of writing and include elements from slave narratives and historical novels in their portrayal of slavery. Wood argues that Butler “adapts what has been regarded as the quintessential African American literary mode of the slave narrative” and sees *Kindred* as a hybrid text: “part historical novel, part science fiction/fantasy and part slave narrative” (83). What lies at the novel’s crux is the slave narrative, and this is visible since “the text clearly deploys a modified structure of [it] ...” by

⁴ *Wench* is situated in Ohio, which used to be a free territory before the American Civil War, and the state where Tawawa House, a “vacation” destination for masters and their enslaved mistresses, was built. The major episodes of the novel take place in the idyllic resort. However, the book also contains several moments of retrospective narration in which the lives of the four enslaved women on the plantation are described and invaluable information about the peculiarity of the institution is given. *Kindred* provides two narrative strands – in nineteenth century Maryland and twentieth century California – but the predominant part deals with the slaves’ lives on the plantation despite the main character’s repeated returns to the present.

imagining the 'journey' of Dana Franklin, who is also the narrator, from slavery to liberty (Wood 85). The merit of Butler is that she "develops and extends the traditional slave narrative", interrogating how this is used in order to explore the realities of slavery and of contemporary American society at the same time. Additionally, her fiction attempts to reveal how effective the slave narrative is in "challenging stereotypical representations of white and black femininity" (Wood 83). While *Kindred* cannot be seen as "an authentic account of antebellum slavery", it is nevertheless "a product of, and reflection on, the time in which it was written as the texts from which it draws" (Wood 86). Ryan reads *Kindred* as a novel that "self-consciously signifies upon existing literary discourses about slavery—from the fugitive slave narratives to *Roots*". He argues that Butler's novel "question[s] previous discourses about slavery while also creating a realistic and feasible alternative to them" (130).

A common trace of the majority of novels about the peculiar institution that have been published since the 1970s is the combination of "conventional realism with postmodernist intertextuality". Therefore, novelists "engage with slavery both as contested historical reality and as a tradition of conflicting cultural representations" (Ryan 149). This is an extremely significant aspect to bear in mind since readers have to be able to identify the essential differences between a novel's "arguments about the actualities of slavery and its responses to established textual conventions for representing slavery" (Ryan 149). *Property* is a "traditionally realistic historical novel", Ryan argues, "lacking the postmodern discursive knowingness and self-consciousness [...] of *Kindred* [...]". The reality of the past is the novel's main focus and it engages in providing a "counter-revisionist historical analysis of the nature of relationship between black and white women on antebellum American plantations" (151). What makes Martin's book significant is not only the fact that it is the first novel "of substance" about the slavery institution authored by a white writer in more than three decades, but also the fact that the full narrative is told from the perspective of the plantation mistress, Manon Gaudet, a viewpoint inexistent in previous modern novels of American slavery (Ryan 150).

Perkins-Valdez's novel was published in 2010 and except for some book reviews, not much has been written about it. *Wench* can be seen as a historical novel; it also resembles the slave narrative to the extent that it follows the life stories of four slave women who consider and then attempt to escape from bondage to freedom. Despite the fact that all four reflect to some extent on fleeing, only one woman manages to successfully follow the itinerary and make her way to permanent freedom. The novel not only deals with the emotional implications that the brutal slave system has on the lives of the female characters, but also provides historical information about Ohio and about the free black people's way of life. Descriptions of Dayton and details about the abolitionist movement are also included in the novel's report of historical facts; this fosters readers' awareness of relevant past events⁵.

2.3. The female slave as protagonist

It was not typical of novels about slavery to situate enslaved black women at their centre, neither to handle with care and introspection the way the peculiar institution has wounded their being and challenged their existence. This is a feature that characterises more recent writings, and it is meaningful to give a brief account of the evolution of this thematic change. African American studies in the 1980s experienced an important development, namely the rise of African American feminist historiography, which was grounded in the academy, by emphasising the little attention given to the roles that black women played in slave families in works written by certain scholars (Collins 362). Moody argues that starting with the earliest works created by blacks, the frequent themes of ex-slave writings centred around the black female body since African women "had entered the New World as putatively mindless physical labourers" (121). Enslaved women had to carry out both physical labour on the plantation and reproductive labour to increase the slaveholders' stock. In their double role as physical workers and mothers, the body of slave women was "simultaneously

⁵ <http://www.examiner.com/books-in-dayton/review-wench-by-dolen-perkins-valdez-review>

masculinised and feminised by the dominant culture” (Bennett and Dickerson, quoted in Moody 122). An aspect related to the recurring theme of the black women’s body was the sexual violation of the enslaved, a focus highlighted by all three novels discussed here (Moody 122).

Margaret Walker in *Jubilee* (1966) was one of the first novelists who revived the black woman’s history by putting the enslaved black woman at the centre. The main concern was shedding light on the “material and social situations of captivity” in the black woman’s existence and not exploring her inner world and soul (Mitchell 10). Butler, Martin and Perkins-Valdez are moving from this initial stage to a more in depth portrayal of the female slave’s life. This is indeed a development that requires special attention and that is discussed in greater detail in the section that addresses each slave character separately. If we go even more back in time, Harriet A. Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is considered the antecedent text for several narratives following in the literary tradition of black women writers. This work began the discussion of the condition of the enslaved women by its detailed examination of topics like “female sexuality, motherhood, individualism and community” (Mitchell 22). The focus of historians has been mainly on the institution of slavery rather than on the slaves’ culture and on enslaved black males rather than on enslaved black women, so critical studies have recently engaged with these “neglected” aspects of slavery (Mitchell 23).

Given the above-mentioned trends in the earlier writing tradition, it is not surprising that many of the recent novels about slavery find room for the marginalised and primarily focus on women’s experiences that will ideally cause revelations about the hidden ugliness of the peculiar institution. Bettanin writes that neo-slave narratives written by women “unite the effort to recover African American lost history with the need to recover the social and historical role of women” and argues that African American women are victims of “a double marginalization in history” (93). Slave narratives written by women offered a broad slave perspective on the antebellum society by introducing gender issues and questions of sexuality, aspects that did not appear in men-authored narratives. Influenced by the anterior narratives, some women-authored neo-

slave narratives have referred to these themes and resituated them in a postmodern context (Bettanin 93).

The three novels differ considerably in their representation of female characters and the effect that their descriptions create. Even if there are certain similarities between the portrayal of the enslaved women and their suffering throughout their bondage in the works analysed, there are distinctive aspects that deserve careful examination. These are connected to the question of how specific strategies are utilised in order to impact the reader by writing about slavery in modern works. First, *Kindred* presents a protagonist that travels through time, an African American woman who is free in the twentieth century, but who becomes a slave once she is transported to the Maryland plantation. Additionally, a significant part of the novel deals with Alice's situation in bondage, she and Dana being the main female characters of the book. *Property* has an unsympathetic narrator⁶, namely Manon, the plantation mistress who is, in fact, the main character. However, her fixation on Sarah, the slave girl who gives birth to the master's first born, shows the importance that the slave figure has in the narration. It is therefore important to consider Sarah the second main character in the novel and to carefully investigate the effect that Martin produces through this unconventional character. Third, *Wench* places four black women at the centre of the course of events, but Lizzie is in fact the main character and the narrator of the story. Nevertheless, the lives of Mawu, Reenie, and Sweet contribute to communicating an essential message about the reminiscences of the cruel slavery era.

⁶ <http://www.bookgroup.info/041205/review.php?id=53>

2.3.1. *Kindred*

2.3.1.1. Dana and Alice: “sorrows and trials” protagonists

The expression “sorrows and trials” is employed by R. J. Ellis (84) in the context of the conventions of the “sorrows and trials” subgenre in Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*. The same phrase is used here in connection with Butler’s characters in order to emphasise the cruelty that the two slaves endure in the peculiar institution. It is notable that while Dana and Alice are both very vulnerable to the repeated sexual assaults and bloody acts of violence, they still manage to survive despite going through several dehumanising situations. Dana is both the narrator and the protagonist of *Kindred*, Butler conveying different aspects about the realities of slavery through her double position: free African American woman in the twentieth century and enslaved “negro” in the nineteenth century Maryland. Nevertheless, Alice is a very important character and her life generates several reactions, an aspect that Butler strategically employed in order to draw the readers’ attention and awake their sympathy. The nature of the relationship that Dana and Alice have with each other is significant for the points that the author is making about the roles of women in slavery. Therefore, rather than presenting the characters separately, my focus is on the impact that they create both individually, but also through their interactions.

What makes *Kindred* innovative among other novels about slavery published at that time is not only the fantastic element of time travel by which a character is sent back to the past to discover and suffer from the cruelties of slavery, but rather the fact that this experience is perceived through the lenses of a woman rather than of a male protagonist. Comparisons with other works of fiction such as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and *Roots* have been made in the sense of all these novels being first-person narratives that “explore the psychological traumas of enslaved people who ultimately rebel violently against their oppressors” (Ryan 130). Despite the fact that the perspective is different, – *Kindred* has a heroine and *Roots* a male protagonist – both novels are concerned with “ancestry and genealogy” (Ryan 131).

Butler opted for a narrative situation that depicts the story of a modern African American woman who is sent back in time to a slave plantation, where she has two main “missions”. She does not only have to keep her ancestor Rufus alive throughout the years as he gets involved in several self-destructive activities, but Dana also needs to contribute to making the union between Rufus and Alice possible, because otherwise her grandmother Hagar will not be born. This means that she has to fight for her own survival as well; should something go wrong, Dana misses her chance to come into existence. The heroine is directly exposed to the realities of slavery by becoming a participant in the slaves system, but also by attempting to fulfil her task, namely to get the slave girl Alice into Rufus’s bed. Dana experiences on her own body - when she is almost raped - how aberrantly slave women were treated; besides, she comes to understand the level of sexual exploitation that several women endured, seeing with her own eyes what Alice is going through. Therefore, Dana’s time on the plantation influences Alice’s life substantially. Many of Dana’s actions affect Alice in a very painful way, but that is the only way to go in order to perpetuate the generations through the children that Alice and Rufus will have. It is only by convincing Alice to have sex with white Rufus that Dana’s ancestors will be born, and despite the fact that Dana knows that Alice will be sexually abused in the process, she is still forced to persuade her: “But she wouldn’t think much of me for helping her this way. I didn’t think much of myself” (Butler 164). Mickle suggests that Octavia Butler “explores the maintenance of the slave plantation” and by having Dana encounter captivity, the author illuminates the “ethical issue of propagation, biological order, and cultural and racial interbreeding associated with slavery” (61).

There are several main aspects that need to be considered in order to clarify the central message that Butler is conveying by her focus on female protagonists and their problematic relationship with the institution of slavery in *Kindred*: first, the cruelty that Dana and Alice, as well as other women on the plantation endure, in a way that differs from the pain experiences of enslaved men. Butler stresses the tormented life that women especially had during that time not only because it is a theme that has been marginalised in previous novels about slavery, but possibly because it sheds light on the psychological

problems that were more complex in the case of women, who were abused both sexually and emotionally. Mitchell argues that Butler focuses on “the most vulnerable: black women in bondage” as she explores the concept of freedom (46). The narrator tells the stories of other slave women who went through unimaginable despair, like for example a woman who died in childbirth because her master “strung her up by her wrists and beat her until the baby came out of her – dropped onto the ground”. Dana comes to the conclusion that Weylin, despite being a mean slave-owner, would probably not have done such a thing to a pregnant slave because this would have meant “dead mother, dead baby - dead loss”. Additionally, there used to be a woman on his plantation whose former master had cut three fingers from her right hand when she was caught writing and who had a baby nearly every year. She was considered a “good breeder” and Weylin never whipped her, but “he was selling off her children one by one” (Butler 191).

Butler creates a universe through which she signals that slavery involved much more than the persons who did not experience it themselves will ever know. She “draw[s] from the past and then add[s] the interior lives to [her] characters”, and these characters are “imbued with a range of human emotions – both positive and troubling – in response to the ‘monstrous’ laws that maintained slavery” (Pagnattaro 115-116)⁷. Dana and Alice are beaten, humiliated by the men who try to rape them, chased by dogs and brought back to the plantation more dead than alive, whipped several times and above all, Alice is repeatedly sexually exploited by Rufus, a man whom she despises: “I’m going to him. He knew I would sooner or later. But he don’t know how I wish I had the nerve to just kill him!” Dana adds this to Alice’s comment: “She went to him. She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn’t kill, but she seemed to die a little” (Butler 168). The level of violence against slaves, both men and women, is described in greater detail in the chapter about abuse and physical pain, but for the sake of this section the following information is of special interest. The author purposefully concentrates on presenting the differences between how a woman, in opposition to a man, goes through nineteenth century plantation life because it is obvious that it is women who are

⁷ Pagnattaro writes about *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved*, but her argument is applicable to *Kindred* as well

much more ill-treated. Readers gain invaluable insights into the accumulation of pain in the soul of women, and judging by the two characters'⁸ visit to the past, it is very clear that Dana endures considerably more grief than Kevin during their time in Maryland. Being a white man, Kevin is spared the trouble of becoming a slave like his black wife Dana.

Another important element that is connected to the cruel experience of slavery and its impact on women's life is the close relation that exists between the life of enslaved women and their children. This is an aspect that is to be dealt with in greater detail in one of the next chapters, but it is meaningful to mention here that Alice kills herself because she refuses to see her children continuing to be slaves. She had probably not put an end to her life had it not been for the impossible situation of her children, which demonstrates how inextricably intertwined the conditions of the institution and the destiny of women slaves are. Forced to have sexual encounters with her master, Alice gets pregnant and having no rights at all, her children ultimately inherit her precarious condition of bondage, which affects her so much that she does not count her life worth living anymore. Butler presents this chain of assaults against women that includes severe sexual abuse and suggests that not only was there no respect for the rights of human beings to freedom and happiness, but there were further consequences to be dealt with, namely children resulting from the illegitimate sexual affairs.

The second aspect that is relevant for the discussion of the message conveyed by Butler through her female characters is the double position of Dana: a writer in the twentieth century and a slave on the Weylin plantation. The author's choice to select time travel as a mechanism to explore slavery and its influence on the characters' present is undoubtedly strategic, since readers discover and learn together with Dana about the misfortune of slaves on the plantation. In a sense, *Kindred* is a work of fiction that has a didactic value that is achieved by placing at the centre of the novel a person from modern society in the position of an explorer of the past. The protagonist has read things about slavery, but she has to see with her own eyes how much

⁸ Kevin joins his wife and time-travels as well, but not every time Dana is taken to the past

worse things can be in reality: “Oh, they won’t kill me. Not unless I’m silly enough to resist the other things they’d rather do – like raping me, throwing me into jail as a runaway, and then selling me to the highest bidder when they see that my owner isn’t coming to claim me [...] I almost wish I hadn’t read about it” (Butler 48). On another occasion the narrator explains: “Then I looked away, remembering that I was supposed to be a slave. Slaves lowered their eyes respectfully. To stare back was insolent. Or at least, that was what my books said” (Butler 66). The writer takes her readers on a journey back in history and introduces them not only to the facts, but also to the level of feelings so that they can understand what it meant to live as a slave. Butler states in an interview with Mike McGonigal that she “wanted to do a novel about feelings as much as about history [...] a lot of young people did not really understand on the level of feelings — they could quote facts for you — but they didn’t really understand what it might have been like to live then”.

Putting the protagonist of the novel in the position of an informer who contributes to the readers’ better understanding of the terrifying life on southern antebellum slave plantations does not only signal a degree of insufficient knowledge of certain aspects of slavery, but it stresses other angles as well. Foster Smith suggests that Butler emphasises the “psychological danger” that Dana faces in order to bring into light “a new understanding of heroism and perfidy, of human potential and human limitation” (246). Identity is a crucial aspect that the writer touches upon by writing a story about a modern woman coping with slavery. Williams argues that through this manner of invoking the slave past, “Butler interrogates its role in the construction of the female self” (75). Since Dana is confronting “the lingering immediacy of the historical past”, her travels “back to the era of slavery” reveal the compelling need “to question our modes of access to the past of slavery” (164). Ryan mentions that Butler “depicts the traumatic shocks of slavery very vividly [...] and emphasises the psychic disorientation of [Dana’s] physical return to the era of slavery” (145). Dana’s travels to antebellum Maryland also signify the extent to which “the past shaped and continues to shape the present” (Crossley, quoted in Mitchell 43), with Butler not only presenting the world of the slaves, but showing through the heroine the connections that it continues to have with the present. The

protagonist's movement between the modern world and the antebellum South reinforces Rushdy's (*Neo-slave Narratives* 22) argument according to which neo-slave narratives have an interest in "the relationship between the history of slavery and the social significance of contemporary racial identity" (see page 17).

The third relevant feature in the discussion about the message transmitted by Butler through her female characters is the relationship between Dana and Alice, which illuminates to some extent some possible positions of women in slavery. The novel depicts the development of the relationship that the two women have with each other and readers witness its gradual growth over time. Since Dana travels back and forth through time, she first encounters Alice when she is just a child, and her following visits to the past bring further closer interactions with the slave woman. Dana learns more about Alice's situation from Rufus; the man almost rapes her to take revenge because Alice dared to "choose her own husband", namely a black man, Isaac (Butler 123). The narrator comments on the awkwardness of the connection between Rufus and Alice: "I was beginning to realize that he loved the woman – to her misfortune. There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (124). His "love" for Alice does not stop him from behaving like a brute and using the woman for his own pleasures. Although Dana takes care of Alice when she is "bloody, filthy, and barely alive" (146), Alice accuses her for not letting her die and develops feelings of hatred towards Dana. However, she still nurses Dana when she is beaten and severely wounded after trying to run away.

Dana and Alice share "a common bond of sisterhood" (Mitchell 51) and being blood relatives, they look strikingly similar, Rufus considering the two to be one woman (Butler 228). Schiff states that Alice and Dana "operate as doubles" who surpass "temporal limits and break down ego boundaries" and argues that "by giving Dana/Alice two homes, and therefore none, Butler literally personifies the uncanny and traumatic experience of not being able to feel at home in one's own body" (110). Dana articulates this feeling after her first trip back in time: "Maybe I'm just like a victim of robbery or rape or

something – a victim who survives, but who doesn't feel safe anymore" (Butler 17). The doubling also signifies the fact that "each woman feels the other's choice as a critique of her own; each sees, in the distorting mirror of the other, her own potential fate" (Kubitschek, quoted in Mitchell 46). Hampton points out that Butler writes Dana and Alice as "agents" willing to sacrifice their lives in order to "maintain control of the agency and identities that make up their bodies" (*Kindred: History, Revision and (Re)memory of Bodies* 109).

The relationship that Butler imagined between her two main female characters reveals two main positions of slave women: mutual helpers on one side and enemies on the other. Their shared experiences of pain and humiliation bring Dana and Alice closer to each other. However, this solidarity turns at times into a strong competition because the woman who falls short of the master's favour endures more hardship, so there is a tendency to fight for keeping one's status. The ongoing rivalry between women on the plantation is stressed not only through Dana and Alice's interactions, but also through the scene when a slave calls Dana a "whore" (238) because she sees her as the master's prostitute, who nevertheless tries to seduce other men as well. Moreover, disunity and quarrel become visible again when Liza tells Weylin about Dana's escape, simply to destroy her for having previously nursed and saved Alice's life, whom she strongly despises (178). All these conflicts accentuate the emotionally unbalanced type of relationship between some of the slave women, which is undoubtedly one of the consequences of the peculiar way of life in slavery.

A final observation that is relevant for this section dealing with the several meanings conveyed by Butler through her female protagonists and their experiences in slavery is connected with the effects created by sending a free black woman to one of the most painful periods in American history. Dana's failure to behave like a disciplined slave and the fact that she preserves many of her modern personality features make her a strange person for the slaves and an outsider from that time's society. Moreover, her speech and education are out of place for a black woman in nineteenth century society. Paulin (quoted in Troy 165) argues that "Dana's articulateness threatens black and white women

and black and white men, alike". In other words, the discrepancy between the two worlds and the difficulty to adapt to a new society are brought to the foreground by Dana's time in the past, but the fact that she manages to combine both forms of behaviour – that of an emancipated woman and of an insignificant slave – points to the relatedness between former times and contemporary societies. Not only are there huge differences that separate the past from the present, but the two worlds also impact each other significantly. Although many of her rights are deleted, she experiences the freedom to read and have access to the family's library, this showing that Dana is a privileged slave. The library turns for Dana into a private space at times: "[I] went away to the library where I could be alone, where I would write. Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn't say them, couldn't sort out my feelings about them, couldn't keep them bottled up inside me" (252). She needs to escape from time to time from the cruel reality of slavery and she tries to avoid the experience of a possible identity crisis caused by too many emotions in a short time. Kindred demonstrates the "importance and fragility of being a subject rather than an object, the consequences of slavery that make this subjectivity so fragile, and the importance of the body as a site where slavery acts but also as a place of connection to others" (Vint n.p.).

To sum up, Butler touches on several relevant issues by means of her lively depictions of women in bondage. *Kindred's* clear focus on Dana's time travelling suggests that the past is indeed very present and shows how pivotal the understanding of one's personal history is in order to lead a normal life and have a solid sense of identity. The emphasis put on cruelty and humiliation demonstrates that "the patriarchal institution of slavery sought to eradicate all traces of the enslaved woman's self" so that, without acknowledging her own selfhood, the slave could not value her personhood either, which consequently means that it is less probable that she rebels against her enslavers (Mitchell 26). This novel, like other female narratives, visibly presents "the trait of vulnerability and the act of violence" as essential elements of this type of writing (Mitchell 30). Lastly, the problematic relationship between the enslaved demonstrates just how much bitterness these women can accumulate in a system that gives rise to constant competitions and struggles over favouritism.

Nevertheless, women solidarity also exists, highlighting the importance of the community in the era of slavery.

2.3.2. *Property*

2.3.2.1. Sarah: an unconventional slave character

Valerie Martin – as a white novelist – brings back to the literary tradition that which has been missing for over three decades, namely a substantial engagement with the subject of slavery from the viewpoint of white writers. Her novel is concerned with “the notion of constructive interracial debate about slavery” and “initiates a new interracial conversation between black and white writers on the subject of slavery for the twenty-first century” (Ryan 150). *Property* focuses on the analysis of the nature of relationships between white and black women in the era of slavery from “a counter-revisionist historical perspective” which questions, but also confirms several “traditional literary stereotypes about the plantation mistress”. Interestingly, these stereotypes are revealed by narrating the story from the perspective of the slaveholding white woman (Ryan 152). Despite the fact that the plantation mistress – Manon Gaudet – is the protagonist and the narrator of the novel, the story being told from her very manipulative point of view, this section deals primarily with the analysis of Sarah, Manon’s property and obsession. Her fixation with the slave woman reveals extremely interesting attitudes about the treatment of the enslaved and their impossible life on the plantation.

One of the main themes of *Property* is the abuse of power and the first pages of the novel show the degree of perverted behaviour and the absolutely dysfunctional relationship between master and slaves. The “homosexual scene” (Interview 15) when Mr. Gaudet is forcing the young black boys on his plantation to play a dirty game, then beating the loser for his pleasure (Martin 3-4) is a solid proof of the inclinations that the slaveholder has. This motif can also be seen in Manon’s interactions with Sarah, one of the most shocking instances being the nursing scene (Martin 81-82) that will be interpreted in greater detail in the subchapter about the relationship between mistress and slave. For the sake of this section dealing with the strategies employed by Martin in portraying

Sarah, an unusual slave woman, it is sufficient to mention that Manon abuses the power that she has over her property, bringing both character and reader into a state of disgust and repulsion.

Unlike *Kindred's* depiction of the enormous cruelty that Alice and Dana face on the plantation, Martin portrays her slave character Sarah in a slightly different way. She is undoubtedly also abused; not so much physically, by repeated beatings and whippings, but more in a psychological and sexual way, through severe transgressions of the normal, accepted behaviour between two women. Manon has developed a serious obsession with her servant Sarah, whom she received as a wedding gift from her aunt, but whom she treats very poorly once the enslaved woman gives birth to Mr. Gaudet's heir, Walter. Harrison refers to "[the] contest of wills between [the] two women" (10), who find themselves in a triangular relationship with the slaveholder Gaudet, a fact of life that sheds light on the nature of the marital relations in the context of antebellum slavery.

Love triangles that include the slave master, his wife and an enslaved woman are used in novels about slavery to accentuate the problems resulting from the institution in the Old South. The era of slavery was a time that corrupted and disturbed society and people to the extent that one of the most visible effects of that abnormal world was the unhealthy family life of both whites and blacks. Beautiful Sarah is probably the main reason why Manon's marriage fails, since her appearance is "pleasing, tall, slender, light-skinned, neatly dressed, excellent posture" (Martin 22). Besides, Sarah is not stupid: "On those occasions when she bothers to speak," Manon reports, Sarah "makes sense" (Martin 7). Harrison suggests that the real reason why Manon's aunt "gave [Sarah] away was to preserve the harmony of her own home, which could not bear the inclusion of a gifted, proud black woman unwilling to submit to the confines of her station and [who seems to be] quite willing to use sex as a means to [obtain] power" (12). Under these circumstances, it is quite possible that Sarah's presence, rather than the failings of Mr. Gaudet, lead to the big crisis in Manon's marriage. Martin suggests that although women slaves were vulnerable and unprotected, their beauty was a weapon that some could have made use of to obtain power. This does not mean that Sarah purposefully seduced her master, a possibility which is excluded by the text: "Sarah had

resisted him all those weeks when [Manon] wasn't there, and now she had tried to outmaneuver him" (Martin 25), but her looks do awake her master's interest, who starts a sexual affair with her, which makes her in a way Manon's superior. However, the role of lover and mother of Gaudet's first born means very little in the context of slavery.

Sarah is portrayed very interestingly, being presented to the reader only through Manon's eyes. This certainly influences readers' perception of the slave since it is hard to know what she really is like, the narration being rather manipulative. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator tells the story of Sarah's first encounter with pain; her suffering was caused by the loss of her first baby and the man whom she wanted to marry. Bam was beaten "near to death" and Sarah's baby boy was taken from her after birth and sent out to Gaudet's brother plantation with the purpose of selling him "when he was old enough to work". Sarah "wept, pleaded, then grew *silent and secretive*" (Martin 26, emphasis added). This event was a turning-point in the woman's life since it changed her substantially and made her more mature after seeing with her own eyes the schemes and evils of the society she was living in.

Martin creates the image of a slave woman who is more than a worker or a breeder, and although she attends to all the needs that Manon has, her role in the house of her masters is quite complex. Sarah seems to know more than she is actually showing, and Manon's taking into consideration her gestures, her way of looking at things and interacting with her husband suggests that the enslaved woman is actually part of the family: "I looked at him for a few moments blankly, without comment, as if he was speaking a foreign language. This unnerves him. It's a trick I learned from Sarah" (Martin 8). This does not mean that Mrs. Gaudet approves of Sarah being personal with her husband or likes the fact that she learns things from the captive woman, but what *Property* transmits through the slave character is a message about the determination and superiority of the oppressed. King mentions that "Sarah's presence operates as a highly destabilizing force in Manon's life" (220) and Oates (quoted in King 220) explains "Manon is bitterly jealous of Sarah, and yet Manon admires Sarah; Manon also hates Sarah, thinking she would sell her if she could – but when Manon has the opportunity to sell Sarah for a very good price, after

Gaudet's death, she refuses (134)". All this emphasises the surprising effect that the 'sophistication' of a woman in bondage can have on her mistress, to the degree that the oppressor and one in power is intimidated by the powerless one.

Sarah is described as being light-skinned, so she is "a biracial character" (Interview 15), which is a proof of the fact that as a mixed woman, she must come from the same 'tradition' of a white slaveholder raping or forcing a black woman to sleep with him. Martin's point is that this phenomenon was widespread, and is not limited to a single household. Interestingly, since *Property* is the product of a white woman writer, who imagines her character from a totally different perspective, (not that of an African American novelist writing about the sorrows of her ancestors like Butler in *Kindred*, for example) a question that becomes relevant is to what extent Sarah's representation is influenced by the fact that Martin is not black. Could it be that black-authored representations of slavery concentrate more on the vulnerability of the woman slave, presenting her story from a more sympathetic angle, while white novelists focus on creating slave characters that are unusual, that possess strength and determination? It is not possible to generalise, but it could be that Sarah is the result of a perspective that differentiates itself from previous novels by black writers who imagined submissive slaves in their relationship to masters, while in *Property* Sarah and Manon's relation looks a bit different.

The final part of the book presents Sarah in an absolutely surprising role, namely that of a fugitive who gets to the North by pretending to be a free woman. This is the climax of the entire novel, since Martin develops an image of Sarah which is both almost impossible to believe and still very inspiring. When she escapes during the slave rebellion that starts on Gaudet's plantation and Manon is left behind to face the violent insurrection, few would probably imagine that the woman could free herself and experience unthinkable liberties, such as being treated like an important person. Sarah is indeed a strong woman, Martin illustrates, a woman who was not only able to liberate herself and her baby, but also to travel around the country like a free white man, a freedom that Manon will never know of:

[...] Sarah may be very different when she returns [...] She has passed as a free woman, and that experience is generally deleterious to a negro's character. She has done more than that,' I observed. 'She has tasted a freedom you and I will never know.' My aunt looked perplexed. 'What is that?' she said. 'She has traveled about the country as a free white man' (Martin 204-205).

The unpredictability of Sarah's actions revealed towards the end of the novel is assuredly generated by the lack of involvement in the narration of the events. The text never indicates how Sarah perceives Manon, because her thoughts are absent from the entire narrative, and "Sarah's actions and sparse words are all mediated through Manon's understanding of them" (King 227).

In summary, Martin writes excellently about the unusual relationship between a plantation mistress and a slave woman, which, despite being entirely narrated from Manon's manipulative point of view, reveals, the cleverness of a slave who even inspires self-centred Mrs. Gaudet. Seen through the lens of the power struggle between Manon and her husband, and focusing on the drastic abuse of power that makes Sarah a victim, *Propety* creates a universe of its own, where not only men, but also white women can irreversibly impact the destinies of slaves. In other words, Manon's deviously cruel actions influence Sarah's life psychologically and emotionally, but they do not succeed in destroying her strong will or to remove the slave's great subtleness.

2.3.3. Wench

2.3.3.1. Lizzie: a slave "in love" with the master

"Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet A. Jacobs, quoted in Mitchell 22)

This quote stresses one of the central focuses of this subchapter, namely the way Perkins-Valdez brings slavery into "emotional, immediate relief by

presenting it in its simple horror”⁹ through the lives of the four enslaved women: Lizzie, Mawu, Reenie, and Sweet. The novel deals with the experiences of all these women, but the main character and the narrator is Lizzie, the one my analysis centres on. The life stories of the four slaves can be briefly described as follows: Lizzie loves her master Drayle, with whom she has two children, Reenie is passed along to the resort manager by her cruel owner, who happens to be her half brother, Sweet is a pregnant woman who has a rather good relationship with her owner, and Mawu is a wild red-haired woman who is ardently seeking liberty from her violent master. What makes the existence of these women in bondage more bearable is the fact that they “rely on each other for support as they come together for three summers, catching up on their lives of woe and occasional joy”. The author skillfully depicts the “complexities of relationships in slavery and the abiding comfort of women’s friendships” (Vanessa Bush, book review).

It is crystal-clear that every single one of these women struggles, and as they come in contact with each other, what takes place is a mutual exchange, a kind of storytelling experience that is bringing them to the point of sharing their pain. What Perkins-Valdez conveys through this way of constructing her novel is a message of healing and restoration of the soul that is made possible by remembering. Rushdy (“The neo-slave narrative” 103) addresses this issue and concludes that memory is essential in the process of recovery, being a strategy employed to recall the past so that people can be healed from the past’s pain. The fact that writers author stories that are shared with readers signals their attempt to heal in various ways wounds that do exist and come from the past, but that not all acknowledge (see page 18 of thesis). Two of the four women, namely Lizzie and Mawu, share a special type of connection, the author accentuating how relevant the level of reciprocal communication of mentalities is in impacting each other and influencing someone’s life. While Mawu is determined to escape her sadistic master, not hiding her intentions to run away, Lizzie thinks that she loves her owner and that he loves her back. Lizzie admires Mawu's independent spirit, although she is reserved, her only

⁹ <http://everydayiwritethebook.typepad.com/books/2011/10/wench-by-dolen-perkins-valdez.html>

desire being to convince her master to grant freedom to her own children. Mawu's defiant and carefree way of behaving challenges Lizzie, who rethinks her situation and considers escaping herself. The condition of women in slavery is brought to life through the skilful portrayal of "Lizzie's precarious situation and the tragic stories of her fellow slaves" (Cavanaugh, book review).

If in *Kindred* the presentation of the female slave gravitated around strategies like placing an "extraordinary figure – a time-travelling woman [...] into the ordinary circumstances of slavery" (Ryan 169) and focusing on the cruel acts of violence as punishment for disobedience, in *Property* the depiction of the captive woman centred around the unusual relationship between an abusing mistress and her slave. What Perkins-Valdez accomplishes in *Wench* is illustrating the degradation and indignity that define the life of the slave woman as illustrated by encounters and exchanges with others in bondage and by the emotional and sexual exploitation within the master-slave relationship. Lizzie is her master's sexual object, finding herself emotionally tied to Drayle in a complicated relationship that makes her oscillate between loving and despising him. The relationship between Lizzie and Drayle is psychologically dynamic, making readers wonder if love can really exist when the degree of the imbalance of power between them is so significant. The protagonist is favoured by her master, since she is a house slave, not working in the field like the other women. She becomes the mother of Drayle's children after he asks Lizzie to give him a heir; nevertheless, Lizzie toils under the heavy burden of deciding for herself if her owner's behaviour deserves her love or rather her profound hatred.

As briefly mentioned above, one important means of characterisation is the influence that the other women in bondage have on Lizzie within the span of four summer excursions when "they learn that love can sustain them in the face of excruciating cruelty, depravity, and disappointment" (Newson-Horst, book review). Not only does she find friends to share her life with, this bringing comfort and relief, but she gets to the point of questioning her entire perception of life when the possibility of escaping is discussed among the other three women. The most difficult thing that Lizzie could do is to run away and leave her

children behind, the trials of motherhood under the peculiar institution being closely investigated by Perkins-Valdez. She creates very emotional characters like the protagonist, but also determined and unmoved ones like Mawu, who is not put off by abandoning her children in the case of running away. By investigating Lizzie's inner being very closely and giving access to her most intimate feelings, the author reveals the permanent struggle that enslaved women go through, namely not knowing who they are in a world that considers them property. When Mawu asks Lizzie how Drayle treats her, Lizzie hears the question "Is he good to you?" but after a time she understands that what Mawu was interested in was in fact the answer to the question, "Is he God to you?" (229). Lizzie's thinking is undoubtedly shaped by Mawu's critical approach to enslavement, life, and relationships and a simple, but clever question generates a revolution in the protagonist's mind and heart, who re-analyses her role in Drayle's life.

Second, *Wench* presents Lizzie caught in a complex relationship with her owner, this illustrating how Perkins-Valdez "engages the personal and the emotional in the history of slavery" (Mitchell 6). It is intriguing that Lizzie cannot detach herself from Drayle, despite being put on several occasions in the situation of granting him sexual favours so that their children would not be treated badly. She is thirteen years old when her master seduces her and convinces Lizzie that he actually loves her, an experience that probably impacted her so much that she is living under the impression that she is some kind of lover who he cares for. Readers understand that Drayle cares more about possessing her body and satisfying his sexual needs than about freeing the children or respecting her. Mitchell argues that "the right claimed by slave owners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over black people as a whole" (25), a point that is made by Perkins-Valdez as well as she imagines the relationship that Lizzie and Drayle have. She is subordinated to her master not only as far as gender is concerned, but also with regard to race, being nothing more than a black slave: "I have told you time and time again to watch your mouth when you are talking to me. You are just a woman and, on top of that, nothing but a slave woman" (215).

Lizzie reflects the co-existence of two binary characteristics that were visible in the lives of slaves, namely “humanity and property”¹⁰. When she is first taken to Tawawa house, Lizzie feels human (18), enjoying using the objects in the cottage as if they belonged to her and forgetting for a short while perhaps that she is an enslaved woman. She is reminded that she and her fellow female slaves are only property when she witnesses Tip, Mawu’s master, beat and rape her. The scene is very brutal and its description is shocking due to the sexually explicit language used by Valdez to put into words the violent behaviour of the oppressor and the humiliation of the victim.

This is not the only instance when sexual encounters are described in great detail, the novel exploring the notion of the body as commodity and stressing the outrageous behaviour of slave masters. The fact that Drayle is taking advantage of Lizzie and forces her to do things that she finds immoral reveals the thinking of white man who saw black women as sexually promiscuous. Mitchell notes that “the agents of slavocracy constructed the myth of the sensuous enslaved black woman – the Jezebel – who animalistically and uninhibitedly acted upon her sexual urges when in reality her body became the site of white male licentiousness and economic desire” (25), this being a possible explanation for the liberties that Drayle takes in bed. Lizzie is the one who must offer this man that which his wife would probably never agree with, given the “cardinal virtues” that formed the “true womanhood” in nineteenth-century America: “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” (Carby, quoted in Mitchell 27).

To sum up this discussion on the representation of the female slave in Perkins-Valdez’s novel, it can be argued that there is a clear focus on the soul of the captive, with its emotions, and deepest fear and pain. The author imagines what a slave woman might have thought about her situation, what difficulties she might have faced after taking into consideration the possibility of escaping, and what would stop her from running away: was the bond with the master so strong that not even freedom was more attractive? The commodified body is emphasised here in order to point to the sexual servitude of the protagonist and

¹⁰ <http://www.examiner.com/books-in-dayton/review-wench-by-dolen-perkins-valdez-review>

to reveal “the set of cultural expectations [Lizzie] w[as] entangled within” (Perkins-Valdez, Interview 4)¹¹.

2.3.4. Comparing and concluding

Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez create modern narratives that place the figure of the enslaved woman in a pivotal position in order to revive a very important chapter of American history. They imagine stories about what life on the plantation might have looked like for the oppressed black women and attempt to employ innovative tools in order to preserve the impact that the era of slavery had and still continues to have on people. *Kindred* shapes readers’ understanding of the presence of the past in the present and by the fantastic element of time-travelling sheds light on relevant issues like identity, racial relations, and ancestry. *Property* provides invaluable insights into the consequences of slavery in the existence of both black and white women and questions the stereotypical view of the vulnerable and helpless slave woman. Sarah is a character that disrupts the expectations of many and inspires readers, who are encouraged to reconsider their projections about the role of slaves in the peculiar institution. *Wench* offers careful insights into the minds, hearts, and spirits of women in bondage and shows just how complex relationships in the era of slavery might have been. The author gives life to a narrative that presents female solidarity and storytelling, but also critical observation about women (Mawu questioning Lizzie) as essential components in the process of rethinking one’s position and taking an attitude when the promise of freedom is finally addressed.

Butler chooses to convey her central message about the peculiar condition of women under slavery by creating two characters that endure tremendous hardship and that are tormented by the same man. Alice eventually kills herself to escape from Rufus, while Dana stabs him to free herself from her ancestor. Martin displays the way of life in slavery through Sarah, a complex character that is not exposed to so much violence as Alice, but who is nevertheless sexually abused by both her master and his wife. Perkins-Valdez deals with

¹¹ The novel also includes an appendix- a special section that has insights and interviews, the quote being taken from an interview by Catherine Delors, originally published on www.catherinedelors.com

Lizzie, who is also involved in a sexual affair with her master, but who is much too tied to him emotionally to try to free himself from the heavy yoke of slavery. What makes each of these novels unique is the fact that they incorporate extremely original elements in their depictions of female slaves. The perspectives from which the narrators present the institution and the captives' lives are also various: Dana is an outsider who tells the story from her twentieth century point of view; Manon is the unsympathetic plantation mistress whose judgements about Sarah are questionable, but whose thinking patterns are truly interesting, coming from the hegemonic position of the white slave driver; Lizzie is a slave who narrates her own story of emotional involvement with a white man and those of three other women as well.

Since *Kindred* was published in 1979, and the other two novels in 2003 and 2010, the question of whether the representation of female slaves in fiction has undergone major changes needs to be addressed. Even if the writers use different features when characterising the protagonists and look at slavery from multiple perspectives, the overall tendency is the same. Every slave woman is going through the same type of painful experiences: rape, sexual exploitation, giving birth to children and in some cases losing them, fighting for their offspring's freedom, and different degrees of humiliation through violence.

2.4. Master/Mistress-slave(s) relationship

"My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each" (Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Written by Herself (1861), quoted in Mitchell 22).

This subchapter focuses on a discussion of the significance of relations in slavery and contains an analysis in which the slave-master and slave-mistress relationships are at the forefront. The previous subchapter – that looked at the "new cultural discourse emphasizing the voices and experiences of African American women" (Ryan 152) – and the current section are both relevant for the understanding of the several themes that contemporary novelists employ in their depictions of slavery. In their attempt "to develop [the] vivid picture of slave

life”, historians of the last few decades have concentrated on “previously neglected aspects of the subject, such as the slave market, family structure and relations in slavery, [etc]” (Ryan 14-15), aspects which also appear in all three novels discussed. Thus it has been shown that there is a strong connection between the dynamic of life on the plantation and the nature of the relationships that existed between masters and slaves as well as between fellow blacks. In other words, in order to create credible and powerful illustrations of life in the peculiar institution, writers strategically engage with the type of relationships that existed between the southern oppressors and their victims, imagining situations that demonstrate both their creativity and historical knowledge.

Slaveholders used to be “absolute master[s] of [their slaves’] life, goods, and liberties” (Diderot 26) and even if the enslaved were considered nothing more than property, the system “bound two peoples together in bitter antagonism, while creating an organic relationship so complex and ambivalent that neither could express the simplest human feelings without reference to the other” (Genovese, “Roll, Jordan, Roll” 36). This is an interesting argument that sheds light on one of the levels of influence that the corrupted system had on both oppressed and oppressor. Hence, this subchapter critically investigates not only the way relationships between master and slave are represented but also refers to the way both sides talk and think about slavery. Therefore, the analysis of the three novels in light of this particular facet reveals how the question of dependence functions in the world that these writers created. Since racism diminished considerably “the slaves’ sense of worth as black people” (Genovese, “Roll...” 38), it is fascinating to explore the various types of manifestations caused by the unbalanced relationships and how the Africans and those who ruled over them coped with these consequences.

As regards the relationship between owners and slaves of the opposite sex, it is no secret that “sexual exploitation [was] permissible in slavery” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 5). However, a white master who would engage in sexual relations would “defile his body” and “shame God by sleeping with

someone less than human” (Higginbotham 91)¹². On the other side of the coin, it was thought that the slave woman “defied society and rejected her inferiority by sleeping with her superior” (Higginbotham 91). What oftentimes followed was a whipping so that “the mark of her inferiority that she had failed to imprint in her mind would now be whipped into her skin” (Higginbotham 91). Consequently, slave women were “passive and powerless” as their bodies were “objectified and defined” by the “white authority” (Cowan 19), an aspect that is strongly stressed by Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez in their painting of the intimate interaction between black and white people.

2.4.1. *Kindred*

2.4.1.1. Tom Weylin – Dana

This novel excels in its construction of several types of power relationships between the oppressor and the oppressed in the era of slavery. *Kindred* includes a range of relations between characters in different positions, presented, however, not at the same level of depth. Yet, all these representations of the treatment of slaves in the peculiar institution expose attitudes and beliefs which characterised the evil system. The narrator introduces us to the interactions between cruel Mr. Weylin and his slaves (Nigel, Sarah, and Tess, to name a few of them), between the patrollers and their victims, between Edwards, the overseer, and some women working under his supervision, between Margaret, the master’s wife, and Sarah, and between Rufus and his concubine Alice. Additionally, the way Dana behaves around Tom Weylin, Margaret and Rufus is also given special attention in the book. Considering that it is not possible to analyse all these instances at great length, the relationships chosen for the sake of this subchapter are those between Weylin and Dana, between Rufus and Alice, Rufus and Dana, and between Margaret Weylin and both Dana and Sarah.

The way Butler constructs her plot – incorporating a time-travelling character that moves between centuries – surely has an influence on the relationship between the plantation owner Tom Weylin and Dana. Since she is only a visitor

¹² The author refers to a case from 1640, but this is, to some extent, also applicable to the 19th century context

in the nineteenth century, being, nevertheless, transformed into a slave, her way of interacting with the white slaveholder partly differs from that of the other enslaved women, who do not know what it means to live as independent women. Likewise, Weylin is at times caught unprepared because he is not used to dealing with a slave who is so self-assured and visibly extraordinary: “[Dana has] got some sense”, in fact “Too much sense for her own good” (161) [...] “You’re something different. I don’t know what – witch, devil, I don’t care [...] You are not natural. But you can feel pain – and you can die” (205). These opinions expressed by Weylin suggest that, in spite of his acknowledgment of Dana’s good sense, he is not intimidated by a woman over whom he, a white master, has control and the power to decide what will happen with her life. It is in fact an illustration of Dana’s position on his plantation, where she can still die despite her cleverness.

There are several things that cause tension to develop between these two characters. Their first encounter – when Dana saves Rufus from drowning – reveals already that Weylin’s initial impression of the woman is not good: she wears pants, which makes him think that she is a black man trying to kill his wife and son. Moreover, she disappears all of a sudden like a ghost (24), which makes the slave-owner extremely angry. The second time he sees Dana, Weylin stares hard at her (66) and with time, as he notices that she is more articulated than the other slaves, the slave-owner becomes more and more disturbed by the woman, considering her literacy dangerous, a fear that he also shares with Kevin (80). Furthermore, the fact that Tom Weylin encourages Rufus to rape Dana instead of waiting for Alice to recover, and his lack of respect “for another white man’s property” – both men are aware that Dana belongs to Kevin – because he has gone North (Van Thompson 128) show how much destructive power he has over her. Dana is completely vulnerable in front of the sadistic violence aimed at her possibly because Weylin, a man who has not had much education (80), is somehow threatened by her intellectual capacities and resents her.

It is indeed a very fascinating type of relationship that Butler imagines between Dana and Weylin, who is confronted with the atypical situation of putting up with

a slave whose speech and superiority he strongly disapproves of, and whose place on his plantation is not very fixed. Tom Weylin surely dislikes that he is not the absolute possessor of Dana, who is simply added to the rest of the enslaved when she and Kevin arrive there, and who mysteriously and unpredictably disappears on repeated occasions, only to appear again on the Weylin plantation. The protagonist remains, therefore, a figure that Marse Tom cannot totally make sense of or own the way he owns other enslaved women. Weylin does not sexually abuse Dana, but he beats her mercilessly when he catches her teaching someone to read in the cookhouse (106) and whips her harshly after he finds out that the woman was planning to run away. Although Dana is new to the way things function on Weylin's plantation, she adapts gradually to the rules and becomes much more submissive. Ryan observes that Butler explores "how an exceptionally strong and knowledgeable individual can be reduced, both physically and psychologically, to the status of a slave" (136).

The conflict over power that Butler illustrates through the relationship between Dana and Weylin also provides insights into these characters' thought patterns about slavery. The plantation owner has a terribly malevolent view of black female slaves, whom he considers things to be shagged and discarded, which automatically means that as a beneficiary of the system of slavery, he encourages the perpetuation of the institution. This is demonstrated by the fact that he demands the women in bondage to provide social and sexual services meant to increase his wealth and satisfy his sexual urges. This tendency can be seen in his behaviour towards Tess, a slave who is given to the overseer once he had enough of her: "Poor Tess. Weylin had tired of her as a bed mate and passed her casually to Edwards" (181). Her words reflect the general situation of enslaved women: "You do everything they tell you, [...] and they still treat you like a old dog. Go here, open your legs; go there, bust your back. What they care! I ain't s'pose to have no feeli's!" (181-182). His habit of selling the slaves' children indicates that slavery is an enjoyable business that brings him profit; he has been doing that to Sarah (76) and other women as well.

Dana expresses her opinion about slavery quite openly, but we should bear in mind that she is influenced by her twentieth century conceptions, coming from a

society where she is used to freely utter her feelings. Moreover, she only addresses this difficult topic when she is with Kevin; were she in the position of another slave on the plantation, she could never say what she thinks without being severely punished. This is just another advantage that she has over the other blacks. Dana wants to go home because “[that] place is diseased” (99) but she, nevertheless, acknowledges her position in the past: “We were observers watching a show [...]. And we were actors” (98). As shown on several occasions in *Kindred*, including her relationship with Weylin, Dana has to continually manage her double identity and be prepared at all times since anything can happen to her, even if she possesses skills that the other slaves do not have.

2.4.1.2. Rufus – Alice

Rufus first bonded with Alice in their childhood, when they used to be good friends. Things have changed once Rufus started showing interest in her and became more and more persistent. To his surprise, Alice does not want him as a lover, a fact that enrages the white man so much that he ultimately tries to rape the black girl, who dared to choose a black man as her partner. This is a fact of life in slavery that underlines the white-male supremacy in a society where black females have to surrender to the power of the hegemonic rules. Interestingly, the young woman did not even belong to Rufus at that time; she was a free woman who would have rather married a black slave than accept a white man as her lover. *Kindred* offers illuminating insight into the type of dynamics existing in interracial relationships between man and woman (Alice, before she became a slave and Rufus; Dana and Kevin) and master and slave (Rufus and his new possession, Alice).

Christine Levecq gives a very perceptive explanation of the way Butler constructs the relational aspect of her books. In her opinion, many of her novels concentrate “on the acrobatics of power that characterize normal human interaction [and] human relationships in situations of oppression”. Butler “relentlessly dissects the minute ways in which beings acquire, maintain, negotiate, or lose mental and physical power over each other, whether it be through the use of knowledge, language, or mental and physical violence. Her

analysis addresses forms of resistance and equally forms of capitulation or accommodation for the sake of survival” (533). These observations also apply to *Kindred*. With respect to the evolution of human relationships in oppressive situations, it is clear that Alice is one of the most tragic victims of the system, being repeatedly maltreated by Rufus, who after the woman’s death, eventually loses his mental and physical power over her. Wood interprets Alice’s suicide as “her only possible path of resistance and rebellion”, which causes Rufus “to turn his full affection onto Dana” (94). Alice’s body was at the disposal of her master, the woman having no control over it. After Alice stops being his possession when she takes her life, her sexuality being no longer under Rufus’ care, so to say, the man immediately tries to replace her with Dana, whom he pictures as his next sexual instrument. The man’s “continued sexual harassment” exposes the unceasing sexual violation to which the women in bondage were subjected (Wood 92). Both women resist him in their own way: Alice by showing Rufus that she chose death over remaining the concubine of a man who refuses to free their children and Dana by refusing to be raped by a man whose touch she cannot even stand: “I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once” (260).

Yet, before rebelling, Alice does go through a process of capitulation and accommodation in order to remain alive. By accepting to sleep with Rufus – after she recovers from the bad wounds that she got during her escape attempt with Isaac – Alice chooses the option that is less painful, for she knows that if she does not go willingly to his bed, the young man will force her or even beat her. Her consent to have sex with the man is a highly important move through which she does not only keep herself alive, but Dana, too. Alice is unaware of the fact that the protagonist arranges her rape by Rufus to ensure her own birth, which means that her submission has a lasting effect on generations to come. Interestingly, Rufus claims from the beginning that he loves Alice. He does not want to take her by force, something that he could have done long ago in the bushes, had he not been able to control his sexual urge (124). Ironically, he wants more than her body, namely her heart and her self. His treatment of Alice, Wood explains, reveals a double position: he loves her, but “he can only

cherish [Alice] as a possession”; as property, the woman “is deprived” of any agency over her body and soul (92). His “love” for the black woman does not stop him from abusing her more than sexually: “ He drank more than he should have sometimes, and one morning after he’d really overdone it, Alice came downstairs with her whole face swollen and bruised” (Butler 169).

Their relationship is “seemingly placed in contrast” to that of Dana and Kevin’s, an interracial couple that functions well even in the nineteenth century, when Kevin offers his wife the protection that she needs (Wood 92). Rufus attempts to justify his behaviour by blaming the society he lives in, who gives mixed relationships no chance: “If I lived in your time, I would have married her. Or tried to” (124) and he has even tried to soften Alice’s heart by telling her about Dana and Kevin’s marriage, but she still kept saying no (Levecq 545). Even the open declaration that he loves Alice is something extremely strange – and to a certain extent brave – to do, because during slavery, to say that you love a black woman was seen “as a sign of weakness”, while raping one was perceived “as an act of masculinity” (Van Thompson 124).

Alice’s tragic destiny in slavery does not only reveal the brutal attitudes of white masters in their relationships with slaves, but it also raises questions about the consequences that follow for the enslaved. Jordan argues that black slavery is “a way in which to think about victimization” in terms of how we define “victim”: who is one, what makes one, is it a matter of perspective? (233). Moreover, anger is one of the repercussions of the unbalanced master-slave relationship, as is noticeable in Alice’s case. Jordan refers to “black rage” as one of the most “compelling concerns” and she suggests that readers need to understand what its causes are, if it is justified, and what would “cure” it. Since this is a point that does matter, Jordan believes that the “survival strategies employed by black slaves are a powerful commentary for what is required for blacks to survive in America” (233).

Butler’s depiction of Rufus and Alice’s relationship demonstrates that masters and slaves might have been involved in relations that were more complex than we imagine if we take into consideration both parts of the problem: the

tyrannical behaviour of white men and the response of their victims. Slavery implied dependency and its actors experienced the upshot of a system that impacted lives in such a significant way that writers have still not exhausted the means to represent these relationships in fiction.

2.4.1.3. Rufus – Dana

The most intriguing relationship between the characters represented in *Kindred* is undoubtedly that between Dana and Rufus, which is not merely a master-slave relationship, but also a complex reflection of the development of things when two people are caught in a power/friendship/erotic/ancestral relationship. Rufus is the reason why Dana's journeys to the past start, the young boy, whom she first only knows as ancestor, developing into a mean master and a potential lover. The novel builds on the conflict between these characters, whose depiction shows that "Butler especially excels in microscopic analyses of power relationships" (Levecq 533).

The interactions between the black woman and her white ancestor are fascinating, as they reveal how prevalent "the oscillations of power and powerlessness" (Levecq 534) were during slavery. Their relationship evolves gradually throughout Dana's six visits to the nineteenth century. She starts as a life saver for the "accident-prone small boy" (29), their first encounter signalling "growing emotional closeness" (shown by Dana's use of "Rufe"), but then "moments of negotiation and even blackmail" become very common (Levecq 534). They become partners, working together and sharing a secret that Tom Weylin must not learn about (534). Interestingly, they help and need each other, but their relationship becomes problematic because both Rufus and Dana hold on to the power that they have over the other person. The man controls Dana by "his power to call for [her]", while she reminds Rufus that he depends on her to remain alive, which means that he must collaborate (Levecq 534). Dana's "superior knowledge" is useful on the plantation, but the reality of the inextricable connection between keeping her ancestor alive and assuring her

own survival shows that both “have equal powers of manipulation toward each other and [...] suffer from the system at hand” (Levecq 535).

Dana oscillates in her behaviour towards Rufus, her actions being ambivalent. On the one side, she desires to “keep friendship with him” (68) because she hopes to influence his way of dealing with slaves, but at the same time to win him to her side and be treated well whenever she returns to the past (Levecq 535). On the other side, she realises that Rufus is her oppressor, seeing that he “has turned into a veritable tyrant” (Levecq 536), but nevertheless acknowledges that she cares about him: “However little sense it made, I cared. I must have. I kept forgiving him for things” (180). Dana is manipulated, lied to, and punished by Rufus, but she still thinks of him as “a sympathetic white man” (141), demonstrating “her constant fluctuations of thought and behavior” (Levecq 537). No matter how often Dana has to put up with Rufus’s wicked behaviour and has to compromise due to the gravity of some circumstances (see her persuasion of Alice to sleep with him), she is aware that in the end, his “sudden and unexpected assumptions of his position as an oppressor” triumph over common sense (Levecq 537). This means that she remains a victim, a mere black woman for whom white masters show no regard, so she decides once and for all to end any kind of friendship bond, sticking to her position as a slave woman who defends herself against rape. Dana “has experienced the psychological and emotional complexities of an oppressive institution in which one needs to survive” (Levecq 540), but her decision to kill Rufus shows that there are some things that she is not willing to sacrifice and then she lets him know that he has crossed the line.

Butler “imparts a subtle comprehension of the intricate patterns of oppression, resistance, and attraction that history seems to be bent on repeating” (Levecq 540), the dynamic and challenging relationship that she imagined between Dana and Rufus illustrating just how complex interracial bonds might have been. Moreover, the novel highlights such aspects as “the interconnectedness between the free and unfree, the powerful and the disempowered, and the interconnections between the past and the present” (Rushdy, *Slavery represented* 432), all these topics being touched upon by the intricate

development of the relationship between the two characters. After her being “forced to contemplate the meaning of her romantic relationship with a white man, [...] and the very idea of having white ancestry, of being “kindred” with those who owned her other kindred” (Rushdy, *Slavery represented* 432), what results in the end is the “irreparable loss of body and soul to slavery” (Rushdy, *Slavery represented* 433). Dana literally leaves a part of her in the past, the arm loss being a reminder of the unhealthy relationship that Rufus tried to force on her.

The relation between Dana and her white husband Kevin reveals interesting aspects about interracial interactions, but it is not discussed here because it does not fit into the category of master-slave relationships. Although Kevin becomes her master when he travels to the past with Dana, he does not exploit her, of course, but protects her as much as he can. Levecq argues that they “represent the harmonious race and gender communion that history is supposed to be progressing toward” (538).

2.4.1.4. Margaret – Dana; Margaret – Sarah

The relationship between Margaret and Dana is similar to that between Tom Weylin and Dana; the Weylins do not own the woman after having bought her, as is common among other masters and mistresses, but because Dana joins the other slaves, after she and Kevin are accepted into their household. Since Dana comes from the twentieth century, she needs time to understand what slaves are required to do and lastly, to get accustomed to being Margaret’s house slave. Initially, the woman adapts to the role of a diligent slave: “I cleaned and plucked a chicken, prepared vegetables, kneaded bread dough” (81), and then holds on to her position as Margaret’s maid, regardless of the compromises that she needs to make. Ryan sees this as “unwittingly and unconsciously beginning to conform to the system” and argues that Dana even “defends her capitulation to the role of slave” (133) by stating that it is worth “putting up with small humiliations now so that I can survive later” (Butler 83). Alice notices that Dana is fighting for her own security and criticises her: “You run around fetching and carrying that woman like you love her. And half a day in

the fields was all it took [...].The way you always suckin' up to that woman is enough to make anybody sick" (219). Dana certainly sees things from an outside perspective, being an observer of slavery and understanding the perverted and hypocritical nature of the relationship between white and black women. However, she needs to behave in a similar way in order to remain alive and to avoid violence.

Despite being an independent woman "from the enlightened future", Dana ends up being an "obedient mammy" (Ryan 135). Dana notices herself that she plays roles that she can no longer control: "Was I getting so used to being submissive? [...] When had I stopped acting? Why had I stopped?" (220-221). Van Thompson also comments on Dana's new role as a mammy and refers to the fact that "by continuously saving Rufus' life (as a child and as an adult), Dana becomes a surrogate mother (mammy) figure and a trusted confidant" to her white ancestor (112).

If Tom Weylin is unnerved by Dana's ability to read, his wife definitively benefits from her reading skills when she is "weak and older than her years" (217) and asks her slave to read the Sermon on the Mount (218). This is the beginning of many full days spent in Margaret's room, where she learns how to sew, listens to her endless stories and does the cleaning and the laundry, since she is the only one the mistress wants. Dana observes that the woman has changed so much that she was "full of sweetness and charity" (218). This huge transformation shocks Dana, who previously experienced Mrs. Weylin's abusive behaviour when she "threw scalding hot coffee at [her], screaming that [she] had brought it to her cold" (81) and when she slapped her across the face, calling Dana a "filthy black whore" (93), after warning her that she lives in a Christian house, where illegitimate sexual encounters are not allowed. At least not for Dana and Kevin, for it is no secret that her husband has fathered many children of black women and Margaret herself does not hide her inclination towards Kevin (84-85).

Butler portrays Margaret Weylin as being hypocritical, as the above-mentioned fact clearly proves. In addition, the narrator stresses on at least two occasions that the woman complains about everything, being easily angered, which points to a stereotypical representation of the plantation mistress figure: “[She] complained because she couldn’t find anything to complain about” (81) and “She had little or nothing to do [...]. So Margaret supervised – ordered people to do work they were already doing, criticized their slowness and laziness [...], and in general, made trouble” (93-94). By emphasising this aspect, Butler actually criticises the model of femininity that was prevalent in antebellum America, and that kept white women from doing their chores, the housework falling on the backs of the black slaves. Bettanin argues that “white women avoided material duties to conform to a southern ideal of femininity” (98).

The relationship between this mistress and her slave differs to some extent from the other representations which describe a childless and at times sexually frustrated white woman (as discussed in the next sections on *Property* and *Wench*) who takes revenge on the black woman with whom her husband slept. We deal here with a woman who knows that her husband has impregnated several slaves, but who is not depicted in her interactions with these women. Rather, Butler focuses on the relationship between Dana and Margaret because it shows the other side of the coin, namely what happens when the slave is above the mistress, awakening unexpected feelings like intimidation or fear: “She took a step back from me. ‘You stop looking at me that way!’ She took another step back. It occurred to me that she was a little afraid of me. I was an unknown, after all – an unpredictable new slave. And maybe I was a little too silent” (93).

This last section briefly discusses the relationship that the mistress has with the cookhouse slave Sarah. It is an important aspect of the analysis of interpersonal relationships during slavery because it reveals not only the nature of the connection between powerful and powerless, but it offers a clear image of the challenges met by the slaves as they were trying to preserve the structure of their own family. In *Kindred*, close attention is paid to the selling of slaves since it disrupts family units (Turner 263), Sarah being one of the

characters who is most affected by this. Margaret convinces her husband to sell Sarah's babies in order to have enough money to buy "new furniture, new china dishes, [and] fancy things" (95). Therefore, out of four children that she brought into the world, the woman only has Carrie, her mute daughter, who was considered of no value and, hence, has remained on the plantation.

Dana perceives Sarah as being "the kind of woman who might have been called 'mammy' in some other household [...]. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom – the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose [...]" (145) and sees anger in her eyes: "quiet, almost frightening anger. Her husband dead, three children sold, the fourth defective, and her having to thank God for the defect. She had reason for more than anger" (76). However, she becomes less critical of the obedient slave when she understands that Sarah "is practicing her own kind of resistance" and that "anger and grief are part of her apparently resigned mood" (Bettanin 98). Wood suggests that "the text's depiction of Sarah configures her not as a hollow stereotype, a mythological figure from the past, but rather as an individual fighting to survive in an environment harsher than most contemporary readers would be able to imagine" (91). It is evident that Butler resists black womanhood stereotypes and through Sarah, shows that women can practise different forms of resistance to "white rule" (Wood 91). Since Sarah creates and maintains "a relatively safe space for the slave community", it can be argued that this elucidates "the complex strategies" employed "to resist slavery" (Wood 92).

Another relevant aspect that becomes visible through the representation of the relationship between Sarah and Margaret is the ability to remain a "highly capable individual, unimpressed by the white master class" and as addressed above, resistant to the institution that oppresses slaves (Ryan 137). The cook dismisses Mrs. Weylin as a "bitch" and adds that she is "greedy and mean" (95), trying to avoid contact with her: "You know I don't say no more to her than I can help. She's got her house, and I got my kitchen" (94). Given their anterior conflict about the loss of Sarah's children, it is natural that from the slave's perspective, the two women are strong adversaries: "Sarah was right.

Margaret Weylin kept out of her way. Talk between them was brief and confined usually to meal planning” (94). Again, we encounter the same situation as with Dana, namely that the white mistress is afraid of her servant, probably because she is aware that a woman in despair could theoretically do anything to get even with the one who destroyed her family. Sarah’s strength is also proved by her successful management of the entire household while Mrs. Weylin was absent, when she “managed the house as efficiently as Margaret had, but without much of the tension and strife Margaret generated” (144).

In summary, it can be concluded that the relationship between Margaret Weylin and her two slaves signals the prevalent tensions and conflicts existing between racial groups in the era of slavery. Butler plays with the concept of the docile mammy figure and accentuates that she can be more resistant than it seems. Furthermore, *Kindred* points that even a modern woman of the twentieth century can be made to adapt to slavery and become an obedient servant in order to preserve her life. Lastly, the novel comments on the vile influence that the self-centred mistress has not only on the everyday life of her enslaved women, but also on the family unity, which is destroyed by the corrupt practice of selling its members.

2.4.2. Property

2.4.2.1. Manon – Sarah

Martin’s novel primarily brings into focus the abusive relationship between the house slave Sarah and the frustrated plantation mistress Manon Gaudet, who tells her story in a way that excludes the contribution of other characters. Therefore, her monopolistic viewpoint leaves little room for focusing on Sarah or Mr. Gaudet’s perceptions, whose interactions with each other are presented superficially. However, they do share a master-slave relationship whose effects and implications are pivotal for the development of the narration, being an aspect that needs to be addressed as well. The discussion of their relation comes after the section about Manon and Sarah.

“The interplay between literary representation and historical circumstances” (Cowan 1) in the antebellum South is a particularly important fact that needs to be considered when referring to the interactions between masters and their slaves in *Property*. While Martin’s acknowledgement of the historical sources she used demonstrates “the historical veracity of her story” (Ryan 183), her employment of artistic conventions as well as innovative elements stresses the writers’ ability to creatively bring to life the things of the past. This novel is, so to say, a mixture of thoroughly researched facts and imagined situations that Martin uses in portraying interracial female relationships in the peculiar institution. A good example of this is the stereotyping of African Americans by which southern whites simplified them so that they would emphasise their own favourable self-image. This process is recorded in the historical documents of that time (Cowan 23) and Martin not only includes it in her story, but gives it new proportions by creating a harsh and self-seeking mistress who finds pleasure in abusing her slave, making Sarah look like mere chattel, while Manon tries to project an image of herself that makes her look superior.

The power battle that Manon initiates is based on the fact that Sarah is an attractive young slave who is taken to bed by Mr. Gaudet, which leads to a pregnancy that ends with the birth of a baby boy, the master’s only heir. The unexpected situation brings the childless mistress into turmoil. The conflict between white women who do not conceive and enslaved women who give birth to children belonging to white owners is a common theme in many works about slavery. Martin plays with this idea by portraying a heroine who simply refuses to have children and although she will not fulfil her marital duties, she hates the fact that Sarah is the concubine of her husband. Had it not been for Walter, Sarah’s deaf son, the situation might have looked less severe, but the humiliation of living in the same house with a “wild, mad creature” who happens to be the “bastard son” of her husband is too much for Manon (Martin 30 and 32). What disturbs the mistress more than her husband’s sexual affair with a black woman is the existence of a living proof (Walter) that Mr. Gaudet is unfaithful. This is what the narrator confesses when Joel sees the boy for the first time: “[...] and we went on as if nothing had happened, as if Joel wasn’t

going back to town with a story that would amuse his bachelor friends: Manon Gaudet has no children, but her husband is not childless” (31).

Interestingly, the figure of the plantation mistress has often been marginal even in novels by white women (Ryan 155). Hence, Martin’s contribution offers valuable insights into the personality of a woman who is no longer stereotypically depicted as “a selfless and dedicated angel”, but who reflects the other old stereotype, namely that of the selfish, jealous and even “sexually repressed” southern woman (Ryan 156). It is indeed impressive how skilfully *Property* depicts the life of an unhappy mistress, who takes everything to the extreme, and whose actions are at times so scandalous that they raise questions about the intensity of the abuse prevalent in slavery. The best example to illustrate this is the most appalling scene of the entire book which presents Manon nursing at Sarah’s breast. Before discussing this episode in greater detail, it is worth incorporating a useful quote by Fox-Genovese (quoted in Ryan 162) since it sheds even more light on how some white southern women treated their slaves:

[...] privileged roles and identities of slaveholding women depended upon the oppression of slave women. Slaveholding women were elitist and racist [...]. From my reading of the diaries and private papers of the slaveholders, I have sadly concluded that the racism of the women was generally uglier and more meanly expressed than that of the men [...]. To view slaveholding women as the opponents of southern social relations is to extrapolate from their depictions of slavery as a personal burden to an assumed opposition to the social system as such.

Manon certainly belongs to the category of white women who oppress their slaves and what makes everything very bizarre is the fact that the mistress molests Sarah in exactly the same way as Mr. Gaudet did. Critics have commented on the striking scene from various perspectives, which in the end all point to the position of the slave who is exposed to a cruel and shameful exploitation, in a corrupted system that guarantees her no protection at all. The protagonist narrates the following experience:

The drop of milk still clung to the dark flesh of her nipple [...]. I dropped to my knees on the carpet before her [...]. I leaned forward until my mouth was close to her breast, the put out my tongue to capture the drop [...]. I guided the nipple to my lips and sucked gently [...]. This is what he does, I thought [...]. How wonderful I felt, how entirely free [...]. I opened my eyes and looked at Sarah's profile [...]. She's afraid to look at me, I thought. And she's right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her (Martin 81-82).

Manon's act is a "double violation" that entails both a form of rape and the defilement of her role as mother (Ryan 180)¹³. Moreover, he interprets this "instance of misogynistic violence" as a coinciding projection of the two main stereotypes that enslaved women were thought to fit into – "the sexually available Jezebel and the nursing Mammy" – (Ryan 180-181). King sees a connection between the scene when Manon witnesses her mother's death and the nursing scene since the woman who "look[s] around helplessly" (Martin 80) needs comfort and thus seeks it by "drinking sweet milk at Sarah's breast" (King 223). The slave becomes a "vital mother figure" for Manon, who had previously lost her mother in a traumatic way. Yet, this is an argument that King admits to lead to an oversimplification of the complexities existent in the relationship between the mistress and Sarah (224).

What is alluring about the description of this scene is its stress on the pleasure that Manon felt while transgressing the normal sexual limits and, therefore, humiliating Sarah. King argues that the mistress experiences a wonderful freedom and tingling in her own breasts because "she invokes the "rights" of the male master" (225) and can finally have access to that which only men do. This abuse also has implications for Sarah's children, who are the result of the master's exploitation of her body. Donaldson (quoted in King 226) states that Manon "coldly, methodically" takes Sarah's milk in a "violation" that is even more condemnable because milk is seen as "the only thing" an enslaved woman can offer her children. King concludes by indicating that "in stealing Sarah's milk, Manon firmly indicates her attitude toward Sarah and her children – none of them deserve her acknowledgment as human beings" (226).

¹³ Ryan refers to a scene in *Beloved*, but his argument is undoubtedly valid for *Property* as well

In *Property*, Martin reflects on the incapability of white women, who are without any doubt a product of their time, to show any kind of human feeling toward coloured women. It seems that it is not very likely that friendships between mistresses and slaves actually existed in the era of slavery (Ryan 184). This is the effect of the lack of values in the degrading system of slavery. Since owners had total control of their property, there was no limit to what they could do. Manon is the perfect example of someone who treats another person just like she has been treated by men in an utterly patriarchal southern society (Ryan 180). When Manon finally owns Sarah, being in the same position as Gaudet, who possessed both women while he was alive, she is determined not to let her go (Harrison 12). Mrs. Gaudet's dialogue with Mr. Roget clearly demonstrates that after Sarah's escape, Manon can only think of her in terms of recuperating her lost property (Ryan 180): "You seem to think I care for nothing but money. I am going to considerable expense to recover what is mine, by right and by law, and recover her I will" (186). Nothing can stand in the way of this determined woman who wants to know what it feels like to possess and decide over someone's fate.

Martin skilfully portrays the figure of a southern white woman who wants her share of power in a society that strongly makes use of it to control, manipulate, and impose on the victims of the system. Even if Manon is a member of the ruling class, accepting and supporting the social system that endows her with power over Sarah, she overlooks her privileged position when she "identifies with [the slave] as a fellow victim of white patriarchy" (Ryan 172). The white mistress sees herself as "a victim, a sister-sufferer to Sarah" (Ryan 178). There might be instances when we are tempted to believe that Manon is against slavery – she seems to reject her husband's conviction that black people "are brutes and have not the power of reason" (Martin 4) and she has a close relationship with Delphine, the cook of the house (discussed in Ryan 178) – but instead of freeing herself from patriarchy, she "chooses to perpetuate it" by exploiting Sarah (Ryan 176). She knows what it feels like to be humiliated and live under someone's authority (the simple fact that her husband asks to be served food by her when no other slave is in the room is offensive for Manon) and still, when she needs to take a decision, she prefers to subjugate Sarah,

showing this way that she is part of the “power structure of slavery” just as much as her husband was (Ryan 179).

Looking more deeply into Manon’s motivation and psychology challenges readers to ask themselves if these mistresses, who might have been “even uglier in their racism than their husbands”, were in fact as “sadistic and sexually repressed” as we find them oftentimes represented in the more modern American novels about slavery (Ryan 182). The protagonist is a figure that scandalises the reader and her obsession with Sarah shows that she does not find her place in the world even if she is theoretically independent after Gaudet’s death; nevertheless Manon feels “as if an iron collar, such as I have seen used to discipline field women, were fastened about my skull” (Martin 188). Her only concern is to persevere in her abuse of power, the only thing that really satisfies her. Martin’s complex depiction of Manon’s behaviour demonstrates that she is more dependent on Sarah than the slave is on her mistress, an aspect that reinforces the fact that slavery bred not only misuse, but also mutuality and shared dependency. Just how much masters and slaves depended on each other is different from case to case.

As mentioned in the first paragraphs of this section, the way slaves and masters speak and think about slavery is another illuminating detail on the dynamics of the relationship they had with each other. Sarah does not say much throughout the novel, her silence being in fact a “tactic” used for “survival” (Ryan 179), but when she does answer her mistress’s questions about her experience in the north, she stresses how much she enjoyed the freedom that she has tasted: “Yes, [...] It appeal to me” (208). Manon evaluates her words by concluding: “She had changed; she’d gone mad” (208) and cannot imagine that this “perfectly ridiculous” (209) situation might have actually happened somewhere in the north of America, a society where her southern exploitative mentalities are out of place. By presenting Sarah’s opinions about freedom, and not bondage, Martin stresses that slavery does not allow slaves to form their own beliefs and actually express them, so the first chance that this character has to reflect and then utter her thoughts is only after having experienced the sweet flavour of liberty. As regards the mistress’s judgements about the peculiar

institution, it has been previously shown that Manon criticises the system that, in her opinion, enslaves her just like it does the other black women, but that she is not willing to detach herself from. She does not agree with the southern patriarchal system treating white women unequally, but she is too caught up in slavery to consider it something bad for the black women.

Property also includes the standpoints of other characters on the topic of enslavement and black people's condition and it is interesting to observe just how dependent some masters were on those they held in captivity. Manon's father "became obsessed with the negroes [...] because he'd not grown up with any" (189) and her aunt assures her that "all the planters are obsessed with the negroes", confessing that her sister (Manon's mother) "came to feel [her husband] cared more about the negroes than he did about his family" (190). The narrator eventually dares to say this about her father: "My aunt was right, he was obsessed by the negroes, he wanted them to admire him, to adore him, and my mother was right as well; they had killed him" (197). This was the situation of a man who was not like most of the masters who terrorised their slaves, but whom Manon evaluates as "strict and fair" (23) and who did not take part in the "perverse practice" (24) of impregnating slave women. However, slaves were exotic beings that he was fascinated with and that he spent more time with than with his family, it seems.

Another aspect that deserves some attention is the correlation between racism and the enslaved losing their sense of worth as a consequence of the unbalanced master-slave relationship. In some cases this leads to submission and complacency, as can be seen in the figure of the Mammy. It can also lead to attempts to escape and/or kill the master, as shown through Sarah and the other slaves who start an insurrection. Moreover, "victims have their own peculiar power, a forgiveness to withhold, a silence to impose: the currency of martyrdom" (Harrison 12), a category that Sarah belongs to as well. How slaves cope with the harshness of the life on the plantation differs from situation to situation, but what is very clear is the fact that their identity and self-image is assuredly deformed by the genocidal experience of slavery.

To sum up, there are several things that Martin draws our attention to through her book. First, that interracial slave-mistress relationships can be so complex that they are unlikely to be followed by friendship, despite the fact that they involve intimacy and (mutual) dependence. Second, that white southern women might have been just as guilty as men of contributing to the perpetuation of a corrupted system which encouraged oppression and repeated abuses, all this having a negative impact on those who fell prey to the cruelty of their owners. Third, that a slave black woman who appears to be silent and manageable, despite enduring repeated sexual assaults, can become so determined that nothing can ultimately prevent her from escaping and making her way to a form of freedom that not even white plantation mistresses have access to.

2.4.2.2. Mr. Gaudet – Sarah

The typical situation of the libidinous slave-owner who rapes or sexually exploits black women in bondage on repeated occasions is an element that Martin did not leave out of her story. In many cases, it is the trigger for dramatic consequences in the lives of both oppressed and oppressor. Since *Property* renders both Gaudet and Sarah as “marginal figures” (Ryan 177), this being the result of Manon’s exclusive position as narrator and protagonist, an aspect already discussed in the previous sections, the relationship between the master and his slave is not sufficiently developed. However, Martin possesses the ability of saying much with few words, which means that readers comprehend the nature of their relationship even if the only tools employed are Manon’s manipulative perception and a few instances when Sarah and her slaveholder interact with each other. Mr. Gaudet is portrayed as being a very furious man because Sarah sexually resists him, having chosen another man to be her partner. He flies into a fit of rage when the news that Sarah and Bam want to marry reaches him, so Manon’s husband behaves like other plantation masters depicted in novels about slavery: he hurts the man and afterwards sells him, making sure that he marks the two slaves for life. Lastly, he punishes the woman by beating her and then makes her his concubine by force. It is the evolution of facts towards an unchangeable outcome, namely the birth of Walter

that generates Manon's sudden change of mind. She becomes, therefore, the psychic tormentor and unpredictable molester of another woman.

The scene of Sarah being caught in the act as she is leaving Gaudet's room late in the night (Martin 52) and the departure scene are representative of the way things developed in love triangles when the wife occupies the second place after the slave woman. Although Sarah despises her master, Manon tries to convince us that her husband is preoccupied with the fate of his sexual slave: "Nothing could have been more laughable than the touching scene of our departure: the master bids farewell to his wife and servant, tremulous with the fear that one of them may not return. But which one? He wishes I might die of cholera, and fears that she may instead" (Martin 67). Mr. Gaudet considers himself a vital part of both women's lives and he "cannot imagine his removal because, according to the patriarchal system under which they live, the stability of the two women's lives depends on his well-being" (King 221). He proudly addresses this issue in the following manner: "You women should think about what would become of you if I wasn't here" (17). This reveals the level of influence that southern men living on the nineteenth century slave plantations had not only on their possessions, that is the slaves, but also on their wives. Even though he arrogantly places himself at the top of the pyramid, Gaudet is fearful that his slave is poisoning him (Martin 6), complaining about the food on more than one occasion.

In summary, Martin presents the stereotypical master-slave relationship that paints a man whose inclinations towards the beautiful slave Sarah could have been encouraged by his wife's rejection to give him that which a husband is entitled to in the marital bed. While it could be argued that Manon's refusal to be intimate with Mr. Gaudet encouraged him to continue his affair with Sarah, it was surely not the reason why he started to sexually exploit his slave, since she was forced to sleep with him shortly after the couple got married. His wife had at that point not yet turned her back on marital relations. Gaudet uses Sarah for his own pleasure; however, he treats her in a reasonable way, in the sense that there are no scenes of brutal physical violence like in the case of other men

who whip and publicly humiliate their slaves (*Wench* provides some examples of these acts).

2.4.3. *Wench*

2.4.3.1. Drayle – Lizzie; Fran – Lizzie

Perkins-Valdez's novel depicts in great detail the relational aspect of the peculiar institution and it does so by focusing on the slave-master relationship in a specific context. The author explained in an interview with Delors how the idea of writing *Wench* arose and revealed that she read a line about a summer resort in Ohio that actually existed and that was very popular among white owners and their slaves. Consequently, Valdez started to write a book meant to answer her own questions about what life would have been like for those women (Interview 4).¹⁴ This detail is relevant for analysing the type of relationships that Perkins-Valdez imagined between her characters because the novel deals with one particular setting and centres on the segment of the emotional life of these concubines who were taken on "vacation" by their masters. Therefore, her novel does not include the full spectrum of plantation life, but it still underlines some of the salient aspects of how bondage influenced both the slaves' inner lives and their behaviour development within the relationships with white men. Although all four wenchs are presented in connection with their owners and the nature of the relationship between them, the book allocates the most space to the relation that Lizzie has with Drayle. Their interactions as well as the relationship between the master's concubine and his wife are the main interests of this section.

The fact that Valdez opted for a romanticised and eminently exaggerated depiction of the nature of relationship that white southern master Drayle has with young slave girl Lizzie is perhaps an attempt to avoid the employment of conventional and "long-established strategies" for depicting slavery in literature that Ryan (189) refers to in his study (see page 18). In order not to run the danger of transforming the peculiar institution into something "familiar" and

¹⁴ The interview is included in the appendix of the novel

“commonplace” (Ryan 189) as it often happens with those novels working with traditional forms, *Wench* moves away from the violence-based relationship between slaveholder and his slave woman and imagines a story in which the two claim to love each other. Whether this is an original strategy or simply a romanticised way of looking at relationships in bondage is something that readers have to decide for themselves. The focus here is to shed light on the effects that this kind of representation of slave-master relationship has on our understanding of the way of life in slavery.

Drayle and Lizzie’s story starts the way other master-slave intimate relationships begin, namely by using the black woman for sexual favours from a very young age. The licentious white man who has no regard for the feelings of the other person is a motif employed strategically by several other novels in order to stress the salacious aspect of life under slavery. It is not necessarily shocking that Lizzie is thirteen when she is found by her master and considered “appropriate” to become his “lover”, since it seems quite common for men in slavery to misuse girls regardless of their maturity. Reenie is another example of this abuse; she was raped from an early age by her half-brother. What is intriguing about the way things function between the two protagonists is the shameless attitude of the master, who seduces naive Lizzie with his flattery, hiding his real intentions. Drayle asks for permission to touch her, he gradually trains her in experiencing pleasure, and after their first sexual encounter on the kitchen floor he even tells Lizzie that he is sorry for what has previously happened (89). All this might seem like the beginning of a romance, but the evolution of things clearly shows that all his actions were carefully planned. The fact that Drayle teaches the woman how to read and write and brings her sister to her only to receive his reward in bed shows that even his best intentions in fact hide filthy expectations (101).

It is incomprehensible that a white man living in that society would treat his slave as mentioned above, given the context of the situation of those in bondage who were flogged and violated by cruel owners. Perkins-Valdez surprises readers, who have their own conceptual map, and who need to be alert in order to position themselves for the future development of the situation:

“Come on, Lizzie. Haven’t I done right by you? Haven’t I always treated you like you were my very own wife? He kissed her behind her right ear, whispered the word *wife* as if it had a magical property all its own” (22, emphasis in original). Nathaniel Drayle also tries to convince Lizzie that she is special, that she was picked out of all the slave women, that she is the first slave girl he has ever brought into his house and that she is the mother of his firstborn (23). As the story unfolds, it becomes obvious that the master not only maintains the sexual relationship with the young woman, but he also purposefully takes Lizzie under his wings and educates her, sees her grow and puts her in a place that contributes to a powerful attachment to his person. Because she is indeed very young, – at sixteen, already the mother of two children – Lizzie finds it very hard to detach herself from her owner, who has controlled her mind to the extent that she reminds herself of his goodness when she hears the tragic stories of the other women: “So different from what she had with Drayle. She loved him. He loved her. And even more, he was good to her. Hadn’t he fixed the leaky cabin roof that was dripping on his children’s heads?” (57).

Both Drayle and Lizzie’s inability to break the emotional dependency that they share is a strong tool that Valdez employed in order to emphasise, even if through the outrageous situation of a love scenario between master and slave, the deep marks that slavery might have left on the sentiments of those involved in it. While Lizzie is convinced that she loves her master so much that she would grieve like a widow after his death (78), Drayle himself thinks of what it might be like if the young woman were not in his life anymore; he fears being left behind, were Lizzie to run away (66). This is perhaps the reason why he ties her like a dog (286), a gesture of unexpected evilness coming from a man in love, but of predictable arrogance coming from a man who above everything else remains the possessor of Lizzie. Change is oftentimes hard to cope with, and in a system like slavery, which preserved things without questioning them, the sudden disappearance of an attachment figure like a master or a slave probably had various implications for the future of both.

The way slaveholders and slaves speak and think about slavery is an aspect that also needs to be included in the section discussing *Wench* since it reveals

attitudes that differ from those described in *Kindred* and *Property*. Since the story is set in the 1850s, relatively close to the Civil War, the novel includes discussions between white men who comment on the new Fugitive Slave Law and on possible tensions between the North and the South. A plantation owner stresses that the country could do nothing “with a bunch of freed niggers” (50), while Drayle is sure that nobody can end slavery “anytime soon” because “this country has been built by men like us” (52). Interestingly, when he expresses his views on slavery in his talk with Lizzie, he refers to things totally differently: “You imagine too much. I never should have taught you to read. Slavery won’t last forever, what with all this abolitionist talk going on” (22). His words are clearly meant to quiet Lizzie, who persistently asks her master to free their children, this showing his duplicity and ability to adapt according to different situations.

Slaves also speak among themselves about the horrible system of slavery and Mawu clearly expresses her strong desire to stop being a victim of it: “Mawu worked on them in the days following their visit to Lewis House: nudging, cajoling, infusing them with thoughts of escape. She asked them: *How can you stand being a slave? Don’t you want to claim that arm? That leg? That breast?*” (42, emphasis in original). Valdez also inserted the content of a pamphlet in her novel, all slaves being all ears when Lizzie read it out (208-211 and 219-220). The ideas expressed by the abolitionists inspire and encourage the Africans, who have access for the very first time to valuable insights that put into words that which they so fervently desire: “*slaveholding is a heinous crime [...] demand its immediate abolition, without expatriation*” (209, emphasis in original). *Wench* thus makes a clear point and creates occasions for slaves to debate, to take heart, and dream of liberty.

The last part of the analysis is dedicated to the brief presentation of the relationship between Lizzie and Drayle’s wife, Fran. The theme of the childless mistress whose unfaithful husband impregnates enslaved black women on the plantation is also incorporated by Perkins-Valdez in her novel. Unlike Manon in *Property*, Fran is less inclined to punish the slave for becoming her husband’s concubine. However, she still shows her disapprobation and sometimes pinches

Lizzie after her failure to get rid of her by selling her to another plantation. What the author is more focusing on is the way in which all women, black and white, were affected by slavery. She makes her point by presenting a mistress figure that is very hurt inside and who takes everything as her personal failing in marriage: "Fran's eyes were never the same. Sometimes, they were listless and empty, staring down at her needlework as if wondering how it had appeared in her hands". She even pretends that she did not see her husband and his lover in the kitchen after having spent the night together, a humiliating experience that certainly feels like a knife in the back: "Lizzie could not see Fran's face, but she imagined it wore a quizzical expression" (102). In accordance with the normality of these acts during slavery, Drayle reassures his concubine that there is nothing to fear: "I reckon Fran doesn't mind. She's a Southern woman. She expects a man to do certain things" (102). Therefore, white women not only had to put up with their husbands' sexual affairs with black women, and oftentimes with seeing the mixed blood children grow up on the plantation, but they also faced the mentality of that time according to which these things were normal for men.

The depiction of how Fran feels about the slave woman is again exaggerated just like the whole story of Drayle and Lizzie. Nevertheless, it does provide an understanding of the complex palette of emotions that might have existed in the heart of women who had no choice but to live in a precarious system that disgraced them just as much as it did black women. Although they were not physically abused and repeatedly punished by white men, southern women were nevertheless extremely embarrassed by their husbands' corrupt behaviour, whether they acknowledged it or not. Fran openly admits that she "was always jealous of [Lizzie] because [she] gave him children when [Fran] couldn't" and because the enslaved woman was brought to the summer resort without her, which to her was "downright disrespectful" (269). Despite all this, it seems that Drayle's wife never hated Lizzie. She proves it by watching over her at night so that her husband would not abuse Lizzie, by bringing her water when she is thirsty and by making her bed close to Lizzie's. This kind of behaviour is absolutely unexpected for the slave, who interprets it as vulnerability: "In this unfamiliar setting, Lizzie could clearly make out Fran's vulnerability. The white

woman stared at Lizzie as if she needed to know what the younger slave woman wanted to say to her, as if she didn't have a closer friend in the world who understood the problems of her intimate domestic life better than Lizzie did" (271).

The message transmitted through this uncommon representation of a white woman's impressions about the most humiliating situation a wife could experience is that of a desperate need for answers in order to come to terms with the pain of adultery. Fran needs to understand why things happened that way in her home and she hopes to grasp more by connecting with the young slave. This issue of conjugal infidelity both unites and separates the two women. They are the victims of an unhealthy form of life in which they share the same man, which possibly creates a bond of solidarity in the sense that they are in the same boat; they form together a love triangle which enables them to go through similar emotions. Nonetheless, their totally different positions within their individual relationships with Drayle show the degree of distinction between two women, who envy one another and would rather have the things that the other one possesses. In this case, Fran wants Lizzie's role as mother, while the slave desires her mistress's beauty and freedom.

In short, Perkins-Valdez imagines an utterly unusual situation as regards the nature of the relationship that both Drayle and Fran have with Lizzie. The novelist's choice to move beyond the traditional representation of cruel men who rape and beat their enslaved women (as nevertheless illustrated by the other three slave masters) can be seen as an attempt to investigate in greater detail the emotional involvement of both parts and to exemplify the terms of mutual dependency. The portrayal of a possible romance between two people involved in an unbalanced relationship challenges the understanding that readers have of the way life looked like during slavery, forcing them to rethink things. *Wench* also accentuates the damage caused by the peculiar institution to all the women that lived during that era by insightfully presenting the sentiments of the plantation mistress in her interactions with her husband's concubine.

2.4.4. Comparing and concluding

Kindred investigates the complexity of the interpersonal side of slavery by focusing on the one hand on the unlimited abusive power of the oppressor, exemplified by Tom Weylin and Rufus, and on the dependency of these white men on their slaves (Alice and Dana) on the other. Their brutal behaviour leaves marks on the victims' bodies and souls, revealing the vulnerability of black women. However, these men are caught in complicated relationships with black women that they depend on (Rufus who is fixed on Alice) or that intimidate them (as shown by Dana, whom both Tom and Margaret fear). Butler also discusses the condition of the powerless slave who nevertheless finds possible ways of resistance (Sarah and Alice) and accentuates how rapid the adaptation to plantation life can be for outsiders who have never had anything to do with the peculiar institution (Dana and Kevin). This way, she stresses that slavery impacts the present and shows how deep the wounds that it caused are, affecting future generations that go through a process of comprehension and evaluation of what the past meant for their ancestors.

Property deals primarily with the effects of slavery on southern white women and their contribution to the perpetuation of the unfair system, as illustrated by the unusual and perverse relationship that Manon forces her slave Sarah into. The level of dependency (the master and mistress) and vulnerability (the slave woman) are aspects that are visible in this novel as well, Martin providing a very original picture of what the abuse of power during slavery might have looked like. *Wench* introduces its readers to a world that partially romanticises the relationships between master/mistress and slave, but that clearly unmasks the consequences resulting from the pain of bondage on the emotions of enslaved women. Similar to the other two books, the motifs of dependence and fragility are crucial elements that Perkins-Valdez looks at through her construction of interracial relationships. The degree of dependence is so strong in Lizzie's case that, unlike her female companions, the offer of freedom does not motivate her to leave her old life behind and start a new one, far away from captivity.

These three novels differ in their illustrations of how master/mistress-slaves relationships might have looked like in the era of slavery, but they all include an obvious focus on the uneven character of their interactions. Furthermore, the details provided about the treatment of slaves, plantation life, and living conditions in antebellum America, which Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez “painstakingly re-create” in their novels, noticeably make their works historiographic (Turner 263). In this sense, it can be argued that through their stories, the novelists shape history and hence create identity, which goes beyond a mere representation of the past. The history of slavery is therefore accessed as a narrative which enables these writers to interpret and represent events from their own point of view (see Nünning 216 on page 33).

Human relationships are one of the most dynamic and complex aspects of the history of the peculiar institution. The central place that they occupy in these novels shows the continuous interest of novelists for a theme that offers inexhaustible possibilities to imagine, reveal, criticise and testify. This way, their depictions bring to life things that those who did not experience them want and need to know, because the understanding of the relationship between the powerful and the powerless certainly contributes to a deeper awareness of its impact on the interracial situation nowadays.

2.5. Children of slaves: freedom or bondage?

The third significant theme that all novels discussed include in their representations of slavery is the situation of children in the peculiar institution. This aspect is connected to the previous two chapters dealing with depictions of female slaves and their relationships with white masters/mistresses due to a number of reasons that this section touches upon in detail. Therefore, special attention is given to the link between the experience of maternity and the life of women during slavery as well as to the interplay between the harshness of masters and the tragic destiny of children born on plantations. By including the difficult condition of both children resulting from interracial relationships (white master and black slave) and children born from the union of black slaves, the

novels focus on the problematic inheritance that they receive, namely enslavement.

The lesson of inferiority was written not only on the bodies of blacks, but also on the bodies of their children (Higginbotham 91), which shows that the slaves' offspring did not escape the cruel fate of their parents. The enslaved mother, who had no right to own herself or her children, neither to choose her sexual partner nor utilise contraceptive methods, had absolutely no control of the future of the ones she gave birth to. Under these conditions, the institution drastically restricted the influence of the mother in the life of her progeny. Moreover, the experience of motherhood was one of the most difficult things that the slaves had to go through since it impacted their whole being. Not only did they have to carry their pregnancy to term in harsh circumstances, but they often lost their babies at birth or had to endure the constant pain of seeing them abused under their own eyes. These women lived in continuous peril of separation from their children (Mitchell 26). Motherhood sometimes contributed to black women pretending "complacency" because running away was more complicated for black mothers. Yet, there were cases when motherhood motivated women to rebel or escape (Mitchell 26).

As regards the connection between the theme of this chapter and that of the previous one, mixed children born during slavery were indeed the result of forced sexual relationships between black women and white owners, which made them the visible evidence of the violations prevalent in the system. More than that, the type of relationship that their mother had with the white master influenced to a certain extent how these illegitimate children were treated. Some concrete examples are provided in the course of the analysis of the three novels. As for the children born to black slaves, the mean master was the only one who decided what would happen to his new property. No matter whether he sold or kept them on the plantation, the children did not belong to their parents, who were undoubtedly filled with sorrow as they were witnessing the unfair situation without having a word in it. Real cases from the past attest to this truth, stressing the distress of parents who experienced the painful removal of their offspring: "If there was any one act of my life while a slave, that I have to lament

over”, writes Henry Bibb, “it is that of being a father and a husband of slaves”. Elizabeth Keckley reported:”I could not bear the thought of bringing children into slavery” (quoted in Bromell 179).

All these points mentioned above demonstrate the connection between black women, unbalanced interracial relationships and the situation of children during slavery. These aspects are inextricably linked and they represent three major elements that compose the interpersonal side of the institution, novelist creating fascinating stories that imagine how difficult/impossible it might have been to live in the context of the inhumane conditions of enslavement. Stressing the children’s hopelessness and lack of perspective is for sure a strategy that is relevant when it comes to bringing the past to life.

2.5.1. *Kindred*

2.5.1.1. Rufus and Alice’s children

Butler emphasises several important aspects about the lamentable state of human relationships in slavery through her construction of the situation of children on the Weylin plantation. Alice, an enslaved woman, passes on the bondage to her children after they are born. She gives birth to four children, but two die as infants because the medical care was improper (210). As expected, the mother has no word to say in the whole matter. The two children that remain are then used by Rufus like “a bit in [Alice’s] mouth” (Butler 235) and they become in fact objects employed by the man to “control Alice’s affection and sexual behaviour toward him” (Mitchell 53). Other strategies used by Rufus in order to “remind Alice of his dominion over her” are manipulation and intimidation. He does so by pretending that the children have been sold, when he actually only sent them from the plantation to scare Alice (Mitchell 54). The outcome of this game is the death of the enslaved woman, who resolves that dying is more appealing than living. This incident proves what a great influence the loss of children had on the life of black mothers.

The question of the affection that enslaved mothers felt for their children is also relevant in this context. As *Kindred* indicates, the institution of slavery gave no value to the experience of maternity, considering black women producers of

human chattel and not mothers. Therefore, it can be argued that the female parent might have considered her pregnancy, and ultimately her offspring, a mere burden and not a gift to rejoice about. Alice is the living proof that children were inopportune as she was trying to free herself from Rufus. She knows that escaping alone is difficult, but doing so with young children is perhaps impossible, so Alice “represses her own desires and submits to Rufus’s desires”, hoping that there will come a day when her children will be free (Mitchell 53). If the woman in bondage strongly hates the man who impregnates her, and then experiences extremely inhumane moments during her gravidity and immediately after, can she really love the children that do not even belong to her? Alice loves her children “[...] in spite of the way she talked, she obviously loved the child” (210), but the peculiar institution “constricts and circumscribes her love for them” (Mitchell 53).

Alice was denied her right to enjoy her children, and although she did not have the close tie that mothers normally have to their babies, she still had hopes for her offspring and was confident about their future. This is shown by the names that she chose for her babies, namely Joseph and Hagar, Biblical persons who were enslaved in the Old Testament, but who “didn’t have to stay slaves” (234), something that she desires for her boy and girl as well (Mitchell 53). Interestingly, Joe is a “thin pale little boy” (209), who resembles Rufus a lot, which is difficult for Alice to accept. She finds more pleasure in the birth of her baby girl, who has dark skin: “ ‘Bout time I had a baby to look like me’, said Alice when she saw her” (233). Butler highlights the sense of pride that black people have when it comes to preserving the features of their race through the birth of members of the next generation, and shows through Alice that bearing a white child represents an additional shame because it is another proof of white dominion.

Another relevant point that all novels make is the way these illegitimate children relate to their fathers. In *Kindred*, the two children that Alice brought into the world eventually learn that the white master is also their father, but only after their mother’s death: “The boy had spent his short life calling his father ‘Master’. Well, now that he no longer had a mother, I supposed Rufus thought it was time

he had a father” (253). Butler thus demonstrates how changeable things are for the identity of mixed-race children. The behaviour of fathers toward their children is also worth noting here. Rufus did threaten Alice several times that he would sell their children, but in the end he allows Dana to teach his son how to read and even gives Joe lessons himself. This is a surprising position for a white master who previously intended to sell his children away. By this, Butler plants seeds of hope and suggests that in some cases hard hearts might have been softened by children.

Kindred also provides insight into how master Tom Weylin treated his son in order to point out that he had the same cold heart as far as Rufus was concerned. In his world, everything gravitated around money, and this was true in all situations, regardless of the mortal danger that his boy was exposed to: “Weylin grunted and knelt to look at Rufus’s leg. ‘Guess it’s broken all right. Wonder how much that’ll cost me’. The black man gave him a look of disgust that would surely have angered him if he had seen it” (65). On the next occasion when Rufus is in trouble, his father says: “He was sick yesterday, puking all over. But he would get up and go out today. *Damn fool!*” (130, emphasis added) When Dana reminds him that she saved Rufus’s life, who “might have died out there sick and injured and alone”, Weylin responds: “And you think I ought to be grateful?” (130). White masters are presented in this novel as excessively cruel beings with stony hearts, whom the system has corrupted so much that they did not even care about their legitimate children. How were these men to care about the ones their slave women gave them, if they saw them as mere instruments to get rich once they sold their sons and daughters? Playing with the idea of selling children is something that Rufus learned from his father and then used on his own offspring, but unlike Tom Weylin, he never made the transaction.

The last part of this section deals with the way black people talk about enslavement with their children and how they address this difficult topic in the presence of the younger generation that the reality of slavery is passed on to. The most relevant example is that of Alice’s family. Alice’s mother was free, so her daughter remained free as well, but she lost contact to her husband

because he was not allowed to see her anymore. Weylin wanted him to choose a new wife on the plantation so that he could own all his future children (40). The woman warned her daughter that “marrying a slave is almost as bad as being a slave” and concluded that she would rather die than be a slave (156-157). This signals the concern of the black parents, who make their children aware of the impact that the decisions they take can have on their future. However, Alice does not consider her mother’s advice and loses her freedom by assisting Isaac’s escape, which brings enslavement as her punishment for collaborating with him.

2.5.1.2. Other children on the plantation

The way Butler presents the situation of the other children born on the plantation reveals additional attitudes about the perspective of whites with regard to the function of slaves and their treatment. It is not only Tom Weylin, who heartlessly sells Sarah and other women’s children, that behaves in a deplorable way, but Margaret is herself unkind to the little babies that remained on their property. She slaps one of the children hard across the face because it toddles into her path, punishing this way a child for her husband’s sins (Butler 85). The babies that visibly resemble Weylin have even a harder life because they and their mothers are the only people that the cheated white woman can take revenge on. This is an element that all three novelists employ in their illustration of the mistresses’ manner of showing their rage, the innocent mixed children being totally vulnerable to these women’s whims. Margaret’s behaviour changes radically with the time, her illness making her softer. She is very sensitive with Nigel and Carrie’s children: she wants to see them and is “sugary sweet with them [...] Slave children hadn’t interested her unless her husband had fathered them. Then her interest had been negative. But she gave Nigel’s sons candy and they loved her” (218).

Just like Alice, the other black parents cannot change the life of their children and have to accept the fact that they will grow up in bondage. As Nigel watched his three sons, he sadly confessed to Dana: “It’s good to have children [...] Good to have sons. But it’s so hard to see them be slaves” (209). Nevertheless, Nigel cannot be stopped in his quest for the education of his children, a thing

that is made possible by Dana's presence on the Weylin plantation. After the word spreads, several other slave children are taught how to read and write. Butler also suggests that slavocracy made a clear distinction between those black babies that increased the wealth of their owner and those who, due to their handicap, were no good. This is the case of Carrie, who was not sold away like her siblings because she was deaf and nobody would have been interested in buying her. Ironically, defective children might have had easier lives than those who were perfectly healthy, and therefore apt for work.

The importance given to the peculiar situation of children during enslavement reveals pivotal aspects of life that Butler critically refers to. One of this is the paradoxical nature of the system in which women consolidate or ruin power abuse. Richard states that the "colonized women" in *Kindred* do their best to remain alive, although this implies that they "ironically perpetuate the society that denies them power, as their children enrich a variety of slavemasters" (120). On the other hand, a slave that dies reduces the slaveholder's property and "eliminates the personal agency of that slave's many potential descendants". Butler gives intensity to this complex paradox by creating a character whose existence is totally dependent on Alice's rape (Richard 120). Second, she stresses how slavery affected several generations: *Kindred* "acknowledges the impact of slavery not just on isolated individuals but on entire families and networks of kin" (Yaszek 1057). Third, the image of the children separated from their parents is a critique aimed at the inequalities in society. Jordan discusses the connection between the "abandoned, lost or orphaned [slave] child" and the concept of "social displacement and dissociation" and suggests that it sheds light on "the consequences of abandonment of responsibility in a larger social context" (10). Consequently, she argues that "the state of orphanage is just a useful metaphor for all sorts of injustice" (10).

To sum up, the presentation of the way slavery impacted children certainly affects readers, who are transported to a world where blacks are totally unprotected and where whites are not punished for their physical and emotional maltreatment toward slaves. In a malign system that perverted relations and

behaviour, the unfathomable pain caused by the loss of children can partially be grasped by allowing readers access to the feelings of African women who have experienced the deep sorrow of having their babies removed from them. Empathy and solidarity are two aspects that define the lives of the female characters in *Kindred*, as exemplified by Sarah's confession: "when he took away her children, I thought she was go' die right there. She was screaming and crying and carrying on. Then she got sick and I had to take care of her. When Marse Tom sold my babies, I just wanted to lay down and die. Seeing her like she was brought all that back" (250). Bearing children in slavery only added to the anguish that characterised the hard existence of blacks.

2.5.2. Property

2.5.2.1. Walter

Valerie Martin makes room in her novel for the depiction of children's life on the plantation under those difficult circumstances and presents their situation from the viewpoint of the white plantation mistress. Therefore, the perspective exhaustively reflects the position of a powerful figure that is unsympathetic but that poses like a victim, attempting to explain how much distress the existence of these slave children causes. The main focus is on Walter, Manon's husband's illegitimate son, but there are some instances that deal with the other two children that Sarah gave birth to. The first one is the baby boy taken from her by Gaudet because Sarah resisted him and wanted to marry the father of her newborn (26). The second one is a girl, whom she gets to keep and even run away with after the slave rebellion. The narrator notes that the baby "will be passed down to the quarter as soon as it's weaned and sold away when it is old enough to work. He won't get much for her. Ugly, dark little girls aren't easy to sell" (7). However, against all of Manon's predictions, her husband does not sell this one, the text suggesting that Gaudet could be the father: "the poor creature becomes uglier every day, and its hair has come in thick, *curly*, and *red*" (67, emphasis added). It is also implied that Sarah has to please her master in order to obtain favours for her daughter, which points, just like in *Kindred*, to the fact that the nature of the slave-master relation influenced the treatment of the enslaved children: "Why did he let her keep that child? I thought. What had she done to make him agree to it, what bargain had she struck, what promise given?" (80).

Mr. Gaudet's first born Walter has his father's curly red hair and green eyes (5) and his birth affects Manon so much that she loses the little desire that she had for her husband (60) and refuses to grant him his marital rights. She is so disgusted with the situation that she refers to the boy as "little bastard [...]" eating bits of meat from his father's hand like a dog"; "a mad creature" (5); "Walter's mad face" (36); "horrid creature"; "a charming child" (ironically of course); "this monster" (37); "the naked, filthy, squirming, screaming body of Walter" (118). Moreover, the boy is deaf, Martin including a defective child in her story as well¹⁵, possibly in an attempt to stress the worthlessness that a disability adds to the identity of enslaved children. Walter is the object of ridicule for the men who invade the house, who sarcastically comment: "he a little yellow monkey" (118); "Miss High Yellow got herself a little redheaded monkey" (119). For the cheated white mistress, the boy is a shameful expression of her husband's perverse inclination; she is deeply humiliated in front of her friend Joel, who took in "the mad creature's marked resemblance to [her] husband" (30).

Martin's choice to concentrate on the figure of the bastard reflects her critical observations on southern society. According to Harrison, "despite his behavior, Walter looks like a cherub. His role, it becomes clear, is that of the holy fool, an innocent who alerts us to the sins of those we might mistakenly assume to be humane, or even civilized" (10). For King, "Walter serves as a bodily reminder of the slave system under which they all live, yet Manon does not think about him with such depth. Walter embarrasses Manon and therefore Sarah should have to live with that embarrassment as well" (228). The novelist herself speaks about this character: "I get accused of being a Gothic writer a lot, and I think, in a way, that Walter contains that Gothic quality of being that uncontrollable force". Martin compares him to a pet: "because his behavior is so unpredictable, they put him on a leash when they walk through the streets of New Orleans with him [...] Nobody, not even his own mother, Sarah, really thinks of him as useful or functional" (Interview 15).

¹⁵ See Carrie in *Kindred*

Manon stresses her superiority over black people by ridiculing slaves. She mentions that she was never allowed to play with the negro children since her father considered it “a perverse practice” (24). Also, the mistress remembers the episode of Celeste, a slave on her father’s plantation, breastfeeding her brother and her own baby at the same time. The black woman’s milk had to suffice for her own baby and that of the white mistress, since nursing white babies was a practice that was common on the plantation: “perhaps that was how the poison entered us all” (195). Walter is not just an obstacle and a shame, but a *persona non grata* so to say, and Mrs. Gaudet underlines this on several occasions: “Walter, I thought. My husband’s curse, as impossible to accustom myself to or rid myself of as my own crippled right arm” (167). In her conversation with her brother-in-law, Manon openly reveals her hatred: “It would be for the best if that child had never been born” (151) and remarks that Mr. Gaudet’s brother sees Walter as “one piece of his brother’s property he wanted nothing to do with” (150). The child’s wildness and unpredictability makes him highly undesirable, this highlighting that the boy is out of place, being rejected by everyone.

Sarah does not show her son that there is a place within her where he belongs. The woman’s behaviour towards Walter stresses her lack of affection, used as a tool to rebel against what Gaudet has done to her: “she continued to evidence an aversion to Walter” (206). She pushes him away roughly after having laid “the flat of her hand across his face” (207), a gesture that Manon sees and then uses to throw into Sarah’s face that even if the boy reminds her of Gaudet, he is her responsibility. “He’s as much your responsibility as mine [...] God knows, I didn’t ask for him, but here he is” (207). Manon wants Sarah to live with Walter, too, if that is what she, an unfortunate widow, must do, and tells Mr. Roget that Walter is not old enough to be separated from his mother. Yet again, Manon makes herself look like a considerate mistress by stressing that she has always abhorred the policy of selling children away from their only protector, in this case the mother. This way, Manon’s hypocrisy is revealed, since she knows very well that enslaved women are not in the condition of protecting their children. She even claims that she follows the example of her father, who “was strongly opposed to the unnecessary breakup of family connections” (182).

Walter's father treats him harshly, too, the narrator exemplifying Gaudet's aggressive nature: "[...] a man who strikes a child at a dinner party" (31). Nevertheless, the master calls the doctor when he learns that his son cannot hear. Since the narration is unreliable, readers cannot draw a clear conclusion concerning the relationship between Mr. Gaudet and Walter, but what is obvious is that the boy is on shaky ground, with no parent to provide for him. It is comprehensible that the mixed child has no rights and no future in the context of the southern antebellum society; yet Manon refers to Walter as "the heir apparent" (146), but only after Gaudet's death, when she openly mentions that her husband is the father of the boy (131). Having no family, the blacks improvise one for Walter. Delphine and Rose are the two surrogate mothers who assume responsibility for the boy. Dandridge notes that this was a common practice during slavery, and for the innocent slave children, these women (sisters and grandmothers who became surrogate mothers) were "constitutive and protective agents" (37).

In summary, *Property* focuses on the problematic circumstances of children born to slaves during chattel slavery from the unusual point of view of the dominant wife, who sees herself, and not the infants, as the true victim of the institution. The novel also shows that despite the hindrance that bearing children represented to the freedom that black women longed for, in some cases – like Sarah's, who dares to run away with her baby, despite knowing how hard it is to successfully escape in those conditions – victory is possible even with a nursing baby in the arms.

2.5.3. *Wench*

2.5.3.1. Lizzie's children

Perkins-Valdez's novel includes many of the aspects discussed in the previous two sections about the thematic of children's situation under slavery. There are several common motifs and elements that all three novels include in their representation of slaves' offspring's condition, which demonstrates that these novelists use similar strategies to draw the attention to this sensitive issue. In *Wench*, the following facts and their illustration are of particular relevance. First, the racially mixed children are fathered by a man whose wife is barren, so it is

the slave woman who gives the white master his first born (in Lizzie's case). Unlike Alice in *Kindred* and Sarah in *Property*, the heroine of *Wench* is enthusiastic about bearing the heir of her owner: "Lizzie was glad she had named her son after him. Nathaniel Drayle, just like his daddy. Fran had opposed it, of course. At first, she had refused to call Drayle's son anything at all, simply referring to him as boy" (21).

The mistress's reaction when she learns that her husband impregnated a slave woman and her treatment of the illegitimate children are also central factors that enhance the understanding of this topic. It is obvious that such a change impacts a woman's life, Valdez focusing on the level of emotion involved in the process of coping with the birth of babies resulting from extramarital affairs: "Fran took the news with what appeared to be a deliberating sadness. She stayed in her room all day and slept. She ceased going to town. As the Christmas holidays neared, she did nothing to prepare" (115). Her behaviour towards Nate and Rabbit is unusual, but certainly well thought out and intentional. At first, she shows her hatred and disapproval, being ashamed when her guests see the children and notice that Drayle fathered them (128). Her humiliation results from the visible resemblance between her husband and the enslaved children, a painful reminder of Drayle's infidelity exposed to her close friends. With time, Fran tries to win the children over to her side by giving Rabbit and Nate sweets, by having them sleep beside her in bed (130-131), by buying them fine clothes and spoiling them so much that they become arrogant and start feeling superior to the other slaves' children. This is a way of showing the contrast between a slave woman, who is not even allowed to nurse her children or sleep in the same room with them and the mistress, who takes the two under her wing to hurt Lizzie. It is Fran's strategy, employed in order to take revenge and to show the black woman that although she can bear children, she has no right over them in the end. The mistress, a barren woman, becomes their mother for a short time: "Fran rushed at her and slapped Lizzie on the face hard. 'Don't you ever touch my children again, do you hear me?'" (139). However, the arrival of Fran's nephew puts an end to the privileges that they enjoyed when they are sent back to the quarters (146), which signifies that the game is over and that the children are toys that she got bored of.

The identity crisis of the mixed children is accentuated here as well; the boy cannot distinguish between his master and his father, but he clearly longs for the attention of a male figure (244). Drayle's comportment towards his children is unaggressive, but nevertheless unreasonable for a father: he threatens Lizzie to have Nate beaten if she continues to ask for Philip's freedom. Yet, given the circumstances of life under slavery, his behaviour is not surprising at all. Along with the quest for education, Lizzie urges Drayle to free the children on several occasions and refuses to give up fighting for their freedom. She tries to convince him by saying that Nate and Rabbit are too soft for slavery. Moreover, were Drayle to die, her children would ultimately be sold to a mean owner or remain completely unprotected if Fran outlives him. This is in fact the struggle that accompanies the main character from the beginning till the end of the novel. She is willing to do anything – Drayle takes advantage of this by putting sexual pressure on Lizzie and making her do things that she hates, but that she nevertheless complies with to protect her children – in order to see her offspring released from bondage, and the sight of the free coloured folk gives her hope for Nate and Rabbit. Drayle plans to have his son educated, but not the girl, which disturbs Lizzie. Education, however, does not equal freedom: "I didn't say that. He is still my son, and so still my rightful property" (284). Philip, a slave on the same plantation, believes that Drayle will never free the children because they are "his blood" and he does not want to lose them (178).

Lastly, the way children influence the decision to escape is also explored by Perkins-Valdez. When Lizzie suspects that she might be pregnant again, she must take a big decision. If she keeps the baby, she has to remain with Drayle, since a newborn would be a great obstacle for her journey to liberty (263). On the other hand, she considers causing an abortion because bearing children only results in adding slaves to his property. Lizzie's refusal to continue to perpetuate enslavement is her tool to rebel against Drayle. She shows her master that although she is but a slave woman, she has to some extent the power to punish him by killing his property before he even possesses it. This attitude reveals a change in Lizzie's thinking patterns: "All these years, she realized, she had been putting her faith in Drayle to free her children. Now she had to put her faith in herself" (290).

2.5.3.2. Mawu, Reenie, and Sweet's children

This section briefly discusses the situation of the other women's children and focuses on those aspects that bring new insights into the representation of slavery by means of focusing on the most innocent victims of the system. The question of the role that children play in the decision-making process of running away is given additional connotations by imagining the stories of Mawu and Sweet. When Sweet answers Mawu's question about what is hindering them from escaping, she mentions that her four children are the reason, that she needs to stay where she is because otherwise she does not know what will happen to them. The daring wild red-haired woman replies: "Who don't got childrens? But what I'm gone do for my child as a slave woman? I need to run off so as I can try to get my boy out. As long as I is a slave, ain't nothing gone change" (37). Glory, a Christian white woman, disagrees with Mawu's decision to leave her boy behind: "What kind of mother. Glory left the sentence unfinished" (253). This highlights how different women under slavery thought about the same aspect of life, and suggests that free white women, no matter how well-intentioned, only saw things from their perspective, too easily judging their readiness to find a new life without their children.

White masters' attitude towards their mixed children is revealed again, this time by the example of Tip, Mawu's owner. The woman brought four children into the world, but three were sold. The younger boy remained with her because he was a "slow blue-eyed nigger" who had been dropped as a baby and hit his head on a rock, therefore only starting to talk when three years old. Tip denied that this defective child was his (40), which again accentuates the worthlessness associated with those children who were handicapped and who were a shame for their owners and fathers. He makes it clear that women should stop dreaming of freedom for their offspring: "These here United States will never be free for you. Y'all are slaves today and you will be slaves tomorrow. Your children will be slaves. And your children's children will be slaves" (67). When Sweet gives birth to yet another baby, her master does not mind the newborn child, but rejoices about the new acquisition of a piece of property. The narrator anticipates that he will meet with other men to decide "whether it was better to put him in the fields or treat him like the halfway son,

halfway human they believed he was and allow him to work and live in the house” (73).

The pain of loss is another element that this novel builds on. Some slave women not only grieve after their babies are sold away, but they see them die under their own eyes or receive news that their children have died on the plantation while they are “on vacation” with their masters. Sweet’s consolation after all these tragic events is that death is better than being sold as a slave, so she finds peace in knowing that her children are in a painless place, namely in Heaven. Despite all of this, it is the masters’ unpredictable and cruel conduct that scares women in bondage the most because they are the main actors that cause them indescribable sorrow: “But they also knew that for white men there was no such thing as separating the two. They were his children, yes. But they were also his property. And like most property they could be replaced. This was the women’s deepest fear” (185).

2.5.4. Comparing and concluding

To sum up the findings of this chapter, it can be argued that the three novels discussed focus extensively on the subject matter of children’s existence under slavery in order to emphasise the impact of the peculiar institution on several generations. By depicting the birth of racially mixed children, the novelists stress the fact that master-slave intimate relationships did indeed exist, despite the fact that not everyone admitted the reality of white men sleeping with black enslaved women. The representation of taboo subjects in literature is a strategy employed to shed light on the past and to reinforce that those aspects that are relevant, but that are nevertheless avoided in society. Secondly, the detailed insight into the masters’ behaviour towards children is a strategy that is meant to point to the nature of the institution, namely that of pure business, where human beings are treated from their first days as chattel and profitable sources of income. The permanent quest for freedom and education signifies the repeated attempts to improve things, but since it is enslaved women who try to change something, their efforts remain useless. These black women in fact play a double role: they desire to be agents of transformation, rebelling against the

system that enslaves their descendants, but they remain perpetrators of slavocracy by giving birth to children who unwillingly maintain the rules of the peculiar institution. By reflecting on the complexities of the slave children's inescapable life of bondage, readers understand that such stories entangle complicated aspects.

2.6. Abuse and physical pain. Violence against slaves

While the first three chapters of the thesis dealt at length with the relational aspects of slavery, the last three chapters succinctly concentrate on themes that, although not very elaborately represented within the novels, significantly contribute to providing valid answers to the research question. Abuse and pain, the two focuses of this section, are important facets of slavery, offering considerable insights into the impacts that the "historical and shameful moment of chattel slavery" (Mitchell x) had on those in bondage. Moreover, this is a topic that still effects today's societies, since the United States, for example, "suffered and suffers from this same inability to articulate pain and shame as they relate to slavery" (Mitchell x).

Violence is one of the focal points of works about the peculiar institution, writers recreating "history as a tale of endless black suffering" (Byerman 6), since the American experience of enslavement "also served to create a sense of special people shaped by a legacy of suffering" (Byerman 27). Seeing slavery "as comparable to the Holocaust" and dramatising "the debilitating psychological effects of slavery" (Ryan 147) are some of the various ways in which contemporary writers "have chosen to narrate black holocaust" (Byerman 6). Chinyelu notes that it was the lot of many slaves to bear "the genocidal nature of chattel slavery silently".¹⁶ The scenes of "violence, humiliation, and dehumanization", despite being "blocked out by both individuals and communities", cannot be erased because of the role that memory played "in the context of [the] traumatic history" (Byerman 27). Remembering these horrific

¹⁶ Article Source: <http://EzineArticles.com/5472463>

events through the writing of fiction and “compelling an examination of the distorted and com-modified past” enable writers to show that “history can be revealed as having profoundly different pattern than the one insisted upon within the dominant national discourse” (Byerman 6).

Interestingly, slaves’ struggles under slavery gave rise to two opposing thinking patterns. Sociologist E. Franklin Frazier launched “a historiography of psychic damage, even pathology, threatening African Americans in the wake of centuries of oppression”, while more contemporary works deny this aspect and focus on the slaves’ “resilience and creativity under crushing conditions” (Collins 360). In the context of current debates about the effect of the tragic past in the lives of black people, Mc Whorter refers to the “Cult of Victimology” and argues that African Americans hold on to systems and structures that are bound to the past and that robs them of possibilities in the present. Therefore, the real problem is the “black refusal to get over the past and accept the new reality” (quoted in Byerman 21).

The analysis of the several instances of aggressive behaviour and its consequences in the three novels is based on different approaches, some of these being the notion of the body and its manipulation, the effect of public beatings or the connection between labour and punishment. Each of these situations reveals fascinating and shocking perceptions about the enslaved and their masters.

2.6.1. *Kindred*

2.6.1.1. The human experience of enduring pain

Butler’s novel contains a considerable number of terrifying scenes that narrate the cruel acts of violence against black men and women. Whether severe beatings, whippings or sexual violations, the treatment of slaves accentuates the fact that the body is “more than a passive recipient of domination”, actually becoming “a locus of struggle between the self and the Other” (Jefferson, quoted in Cowan 19). Mitchell argues that for the enslaved African Americans, whose bodies were exposed to repeated assaults, “abjection and self-loathing”

were only some of the “negative psychological responses to slavery” (96). Whenever masters carry out acts of mutilation, they do so “to reinscribe the body of the accused into the realm of white control” (Cowan 237), as is visible in Isaac’s case, whose ears are cut off (149). According to Hampton, “Butler’s fiction is invested in the examination of narratives written on bodies— male, female, human [...]” and her writing “presents methods of imagining the body that allow us to understand how and why the body is restricted” (*In Memoriam* 247).

Dana discovers gradually the barbarous behaviour prevalent in slavery: she is shocked to hear that Weylin hit his own son with a whip and that he also whips blacks “when they need it” (26) and later, the woman is put in the situation of witnessing Alice’s father’s beating: “I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies [...] But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves” (36). Then, she learns that violence against women was no exception “he punched the woman in the face exactly as her husband had been punched earlier” (37), being slapped herself by one of the patrols (41). Still, the most horrific occurrence that the protagonist sees with her own eyes is the punishment of a man that she is forced to witness, in order to understand that she could be that person, her identification with the victim being thus implied. In fact, the torment that slaves go through is an “expression of white authority written upon the body [...], all bearing the message: ‘This is our body to do with as we please’” (Cowan 239).

Once I was called over to the slave cabins – the quarter – to watch Weylin punish a field hand for the crime of answering back. Weylin ordered the man stripped naked and tied to the trunk of a dead tree. As this was being done – by other slaves – Weylin stood whirling his whip and biting his thin lips. Suddenly, he brought the whip down across the slave’s back. The slave’s body jerked and strained against its ropes. [...] But Weylin was making an example of the man. He had ordered all of us to watch the beating – all the slaves. [...] The whipping served its purpose as far as I was concerned. It scared me [...] (92).

The degree of abuse that Alice and Dana, as well as other women (see page 191) endure is unfathomable. The main character is disgusted by Fowler, who hits her across the breasts, something that not even Weylin uses as punishment for women slaves (211). Despite the fact that females performed gruelling work, they fought against slavery, being raped and beaten on repeated occasions, and were “never subdued” (Davis, quoted in Pagnattaro 115). Van Thompson observes that in *Kindred*, raping women goes hand in hand with whipping men, and argues that there is “a sexual element” to the above-mentioned “public spectacle of torture” because the man is naked and others slaves watch him. Moreover, as both females and males scream during these acts of physical brutality, a “white man’s penetration of black flesh” is taking place and the result is the satisfaction of Weylin’s “sadistic sexual desires” (Van Thompson 122).

A final aspect that needs to be included in this section is the significance of Dana’s arm loss. The fact that she leaves her arm behind demonstrates that “freedom is not free” and that it is impossible to get rid of the past because history “has lingering effects on the present and the future” (Mitchell 59). The woman endured both psychological and physical mutilation, and since Kevin also remains with a scar on his forehead, what the novel is emphasising is that the black as well as the white race “have been scarred by the institution and legacy of slavery” and they each need to confront the past (Mitchell 59).

2.6.2. Property

2.6.2.1. Beating slaves: a loss for masters

Martin does not include detailed descriptions of violence against slaves in her novel, but the scenes that do appear in *Property* transmit clear messages about the implications of these attacks not only on the blacks’ life, but also on their masters’ affairs. Therefore, an intemperate outburst of anger, which results in a severe beating, does have consequences that also affect the slaveholder. For example, the time needed in order to recover can be very long and the slave is no longer able to perform his daily work, which brings profit loss: “In the morning he was in a fury because Mr Sutter has gotten into such a standoff with one of the negroes that he has had him whipped and it will be a week before he can work again [...] The negro, Leo, is the strongest worker we have” (5).

Additionally, the damage done to the best black man on the plantation is also a bad choice, Gaudet stressing that he is not against violence, but its victims need to be chosen strategically: “If Sutter wanted to whip boys near to death, he said, why couldn’t he choose worthless ones like these two and not the only useful negro on the place” (8).

The master’s sadistic inclinations are reflected by yet another strange game¹⁷ that he makes his slaves play and that reveals Gaudet’s attempt to control his enslaved property: “Two strong boys were required to fight until one couldn’t get up. The loser then received a whipping” (18). Cowan discusses that masters “wished to be the panoptic power that sees and controls all” (12), an argument which applies to *Property*, both Gaudet and Manon using a glass to spy on the Africans: “I watched him through the spyglass” (3); “He had it specially mounted for his purpose, to watch the negroes at their daily business [...]” (19).

Another significant scene that shows possible outcomes of slave maltreatment is that of the man “who had been whipped for being too slow in the field”, and as a way to get revenge, started a fire (Martin 54). Not only is this an example of aggression, but it also sheds light on the condition of slaves, who were born to work and not to be, therefore being punished when they were not diligent enough (Bromell 181). Olmsted (quoted in Bromell 182) observes that in slavery “labour and punishment are almost synonymous”.

2.6.3. *Wench*

2.6.3.1. Public beatings: humiliation and intimidation

Out of the several turbulent episodes depicted in *Wench* – beating a slave for asking for a pass (133), punishing those who fail to complete a day’s work (56) or threatening to beat a pregnant woman if her fellow slaves arrive too late for evening chores (25) –, the most repugnant one is undoubtedly the public scene of violence and sexual abuse of which Mawu is a tragic victim. Tip made all the slaves watch the punishment to intimidate them and show them that should they disobey, they would be the next to be disciplined: “If I hear word that any of you other niggers is thinking about escaping, I swear as God is my witness I will do

¹⁷ see pages 3-4 for the sexual game that opens the novel

that and worst to every last one of you” (68). He is the only white man present since “the others had excused themselves”, which reveals their unwillingness to witness a show that they know will get bloody and unbearable. Nevertheless, two white women were “watching intently from a distance” (67). Their presence there illustrates Cowan’s argument: “white viewers identifying with the authorities would gain a sense of confidence in the legal system (239).

Including such brutal scenes in works about slavery can also be seen as an attempt to create “sympathy and outrage among white readers” and awake pity, but also respect for the enslaved who went through the torment with dignity (Cowan 240-241). Goddu refers to these cruel punishment acts in terms of “gothic effects” (quoted in Cowan 239). One last interesting aspect that Perkins-Valdez incorporates in her book is stressing the way different masters handle the issue of savagery against the enslaved on their own plantations. Lizzie proudly confesses that “Drayle rarely beat his slaves. He preferred to sell what he called a bad slave rather than break him (38). Tip, on the contrary, “didn’t believe in hiring an overseer. He said he could oversee his own farm [...] If someone failed to work or lagged behind, he beat them himself. When he didn’t feel like doing the beating – which was rarely – he had a young slave do it for him” (39). This is indeed unusual because by doing so, the master turned black people against each other and made a slave brutalise his own kind.

2.6.4. Comparing and concluding

This chapter, which gave a glimpse into the way these novelists depict abuse and physical pain, is central to the understanding of the effects that result from these representations. Not acknowledging the fact that these cruel things did really happen is a denial of the terrible events of the past, which leads to confusions in the present since these events continue to have a powerful impact (Byerman 8). The hardship experienced by blacks in the past makes their survival spectacular, slaves’ survival offering solutions to present issues, therefore “having a practical value” (9). Novelists’ desire to reveal the entirety of the past, including its ugly, ambiguous and complicated parts, has a potentially therapeutic function because it helps survivors “to face the truth”, all of us being

these survivors (Byerman 9). Moreover, making the “wounds and diseases of the past” clear enables healing for both the nation and the race (Byerman 6). There is a meaningful connection between a past characterised by “pain and guilt” and “models for healing and self-affirmation” and this can only be achieved insofar we do not ignore the past, but acknowledge its importance, which is in itself “the only way to honor the ancestors” (Byerman 37).

Kindred, *Property*, and *Wench* cover the theme of slaves’ exploitation from multiple perspectives and include such aspects as the denigration of the black body, the loss of dignity, the control over African women’s sexuality by repeated rapes, and the public demonstration of domination by severe physical damage meant to intimidate and humiliate. Although the cruelty of these acts differs from plantation to plantation and oscillates according to the master’s character and personality, the illustrations of brutality offered are shocking not only because of their cruelty, but especially because of their wide acceptance within the system, which considered them part of everyday plantation life.

2.7. Rebellion. Slave unrest. Runaways

These motifs are central for the analysis of slavery representations in literature because they stand in a cause-effect relationship with the topics discussed previously. In other words, slave rebellion is the outcome of stark inequalities and of unbalanced slave-master relationships. Obviously, resistance is also the direct result of the brutal abuse that slaves had to endure. In a system that gave slaves no rights and that reduced any kind of future perspectives, the only thing available that only some dared to engage in, was rebelling against their masters and running away. All novelists explore the concept of freedom by creating characters that try to escape, some even succeeding in tasting liberty. This way, *Kindred*, *Property*, and *Wench* stress the strong determination of slaves, who were not just docile and submissive, and reveal fascinating aspects about the psychology of the oppressed.

The master class, despite its hegemony, was not powerful enough to stop some of its slaves from “violently removing their bonds” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 295). The answer to why slaves rebelled is quite simple, Aptheker argues: “The fundamental factor provoking rebellion against slavery was that social system itself, the degradation, exploitation, oppression, and brutality which it created and with which indeed it was synonymous” (quoted in Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 295). There were various forms of slave resistance (passive and violent, individual and collective) and different reasons for rebelling (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 295). The leaders that organised their fellow slaves into a considerable movement had a difficult task because “gender”, “ethnic” and “status distinctions”, to name but a few, had to be overcome (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 297). Since the punishment for failure was severe, they had to take heart and not give way to fear, many relying on religion and rumours about their owners’ vulnerability to motivate people to fight. It needs to be stressed that slave revolts were “remarkable achievements” in the context of the strong power imbalance in the era of slavery (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 297).

There is evidence that “in every slave society” masters needed to develop complex methods of correction and punishment “to keep their slaves in line” (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 226), but the effectiveness of these controls and the extent to which they “shaped the psychology of the enslaved” are still debated in a lively manner (Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette 296). Mitchell reminds us that “volition and agency remain the foundation of freedom” and observes that “deciding to be free is the first step” that slaves took in the long process of rebellion (132). However, “making up one’s mind to free one’s self is complex, given all the variables for failure and success” (Mitchell 133), an aspect that sheds light on the multiple things that blacks had to consider before risking escape. As shown in the novels, men and women who rebelled needed to be sure of their position and stand firm in their attempt to free themselves. Mitchell also suggests that we should consider not only how whites treated African Americans, but more than this, what enslaved African Americans “did with what was done to them” (142).

The above-mentioned argument is reinforced by Boris Max (in an attempt to persuade the court to cancel the death penalty of a slave who had killed his master): “We are dealing here not with how man acts toward man, but with how a man acts when he feels that he must defend himself against, or adapt himself to, the total natural world in which he lives” (quoted in Pagnattaro 117). As the experiences of the many characters depicted in the three novels discussed show, bondage was so impactful and disturbing that some slaves were ready to give up everything just to break free. Mitchell thinks that contemporary narratives about slavery “show how costly freedom is and remind readers that the cost of freedom is never too much” (143). The blacks in bondage “rejected the essence of slavery by projecting their own rights and value as human beings” (Genovese, “Roll, Jordan, Roll” 39), thus proving that nobody can totally own another person, not even by force, unless the victim chooses to surrender.

Despite the fact that slave revolts and escape attempts are depicted in fiction in various ways, history tells another story. It has been often noted that rebellions and open insurrections were not common in the old South, but that blacks masked rebellious tendencies and subverted the system secretly (Cowan 25). It seems that in most of the cases, slaves “tended to become defensive”, aiming at the protection of “the individuals against aggression and abuse” (Genovese, “Roll, Jordan, Roll” 38). Under these circumstances, novelists’ choice to concentrate so visibly on the aspect of rebellion, despite its limited occurrence in reality, needs to be properly investigated since it might reveal interesting aspects about the strategies employed to bring a dead past back to life.

2.7.1 *Kindred*

2.7.1.1. Dana, Alice and Isaac

Butler’s novel is constructed around the binary opposition freedom-bondage, which is explored not only by employing time travel as an innovative strategy, but also by providing descriptions of numerous slaves’ escape attempts and their consequences. Readers have insight into Dana’s thoughts about running away, they experience with Alice and Isaac the despair caused by their escape failure and they learn how Luke and Nigel’s decision to rebel affected their future. A slave caught fleeing would always be gravely punished by whippings

meant to scare him and make him obedient, so that he would not dare to run away again.

Dana's resistance is depicted in the greatest detail and due to her special status in the nineteenth century, she tries out several things to escape from bondage: she sometimes simply disappears because she is in mortal danger, the pain taking her back to the twentieth century, other times she is seen escaping and is brought back, and on one occasion she cuts her wrists, knowing that she will not remain on the plantation this way. The most symbolic breakout from the era of slavery is undoubtedly the struggle to free herself from her ancestor who tries to rape her, a decision that has drastic repercussions, namely the removal of her left arm. Despite the loss of her limb, the woman manages to escape and, unlike the rest of the slaves, Dana is given the chance to continue her life in normal conditions. This is a clear contrast that *Kindred* uses in order to stress the gap between the protagonist and the tragic slaves on the Weylin plantation in terms of the prospect of liberty. Interestingly, Dana oscillates between rebellion and submission, starting her journey as a very resistant slave, changing into a docile enslaved woman in order to remain alive, and fighting for her independence in the end when she realises that it could be her last chance to ever be free again.

Masters were aware that slaves might attempt to run away any time, so they sometimes took precautions. Weylin, for example, preferred to sell Luke, who just went ahead and did what he wanted to no matter what his owner said, rather than "to whip him until he ran away" (138). A slave who did not behave as masters expected was a potential runaway, and it was more secure to get rid of him than punish him so severely that he would not bear his lot anymore and consequently make his way to freedom. Tom Weylin also knew that he lost money with each slave that would leave his plantation, so taking measures against escape was done for financial reasons as well. In Nigel's case, Rufus and his father made sure that they convinced him to marry Carrie, so that he would settle down and not try escaping again: "Man marries, has children, he's more likely to stay where he is" (139).

Isaac and Alice can be seen as adventurous lovers who try their luck and run away from the tormented life in captivity and from Rufus' abuse. They enjoy four days of freedom together, but they are caught on the fifth day (143). The woman is punished so harshly that she is brought back "bloody, filthy, and barely alive", Rufus paying a lot of money to buy her, and her lover is sold away after they remove one of his ears (146). Mutilating the body of the captured runaway in an act of public enactment of authority is just another way to confirm white control over the "minds and bodies of the black population" (Cowan 237). Displaying mutilated bodies also signals that "there are runaways out there, beyond the grasp of white authority" (Cowan 242) and, thus, punishment is required without exception, for otherwise more slaves would flee: "He couldn't let a runaway go without some punishment. If he did, there'd be ten more taking off tomorrow" (180).

By incorporating in her novel black historical figures that successfully escaped and freed other slaves as well (Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner), Butler stresses that there is hope even for slaves. History proves that of the many children on the plantation, some would later rise against whites and become important personalities among black people (141). The discovery of a history book in Dana's bag that Rufus refers to as "the biggest lot of abolitionist trash I ever saw" (140), infuriates the white man so much that he makes her burn it. However, Rufus cannot burn the historical events that will take place, no matter how much he desires to get rid of any evidence of black people's rebellion against the system. *Kindred* also includes historical information about how slaves were kept in line with the help of patrollers whose duty was to check where slaves were at night. This way, the abuse of blacks is accentuated once again: "They chased down runaways – for a fee. And sometimes they just raised hell, had a little fun terrorizing people who weren't allowed to fight back" (45-46).

2.7.2. *Property*

2.7.2.1. The violent slave insurrection

Martin gives importance to the topic of slave rebellion and this is noticeable by looking at the plot. The tension in the Gaudets' domestic situation is depicted against a threatening atmosphere of uprisings and blacks revolts that influences the destinies of all characters in a major way. Gaudet is killed, which means that Manon is finally a widow, a joy that is somehow spoiled by her injury that leaves her without a functional arm and without an intact face. Also, Sarah manages to run away, leaving Walter behind and reaching the north of America, where she experiences things that empower her and that change her attitude after her return to the Louisiana sugar plantation.

Dr Landry, "the walking newspaper" (46), is the one who informs the Gaudets about the latest events: two runaways were captured in St Francisville, a negro set a fire at Greenwood, there are rumors of planned uprisings at Bayou Sara. The most alarming news, however, is that there are three hundred runaways hidden in the low country that plan to kill every white person they find (45-46). Under these circumstances, whites mobilise themselves to stop the rising, but some of them die, humiliatingly defeated by blacks. The hearsay about the organised movement of slaves makes the Gaudets marvel that the men are so bold, an image that they intentionally refuse to associate with the black race (58). Manon even reveals her disbelief in the effectiveness of their actions: "What do they possibly hope to accomplish?" (109).

The blacks are well-organised, which is surprising to some extent, but also realistic since it shows their determination and planned strategy. They enter the house and manage to intimate all the inhabitants, but despite the fact that two white men are killed, and a dozen injured, the number of slaves captured is fifty, all being shot or hanged (134). There is no great victory in the end, but *Property* emphasises the vitality and ambition of these fighters for freedom, whose actions do change the life of a family forever and demonstrate that even the powerful can be taken off guard. In a novel that deals predominantly with the abuse of power, Martin creates situations that reverse things and that partially

give blacks that which they have desired all along: revenge, strength, control, and the freedom to take decisions.

2.7.3. *Wench*

2.7.3.1. Women attempting escape

This novel centres around the decision-making process of four women, who start to consider escape once they arrive in a free state. Mawu is the motivator, trying to convince the others to be courageous and risk everything for the sake of freedom. Interestingly, Reenie is the only one who actually succeeds, the red-haired woman being caught and brought back to her master. Lizzie cannot make up her mind, and although Mawu is waiting for her to join her, the woman remains passive. Her master prides himself before the others, arguing that his slaves are “all trustworthy and docile. They would rather live on my farm any day than try to come up North and deal with these cold northern winters” (51). As Lizzie hears about the new Fugitive Slave Law, she fears that Mawu’s plan will remain fruitless and since “a Northern dog was no different than a Southern dog” (51), the possibility of success is very doubtful for her, which shows that she is not as daring as the other ones, refusing to take risks for the sake of liberty. By this, *Wench* illustrates the gap between these views on the dangerous decision to run away.

2.7.3.2. Free black people

As the four women come into contact with free coloured folks for the first time, they need to make sense of this, realising that these people do indeed exist in the north. They are givers of hope for the enslaved, making them imagine what a life lived in freedom might look like: “Lizzie tried to wrap her mind around what it would feel like not to have to work [...] These free coloreds probably didn’t think of themselves as a free slave at all, she thought. They probably thought of themselves as a free free” (33). The Lewis House, where blacks live in seeming abundance, is a mystery and a delight for the slaves who visit it one Sunday. They marvel at seeing a coloured woman and her child using the front door of a house that seemed to belong to white people, but that was in fact the possession of blacks (31), and they are shocked to hear that those people go into stores all the time there (199). Mawu’s experience in their house, where

she was fed until she couldn't move, and where she saw children playing the piano and reading books had a powerful impact on her and her companions, who listen to her with envy. Perkins-Valdez stresses the uniqueness of this encounter by depicting Mawu in a state of euphoria that, nevertheless, ends much too soon: "I knew it was time to go, but I tell you after my belly got full, I just wanted to stay there forever. I wanted to go to sleep and never wake up" (36).

2.7.4. Comparing and concluding

The vital topics of discussion in this chapter underscore several aspects that reveal more strategies used by these three writers to address slavery in modern fiction. First, the concept of freedom is given significance by depicting some slaves' determination to escape, which in the end sheds light on the psychological traits that characterised enslaved blacks. Liberty was so precious that for some nothing was too much when it came to obtaining it. Second, insurrections, by their aggressive character, are meant to confirm that no person is in fact the slave of another unless they willingly surrender. No punishment strategies are effective enough to turn these men and women into objects, no matter how hard owners try to show them that they are of no value. In fact, Cowan argues, a runaway who was "free in the swamps" could even become "a legendary figure, an exemplar of resistance for those remaining on the plantation" (235). By presenting slaves whose "unregulated bodies" represent a danger for the institution, novelists accentuate the results of such actions coming from those who no longer live "under the gaze of whites" (Cowan 235). Since slaves on plantations were defined by their bodies, escaping meant the removal of the Africans' bodies from the slaveholder's control, but also the refusal "to be defined by the Other" (Cowan 235). Third, the novels challenge the image of the master class, showing that despite its absolute control over victims' lives, it was still unable to foil escape attempts. Fourth, the most suggestive message transmitted is that given the captivity conditions, slave uprisings were indeed exceptional triumphs.

In summary, there are certain facts that Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez impress on their readership. *Kindred* portrays several endeavours at flight of characters that go through various situations and it purposefully includes the names of some of the most remarkable figures in black slave history to highlight the hope of liberty. *Property* imagines well-planned violent attacks that point to the occasional helplessness of whites before the ones they oppressed and considered tractable. *Wench* insists on the presentation of two totally different approaches to running away, shown by the converse behaviour of Lizzie and Mawu. Moreover, it creates a setting where free blacks live happy lives, a strategy that functions as a reminder of the hope that can exist even for those that are still in bondage. Hope is a common motif that is identifiable in both *Kindred* and *Wench*.

2.8. Religion. Faith

The last chapter of the thesis is also relevant in order to answer the research question and adds new points to the aspects discussed in the previous sections. The main focus here is to observe how both whites and blacks dealt with the topic of religion during the era of slavery and to address the role that religious institutions and their beliefs played in the perpetuation of the wicked system.

Engerman, Drescher, and Paquette note that the world's great religions have contributed to the perception of slavery as "an acceptable form of human servitude" in almost all phases of world history (295). Strangely, religion, despite its high moral values, justified the existence of slavery and encouraged its continuance. As regards the Christian faith and the antebellum era, the Bible remained a text that, unlike slave narratives, many considered authentic, since its authorship was impossible to question because it was believed it had been dictated by God, the "supreme authority" (Ring and Plasa 126). Most Christian denominations took a pro-slavery stance, which they rationalised through "well-circulated passages from Scripture" (Ring and Plasa 126). Abolitionists had the difficult task to counter these views by challenging "the literal authority of the Bible with alternative readings which enabled them to engage with and indeed

exploit the dominant discursive force of the pulpit” (Ring and Plasa 126). Under these circumstances, “pro- and anti-slavery factions” used Biblical and religious discourse in order to enter into complex political debates rather than for defending their “spiritual conviction” (Ring and Plasa 126).

The Holy Book gave rise to several controversies given its interpretation in favour of enslavement, which determined Douglass, for example, to discriminate between “religious practices of the Church and its representatives, and the Word of God as it is written” (Ring and Plasa 128). This is what he wrote in the appendix to his book: “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, woman-whipping, cradle-plundering partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity” (quoted in Ring and Plasa 128).

While some whites were indifferent to religion, their hypocrisy being exposed on several occasions, slaves had Christian fellowship with each other and created their own unique theological system. Those slaves who practised their faith possessed “a sense of their own worth before God and man” and were so self-assured that they showed again and again that “no man’s will can become that of another unless he himself wills it” (Genovese, “Religious Foundations...” 276). They desired to prove to the world that “the ideal of slavery cannot be realised, no matter how badly the body is broken and the spirit tormented” (Genovese, “Religious Foundations...” 276). Seeing the whites as brothers in Christ and fellow men living under God gave the blacks “a measuring rod with which to hold slave-owners to a standard of behaviour appropriate to their own professions of Christian faith” (Genovese, “Religious Foundations...” 275).

2.8.1. *Kindred*

2.8.1.1. Manipulation and Hypocrisy

The novel clearly shows the connection between religion and the mentalities of those living in antebellum America by means of its characters. Margaret, for example, knows the Bible (Second Book of Kings is mentioned on page 24) and passes for “a fairly moral woman” (84), showing interest for the Word of God:

“Read the Sermon on the Mount” (218). However, her morality is debatable, as Kevin himself notes: “If she chases me any harder, she and I will wind up playing a scene from that Bible she reads. The scene between Potiphar’s wife and Joseph” (85). Her husband is indifferent to religion (183) and he does not conform to the ideals of Christian virtue, as a slave daringly observes: “And if Mister Tom wasn’t so stingy, you’d have had a dress a long time ago. Man loves a dollar more than he loves Jesus” (165).

Alice is familiar with the stories of the Bible and even names her children after people in the Old Testament, full of hope and faith, but Rufus does not know enough of the Scripture to understand her subtle effort. Dana says: “I even kidded Alice about the names she chose for her children. Joseph and Hagar. And the two others whose names I thought silently - Miriam and Aaron [...] ‘Someday Rufus is going to get religion and read enough of the Bible to wonder about those children’s names’” (233). Interestingly, Tom Weylin and his son have no Biblical awareness, while Margaret and Alice do, which might be an illustration of the wide-spread view that religion is for the weak, for women and children, but not for men. Dana, a citizen of modern America, where Christianity partly lost the importance it had in the past, is touched by the verses in Job and Ecclesiastes that the black minister reads out at Alice’s funeral: “I had shrugged off my aunt and uncle’s strict Baptist teachings years before. But even now, especially now, the bitter melancholy words of Job could still reach me. ‘Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not ...’” (252).

The manipulation of slaves by using the Holy Bible is a common practice that Butler starkly criticises. A pastor and his wife visit the Weylin plantation and they do not forget to remind slaves of the importance of obedience: “The couple dispensed candy and *“safe” Bible verses* (“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters ...”). The kids got candy for repeating the verses” (183, emphasis added). When the white community heard that Rufus allowed some of his slaves to learn how to read, the Methodist minister immediately uttered his convictions according to which education “made slaves disobedient, made them

want more than the Lord intended them to have” (236). These conceptions and attitudes were predominant, the whites impressing them on blacks so that they would stay in their minds and make them remember their inferiority. These views undoubtedly contradict what the Bible teaches about how God sees and values all people, not just the white race.

2.8.2. Property

2.8.2.1. Sarcasm and Christian consolation

Martin focuses on the creed of whites and reveals, just like Butler, the deep level of hypocrisy and falsity prevalent in slavery. Mr. Gaudet, whose inclinations have already been pointed out in the previous chapters, tries to conform to the precepts of a supposedly moral society. He reads to his slaves from the Bible before having them play naked in the water, Manon adding that she does not have to hear it to know what passage it is (3). This leaves room for interpretation, but the verses could be the same that *Kindred* refers to about slaves' submission to their masters. There are three instances where this topic is addressed in the New Testament: Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22 and 1 Peter 2:18, so any of these could be implied (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version p. 979, 984 and 1015). Furthermore, the man carries the Bible around as if it were an accessory, (19) keeping another one in his office. The fact that the ribbon marker never moves (9) means that the book is not read, but stored on a shelf for convention's sake. Manon's father, another white master, did not want to have anything to do with religion because “religion was for the negroes [...] it was their solace and consolation, as they were ours” (24). He criticises those white men in his community who fathered children with slave women and who, despite their visible sin, still sang in church on Sunday morning.

The heroine is very sceptical as regards the existence of God: “everyone else felt the need to assure me that mother's death was part of God's plan. Exactly, his plan is to kill us all” (147) and not even her aunt, who benefits from the consolation of religion (87), can erase Manon's sarcasm. The black slaves are ridiculed. The story of a planter who was going to make the negroes believe he was God and his farm Eden, where “they'd all be happy and grateful” confirms this by ending with a bad joke: “They don't have negroes in Paradise. That's

why it was paradise” (190). They are also stopped from gathering for worship since preachers are thought to incite the negroes to discontent (46). In a time when everyone was against them, slaves did receive some help from the Quakers, described as “some sort of religious society much opposed to slave holding” (202).

2.8.3. *Wench*

2.8.3.1. Some slaves’ strong faith

Perkins-Valdez only concentrates on slaves dealing with religion, and apart from Glory, a devoted Christian woman, no other information is provided about the belief of the whites and their religious practices. The central points made here are the extent to which a living relationship with God increases hope and makes the yoke of slavery more bearable, and the refusal to consider faith a source of consolation. Reenie definitely belongs to the first category as she trusts in God in every situation. She believes in miracles when her companions are praying all night long for her so that she will not conceive anymore (57) and she is convinced that there is an afterlife where the Lord will wipe away all her tears. Reenie’s assurance infuriates Mawu, who is opposed to Christianity: “Mawu spat on the ground. The Bible! The Bible! That’s all you niggers talk about” (205). The letter that Reenie sends Lizzie stresses once again the woman’s unshakable confidence in God: “my faith in the Lord is stronger than ever. I do hope that you will lean on Him in your darkest hour” (262).

Sweet is the other slave woman who allows religion to comfort her, and despite the fact that all her children die, her devotion to God remains unaffected. She is consoled by the thought that her offspring, despite being dead, “are all gone to meet the Lord” and are, therefore, “in a better place” (190). Lizzie is not depicted as being a believer, but there is one particular instance when she goes to a Sunday meeting that reflects the emotional power of religious gatherings. After praying and dancing, she feels lifted up: “a light filled her chest” (155). Mawu, who disregards religion, is not acquainted with the Bible, a proof of this being the analogy between Ohio and the country of God that she cannot make sense of: “Ohio is seen as another country, the country of God. Another called it Canaan but Mawu did not know what they meant” (41). In the end, the summer

resort that brought these women together, and that was the site of cruel events, is sold to a missionary group for a coloured school, the narrator commenting that the land will belong to God now (287). This suggests that the painful memories of that place, where so many ungodly things took place, will be eventually replaced by hope and a perspective for the future, the missionaries offering blacks that which they have been longing for: education, equal rights and a future.

2.8.4. Comparing and concluding

This final chapter demonstrates that religion played a pivotal role in the way mentalities about slavery were constructed and perpetuated. Slaveholders used the Bible to validate their own views about slave submission and obedience, but their selective reading blinded them, and they did not consider those precepts that they themselves had to follow. Therefore, there was a huge discrepancy between their behaviour and their projected moral values. Hypocrisy was thus common among white owners, slaves criticising it over and over again, yet without touching their masters' conscience. The master class oftentimes dismissed religion, because whites thought faith was good only for those who needed its comfort, the black slaves even being ridiculed for their beliefs. In a world that denied those in bondage all human rights, and where sorrow was their daily lot, many slaves found a refuge in the Word of God and felt sheltered while attending the Sunday meetings. Nonetheless, the existence of God and the reality of His faithfulness were questioned by both oppressor and oppressed, a reason for this sceptical attitude being the harsh conditions of life and the corruption of society. Given the amount of suffering that they endured, some of these people found it hard to believe that there is a God who kindly cares about them. The white class, on the other side, abused the power they had, enjoying their privileges and living a prosperous life. Their riches and their view on life made many of them reject the existence of a personal God.

3. Conclusion

Slavery still continues to awaken the interest and curiosity of both white American and African American writers, who produce modern works that depict the tragic past, in an attempt to keep alive the memory of the horrors of the era of slavery. There is a saying according to which those who forget history are destined to repeat it, and fiction, by its representations of important historical events, plays an important role in preventing forgetfulness. Since the peculiar institution was “monstrous and bitter”, it is essential that people “live these things in novels rather than just read about them in history textbooks” (Cheuse, book review), the three novels analysed providing insightful illustrations of the effects of slavery.

The six recurring themes discussed are identifiable as “recurrent patterns” of slave narratives (Govan, quoted in Bettanin 99). However, despite the fact that Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez focus on the same aspects as several other antecedent texts, their approaches are original, preserving the impact of these motifs on the reader. The ideas that generated the writing of these books point to the inventive elements employed: *Kindred's* author wanted a contemporary figure to experience slavery and discover what it felt like to live as a slave (McGonigal, Interview), *Property* highlights power abuse and explores just how far white people can go with their control over blacks (Campbell Moore, Interview 13), and *Wench* is constructed around a specific historical fact, namely the women of Tawawa House and what might have happened in their minds and hearts as they were considering to run away (Delors, Interview 3). These novelists manage to “provide testimonies of the trauma of slavery in their works”, that serve “as a weapon against forgetfulness” (Mitchell 150) and demonstrate that “the death of memory” always has consequences (Mitchell 149). Nevertheless, the authors of the three neo-slave narratives included in my analysis do not merely present the cruelties of slavery, but move beyond the pain of the past and criticise several misconceptions about the institution.

What differentiates these contemporary novels from previous books on slavery is their accurate reflection of attitudes towards slavery from the perspective of both races and the role they play in both past and present (especially in

Kindred). Ryan states that “novels about slavery continue to perform valuable cultural work” since they “engage knowledgeably, imaginatively, and accessibly with specific interpretations and theories advanced in the discipline of history” (209). Benesch sees storytelling as “a veritable means of ‘correction’, an effective antidote to the myths and fictions of dominant society” and his definition is relevant for the way Butler, Martin and Perkins-Valdez constructed their novels since they also express “moments and memories of the past from the perspective of the oppressed Other”, and are, therefore, a “‘corrective’, revisionist comment on history” (260). Dandridge refers to the novels included in her analysis in terms that also apply to *Kindred*, *Property*, and *Wench*, namely that they can be “valued for their expansion of the African American literary canon, whose viability is only as good as its capacity to grow and develop” (92). Patton mentions that contemporary novels on slavery “echo the themes found in the earlier texts and serve as fictive examples of the lasting effects of slavery”, whose “myths and attitudes have not been completely eradicated” despite its abolition (xvi). In other words, the merit of these modern works of fiction is their careful exploration of aspects about slavery that are of concern to both blacks and whites by using, to different extents, the thematic patterns found in slave narratives.

The effect of the strategies that the three novelists employ in their depiction of slavery on readers varies, of course, but the interesting issue that Mitchell addresses is worth noting here: to what extent do writers and readers, who have not experienced slavery, bear witness to a “trauma” that “still exists”? (20). This is a question that points to the various possibilities of fiction to relate to topics that are “new”, so to say, since authors and readers have not had similar experiences. It is true that these novelists “may gain access to the past and communicate [their] insights to [their] readers”, as Lascelles notes in the introduction to her book on historical fiction, but what we need to bear in mind is that what is important is not only “the imaginative apprehension of the storyteller, but also [...] his reader’s capacity for response” (1). Therefore, as Kaplan suggests (in her study on rewritings of Victorian novels), there are debates “about historical memory and the direction of the political future in which we, as

readers and citizens, do have a voice and a role to play” (162), this being applicable for the discussions on slavery in American society as well.

There are several reasons why modern writers continue to portray slavery in their novels. Some of them are: the relevance of slavery in today’s discourses: “all history is present, all injustices continue on some level” (Alice Walker in Kane n.p.), which means that some works use the disguise of writing about slavery, when in fact their writers aim at social critique. Patton suggests that “the legacy of slavery continues to have currency”, the institution being “a very real concern” in our century (xiv). Second, by attempting to give a voice to those who did not have one, these authors place marginalised groups at the centre and emphasise the importance of their experiences under slavery. They “present history from a racialized perspective” and “bear witness to the ‘unspeakable’” (Mitchell 5). Third, understanding one’s history and heritage is essential, and novelists are motivated to write about slavery to draw attention to the importance of knowing about the ancestors’ past. Van Thompson argues that in *Kindred*, Dana, and through her, readers “can never, ever, be naïve about [...] the collective past of Black people’s experience under slavery” (142). Fourth, contemporary narratives about slavery offer the possibility to heal “the wounds, the shame, and the pain” of the past and they serve as a “bench by the road” (Morrison, quoted in Mitchell 150) where people start talking, listening and healing. Mitchell observes that “correcting the public narrative of history” for the marginalised people has a “therapeutic value” since “traumatic events” can become more “psychologically manageable through the telling” (111). Sherley Anne Williams believes that slavery is “a wound that has not healed” and it cannot do so “until the scab is removed” and “the festered flesh cut away” (quoted in Mitchell 66). Things will go in the right direction only when people are willing to learn from the history of the peculiar institution, instead of “ignoring it and leaving it to decay” (Mitchell 162). Fifth, by creating “characters of contemporary imaginations”, novelists enable an understanding of slavery that stresses its impact on all citizens (Mitchell 6), and as becomes obvious through Dana and Kevin’s experience, both races must deal with a problematic common past, whose pain needs to be acknowledged in order to live together in racial harmony (Mitchell 60). Blacks and whites need to collaborate since they all

benefit from the “final outcome” (Mitchell 59). Wrong mentalities about slavery need to be dealt with in order to improve interracial relations in the future, Wood insightfully commenting on this: “The evil spirit that is exorcized in *Kindred*, is not, finally, slavery [...] It is instead the misrepresentation of slavery that must be exorcized from the cultural psyche of both black and white America” (95).

Since slavery is not a “static, ahistorical term”, but a historical phenomenon that generates different “responses” and “effects”, it is impossible to generalise about “such a vast period of time” (Patton xv). This also applies to my thesis, which only looked at three neo-slave narratives, which means that there is still a significant unexplored fictional field. However, the findings contribute to a better understanding of the strategies that these novelists employ in order to appeal to readers by investigating thinking patterns and emotions, attitudes and lasting effects. They imaginatively transform and rewrite slave narratives, and the way each writer deals with the six main themes I have pointed out is to some extent similar, but also unique and very fascinating. Despite the span of over 30 years between the writing of *Kindred* and *Wench*, no major changes in the fictional representation of slavery in contemporary novels can be detected.

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6. Appendix

6.1. Abstract (in English)

The thesis deals with representations of slavery in three modern American novels, showing that “the peculiar institution” remains an important topic for those contemporary writers who choose to revise the past in their works. Information about debates on slavery is given. Slavery’s depiction in literature is emphasised by explaining the structure and objectives of slave narratives, historical novels, and neo-slave narratives. The term “historiographic metafiction”, coined by Hutcheon, is significant for the argument of the thesis because it highlights that these narratives do not only represent the past, but they rather shape history and forge identity. This concept clarifies the research question that investigates the effects of the strategies employed to portray a relevant historical event of the past in contemporary literature. By analysing six recurring themes that all three novelists employ, the thesis explains what motivates these writers to include slavery as a central topic in their works. These themes are: women slaves as narrative protagonists; the unbalanced relationship between master(s) and slave(s); the difficult situation of the children resulting from these relationships; violence and physical pain as experienced by the institution’s victims; slave rebellions and runaways; and religion in connection with the role it played in forming slaves’ beliefs, attitudes and values, but also as a justification of the slaveholders for their behaviour. The findings demonstrate that Butler, Martin, and Perkins-Valdez write about slavery in order to prevent forgetfulness, to criticise misconceptions, to correct and revise history, to point to slavery’s lasting effects, to criticise society by using the disguise of writing about slavery, to give a voice to those who did not have one and to draw attention to the importance of knowing about the ancestor’s past. Their novels also serve the purpose of healing the pain and the shame of the past by showing that things will only improve when people are ready to learn from the history of slavery instead of turning their backs and ignoring what has happened. It is both races that need to deal with a problematic common past in order to live together in racial harmony.

6.2. Abstract (in German)

Die Arbeit befasst sich mit Darstellungen der Sklaverei in drei modernen amerikanischen Romanen, und zeigt, dass "die eigentümliche Institution" ("the peculiar institution") ein wichtiges Thema für die zeitgenössischen Schriftsteller bleibt, die die Vergangenheit mit Hilfe ihrer Werke aufarbeiten möchten. Die Darstellung der Sklaverei in der Literatur wird durch die Erläuterung der Struktur und der Ziele von Sklavenerzählungen, historischen Romanen und neo-Sklavenerzählungen betont. Der von Hutcheon geprägte Begriff "historiographische Metafiktion", ist bezeichnend für das Argument der Arbeit, weil es unterstreicht, dass diese Erzählungen nicht nur die Vergangenheit repräsentieren, sondern auch die Geschichte formen und Identität bilden. Dieses Konzept verdeutlicht die Fragestellung, die die Auswirkungen der eingesetzten Strategien untersucht, um ein relevantes historisches Ereignis der Vergangenheit in der zeitgenössischen Literatur darzustellen. Durch die Analyse sechs wiederkehrender Themen, mit denen sich alle drei Schriftsteller beschäftigen, fokussiert die Arbeit auf die Motivation dieser Schriftsteller, Sklaverei als ein zentrales Thema in ihren Werken zu berücksichtigen. Diese Themen sind: Sklavinnen als Protagonistinnen der Erzählung; die unausgewogenen Beziehungen zwischen Herren und Sklavinnen; die schwierige Situation der Kinder, die aus diesen Beziehungen entstanden sind; Gewalt und körperliche Schmerzen wie sie von Opfern der Institution erlebt wurden; Sklavenaufstände und Ausreißer; und die Rolle der Religion im Zusammenhang mit der Bildung von Überzeugungen, Einstellungen und Werten zum Thema Sklaverei, aber auch als Rechtfertigung des Verhaltens der Sklavhalter. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Butler, Martin und Perkins-Valdez über Sklaverei schreiben, um das Vergessen zu verhindern, um falsche Vorstellungen zu korrigieren, um die Geschichte zu überarbeiten, um zu zeigen, dass Sklaverei eine nachhaltige Wirkung hat, um die Gesellschaft mit dem Mittel des Schreibens zu kritisieren und um denen eine Stimme zu geben, die keine hatten. Um Aufmerksamkeit für die Relevanz der Vergangenheit der Vorfahren zu schaffen, haben Ihre Romane auch die Absicht, durch die gezielte Thematisierung der Vergangenheit Schmerzen und Schande zu heilen und aufzuzeigen. Umstände werden sich nur dann verbessern, wenn die Menschen bereit sind, aus der Geschichte der Sklaverei zu lernen, anstatt ihr den Rücken

zu kehren oder die Geschehnisse zu ignorieren. Schlussendlich müssen beide Rassen sich mit einer problematischen gemeinsamen Vergangenheit auseinandersetzen, um ein harmonisches Zusammenleben zu führen.

6.3. Curriculum Vitae (in German)

Curriculum Vitae

Persönliche Daten:

Name: Pop Anda-Raluca
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Ausbildung:

→ 2002-2006: Nationalkollegium "Mihai Eminescu" Oradea, Rumänien; Kommunikationswissenschaft und Fremdsprachen Schwerpunkt; Matura mit sehr gutem Erfolg absolviert.

→ 07.2006: Studium der Rechtswissenschaften an der "West Universität" in Timisoara, Rumänien.

→ 10.2006 – 02. 2007: Vorstudienlehrgang der Universität Wien (Deutsch C1 Niveau); mit ausgezeichnetem Erfolg abgeschlossen.

→ Sommersemester 2007: Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik an der Universität Wien.

→ Sommersemester 2008: Diplomstudium Romanistik (Französisch) an der Universität Wien.

Auslands-/Berufserfahrung:

→ 23-26 Mai 2008: Mitarbeiterin bei der Konferenz der Universität Wien "Imagining Minds Conference: Cognitive Approaches to Narrative, Metaphor, Complex Tropes and Embodiment".

→ April 2011: Besuch Oberlin College in Ohio, USA (Privater Aufenthalt und Recherche für die Diplomarbeit).

→ 2009-2011: Nachhilfe in Englisch (privat).

→ 2010-2011: Übersetzertätigkeit (Deutsch-Rumänisch-Deutsch; Englisch-Deutsch-Englisch).