Spectral Afterlife: Hauntology, Historical Memory, and Inheritance in Postmodernist Fiction

by

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You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

Maya Angelou - *Still I Rise*
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Introduction.

There is an old photograph from 1863 of a spacious field in Gettysburg. A faraway figure on a horse looks out across the misty landscape, around him a fallen constellation of dead bodies, chests facing the sky. In the foreground, a collapsed Union soldier lays mouth agape, head toward the camera in motionless horror. Beyond him, dead bodies extend onward without stopping, fading into imperceptible light through the swallowing fog of distance. Called “Harvest of Death,” this image captures those losses reaped by the American Civil War, with body counts so large corpses fade into the background, becoming atmospheric. This haunting portrait of mid-nineteenth-century United States, with damaged dead flesh resting atop expansive public space, refurbishes national landscape into collective deathbed, creating ghostly geographies of accumulating absences to which we are heir. But the photograph is estranging, uncannily unfamiliar to a postmodern present that privatizes death, burying it under the skyscraping gloss of a new cultural logic. The image is haunting precisely through its unrecognizability, the faded erasure from public memory. Despite current cultural fascination with phantoms, paranormal activity, and the mythos of a walking dead, postmodernity is afflicted by an inability to think historically, to reckon with its past. This “historical deafness,” as Frederic Jameson calls it, fabricates a “perception of the present as history,” reifying the current moment into a thing
without historical referent (Jameson, xi, 284). For Jameson, spectrality tells us that “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us” (Jameson, 1999, 39). The ghost succeeds in those moments when the present unpredictably betrays us, when the gears switch and we get pulled out of the absorptive autopilot of late capitalism. To the question -- *how can we represent history when our culture cannot think historically?* -- the answer, then, must be clear: through letting it haunt us.

Dropped into the age of this emerging new millennium, Jacques Derrida, the French poststructuralist philosopher and theorist, coins a wraithlike term in his 1993 *Spectres of Marx* that encapsulates well this disjointed time: *hauntology*. This compounded neologism linguistically performs its definition -- ontology is haunted. Hauntology articulates a state of temporal and ontological disjointedness in which total presence is replaced by a language of spectrality. Ontology is always-already embedded with its ghostly opposite other, whose spectral filiations and absences undo presence as an isolated category, dislocating total being and rendering it impossible. Amalgamating life and death, presence and absence, the hauntological project rests on the undoing of categories we perceive as self-contained, feeding polarized concepts into each other. Rejecting Fukuyama’s claim that the arrival of Western liberal democracy signifies the final form of human government and thus the end of history as such, Derrida contends that the spirit of
Marxism is always already spectral, and therefore cannot die. The specter makes impossible this end of history through disrupting the self-presence of that which is there, inscribing the present with forces that are not contemporary. Integral to Derrida’s argument is an ethical investment in active, interpretive inheritance and an attending obligation to the ghostly other across time. Segmenting that which is perceived as totalizing, hauntology unsettles certainty, nurturing the spectral over the sepulchral.

The difficulty in thinking historically comes in part from the illegitimate status of the ghost, who is violently neglected by such aversions to haunting. Ghosts have commonly been conceptualized as sites of repetition, the immobilizing tug of an obsessive past that prevents change, threatens teleology, and creates stasis. This thesis will attempt to complicate these conceptualizations, working instead toward a radical understanding of the specter. How might we begin to think of these ghostly returns and repetitions as themselves radical interventions in our tautological present moment? Drawing on Derridean hauntology, I will argue that the specter deconstructs the present, destabilizing its wholeness and self-containment by revealing its necessary relationship to prior and distant temporalities. Through disrupting linear “progress” and foregrounding that which is unresolved and unrealized, the specter enables a radical ethics of refuturization, providing alternative possibilities to the way we see time and fashion ourselves forward. The malleable, imaginative space of a literary text can recover and narratively
construct processes of haunting and spectrality, and I turn to novels that use their form to authorize new ways of reading time. Building a paradigmatic corpus of postmodern ghost stories, I locate and analyze a path of haunting in three American novels written within the last thirty years, arguing that the unconventional literary form and hauntological narrative of these texts work to radicalize spectral hauntings and reimagine geographies of time.

In my first chapter, I analyze Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), a time travel narrative that uncontrollably shuttles Dana, the protagonist, between her Los Angeles present and the antebellum South. In the past, she encounters a white specter haunting her black family line: the plantation’s slaveholder is the man that will impregnate her slave ancestor, thereby securing Dana’s familial genealogy and her own existence. In her dizzying oscillation between temporalities, she embodies the future’s own potential to haunt its past, and the past’s intervention into a familiar, forgetful present, with Butler urging us to wrestle with the impossibility of ever fully knowing history realistically. I argue that Dana’s active confrontation with and participation in history engenders a new, critical attitude of resistance toward her historically amnesiac present.

Chapter two takes Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days* (2005), which holds three separate short stories, set in the past, present, and future, respectively. Despite the movement through time, each future feels eerily familiar, fortifying the problems of its past. Characters are haunted by
technological trauma, be it in the form of increasing industrialization in 1867, terrorism and bomb detonation following 9/11, or a post-apocalyptic android world where beauty seems irrecoverable. I argue that in each case, the protagonist’s active inheritance, memory, and reckoning with spectral, repetitious trauma allow them to reimagine their confined presents.

In the final chapter, I turn to fiction at its most immediate, George Saunders’ recently published novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), which itself returns us to the mid-nineteenth-century past. Strange, melancholic, and satirical, this Gothic ghost opera, set during a single night in a Civil War graveyard, probes processes of becoming haunted, and freeing the ghost of the cemetery. I argue that the novel, narrated entirely by its ghosts, animates these neglected dead through their joint acts of witness to their pasts and the living present, mobilizing productive afterlife.

These novels all invest in the uncanny territory of nineteenth-century United States as their point of departure, or re-arrival, and the implicit liminality of the ghost should offer useful insight into this temporal archeology. The sites of plantation, factory, and graveyard all capture the century’s ghostly geographies of death, literal and social, an ancestral harvest of hauntings that porously seep into the contemporary present. As the past’s afterlife, postmodernity inherits these traumas, heir to a catalyzing century these texts demonstrate is far from dead. In these three works, unconventional postmodernist textual approaches fashion themselves around the palimpsests
of older literary genres, conjoining temporalities of American literary history. Across these novels, genres bend, as supernatural elements embed into historically familiar worlds, alchemizing fantasy and historical fiction. Characters in each text mobilize futures for themselves through spectral incorporation, finding new opportunities for legacy through strategizing methods of inheriting well. Despite the movement forward in time established by the conclusion of chapter two, our final chapter loops us back to the mid-nineteenth-century setting of our onset, returning us to our beginning. Through this circularity, I have constructed a thesis that, I hope, haunts itself, performing a process of temporal return through which to both conceptualize historical lingering and establish a literary ethic of non-abandonment. Derrida argues that, with the specter, “no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future...[the specter] never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back” (Derrida 99). In its unkillability, the specter demands recognition and continuity, an afterlife built from its meaningful scaffold. Through radical temporal trespass, the specter provides opening, an irreducible spectral infinity set against human finitude.

Haunting must be recognized not just as a dislocation in time, but a “form of social figuration that treats as a major problem the reduction of individuals” (Gordon 20). There is an ethic to spectral work, a commitment to securing trace and memory to the absent or misplaced. The specter is a useful category through which to articulate the felt textures of estrangement and loss,
legitimizing immateriality and unseen presence. In this thesis, I use the terms “specter” and “ghost” for their symbolic value; the ghosts you will encounter here are not necessarily ghosts in the phenomenological, even human, sense, but they are ghosts in the ways that they manifest absence, alienation, anachronism, and disembodiment. In these assembled stories of possession, time travel, melancholy, and the uncanny, the social remains of past, repressed present, and future-to-come gain critical visibility, unraveling the present’s self-sufficiency. This literature takes up the task of imagining and legitimating the specter, attempting to think historically while also looking toward open futurity. These synchronous debts to genealogy and afterlife cultivate hope through inheritance, allying spectrality with alternative future.
Chapter One.
Supernatural Time and The Specter of The Slave

Dropped into disfigured time, Dana Franklin, the protagonist of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, finds herself inexplicably flung from her late-twentieth-century Los Angeles living room into the plantation site of antebellum Maryland. Disturbingly, Dana uncovers that her existence is created through sexual violence and racist captivity. Her ancestor Hagar is the product of Rufus Weylin, a white slaveholder, and his rape of a black slave named Alice Greenwood, and the family line she sustains, down to Dana, all stand as symptoms of this horrifying society and event. Dana is faced with the ethically unbearable task of keeping alive the racist white slaveholder that will go on to impregnate her ancestor in order to sustain her own family line and ensure her existence. Inheritance here is tied to both horrific social history and traumatic bloodline.

Traveling through time only works for Dana, or those physically holding onto her. Her white husband Kevin manages to travel back with her into the plantation when he physically latches onto her at the moment of her summoning, but they must hide their relationship because, in the nineteenth century, it is especially unfathomable and forbidden. But those from the past in *Kindred* do not shuttle into the future; they remain fastened to their time. Plantation characters are not physically visible in 1976, but Dana feels them,
changing the texture and experience of things in her present. Antebellum
ideologies haunt the social relations and political life of Dana’s contemporary
United States, living on in shape-shifted forms. She bears the weight of the
era’s deep, sobering legacy and the unbending bruise it still leaves on the
present. The temporal cul-de-sac created by Dana’s wedged vacillations
between present and past problematizes the possibility of futurity, specifically
black futurity, with Butler urging us to recognize and learn from our ghosts in
order to motivate ethically productive momentum onward. With her presence
splits across presents, Dana concretizes the specter, radically imprinting the
past with its future, her present with its past.

The critic Robert Crossley points out that “in her experience of being
kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting,
involuntary voyage of her ancestors” (Crossley ix). Indeed, Dana’s subjugation
to this travel makes her a slave to time, bound by a “metaphoric Middle
Passage” across centuries that recalls “the African voyage of no return”
(Mitchell 52). Dana’s dislocation thus has a home in the antebellum period, for
which the plantation serves as the site of estranging, forcible migration. Critics
have commented on the unusual foregrounding of real historical past in a
fantasy novel, a genre crossing that reimagines literary narrative. Susan Govan
sees the novel operating as “extrapolative fiction,” wherein focus is placed on
an “African-American past rather than a completely speculative future” (Govan
79). Butler’s evasion of alien presences and otherworldly creatures in a genre
where such devices are so prevalent thus asks the reader to consider the
strange and alien within human society – that which is unknown to us may
already be lurking in our time. This “juxtaposition of the fantastic with the ‘real’
in terms of narrative mimesis) has a disruptive effect in the novel,” further
rendering, on the level of genre, Kindred’s disjuncture (Spaulding 44).

The cultural and historical context surrounding Kindred cannot be
separated from interpretations of the narrative itself, because the story is
implicated in the off-page world of its production. Critics have rightly pointed
to Butler’s engagement with the slave narrative, a historical literary form born
from the autobiographical writings of fugitive slaves. The firsthand accounts of
horrific, brutal slavery established an important counter-narrative to white
pastoral literature and narrative tropes of othering and villanizing black
people. Antebellum authors like Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass sought
to awaken white readers to the relentless damage and trauma the institution of
slavery inscribed on black dehumanized bodies.

As historical sources, slave narratives propelled a literary form to take
root, intent on implicating white Americans in the inglorious violence of a long
evaded history. Marc Steinberg sees Kindred as “part contemporary postmodern
text, part historical slave narrative” engaging in “rhetorical strategies of
subterfuge” (Steinberg 467-8). Drawing comparisons to the work of Thomas
Pynchon, Steinberg sees Butler utilizing an old literary form and offering it
contemporary reappraisal. Butler builds a textual memorial to the past out of a
distinctly postmodern literary architecture, resisting a time-capsule handling of history that might isolate, distance, and extract it from time today. Ashraf Rushdy is similarly interested in this contemporary aspect, arguing that Butler’s writing produces “conditions of historicity by reconstructing the past to endow the present with new meaning” (Rushdy 136). Indeed, *Kindred* arrived at a time when new, critically-minded scholarship emerged on historicity and American institutionalized racism, following the Civil Rights Movement and the institutionalization of African-American studies as an academic discipline. Engaging with history by way of fantasy genre literature, Butler does with *Kindred* what scholars around that same time were beginning to do with history: revisit, reimagine, and revise. Susan Govan refers to this style as “renovation,” where history is “recreated and redressed in a new light” (Govan 95). This self-conscious reliance on inheritance, borrowing, and overlay lends *Kindred* a palimpsestic quality that at once exposes its own spectrality. This is a novel haunted by genealogies, by Dana’s bloodline and Butler’s literary ancestors. This written renovation radicalizes phantasmal literary forms, making the past new and relevant again. As Christine Levecq argues, *Kindred* stages a “rewriting of its literary ancestor, the slave narrative” (Levecq 526). The narrative’s animation of past historical ghosts becomes an effective supernatural device through which to consider Butler’s own larger recovery and resurrection of literary history’s specters by way of her writing act. In formal
technique alone, Butler resurrects a spectral tradition in literature, offering afterlife and postmodern elegy to a traumatic literary history.

1. Temporal Geographies

Butler’s creation of a supernatural time through the time travel framework, where two presents can occur in simultaneity, ruptures normalized assumptions of time as natural. The paradox here—that through a supernatural device the past can be represented critically and truthfully, encourages a radical re-imagination of the way we place ourselves in time. Butler’s investment in a supernatural plot device to ground her narrative lays claim to the value of imagination and interpretation in gaining knowledge. Such rhetorical engagements resonate with the Derridean dream of a scholar of the future, who would finally be capable of “thinking the possibility of the specter” and of productively addressing it (Derrida 13). Such a figure would not privilege the present over the absent, challenging the metaphysics of presence. Conversely, the traditional scholar attempts to fit the ghost into the realm of rationality and resolution, categories that the specter by nature cannot fit within. The specter resists, defies, exposes the restrictions of knowledge because it crosses boundaries, ruptures classification, and becomes irreducible.

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Term coined by Heidegger to describe the impulse in Western philosophy toward full meaning through privileging ideas of presence over the subordinated and absent, a tendency further deconstructed by Derrida. Jacques Derrida, Margins, 21-25.
through its plurality and paradox. Butler’s commitment to the fantasy genre places her narrative outside of the rational and explicable, playing instead to the specter’s irreducibility and dislocation. *Kindred’s* inherent open-endedness allows conversations of the subject to continue and expand, itself already giving room to future specters. As Angelyn Mitchell argues of Butler’s literary choice to sustain Dana’s time travel as an incomprehensible comprehension, “Butler needed an inexplicable vehicle to assist her in presenting the inexplicable institution of slavery, its realities and its residuals” (Mitchell 62). The bewilderment Butler creates in the reader emotionally negotiates the unfathomable experience of slavery, using reading as a means of actualizing historical uneasiness.

There is a distinctly ghostly quality to the repetition of Dana's travel, as she repeatedly disappears and reappears. She embodies time, emblematizing the way it both retreats from and resurfaces into its ongoing future. The final, brutal removal of Dana’s arm literalizes this ostensive absence and suppression of history, while also making visible and real the past’s haunted impression on its future. Derrida’s specification of the ghost as revenant calls attention to time’s subjection to returns, to its lack of self-containment or arrested identity. The revenant embodies a repetition and first time, where “one cannot control its comings and goings because it begins by coming back” (Derrida 11). The ghost then, like Dana, can be conjured but not controlled. As the site of this repetition, the ghost returns the present to a past which reanimates itself,
zigzagging through a series of returns and releases. The spectral figure conceptualizes the impossibility of presence given that its own temporal and ontological hovering act troubles notions of singular presence, representing instead that which has not yet come or is no longer. As a spectral figure that can be seen, Dana gives corporeal localization to otherwise unexamined past forms, moving haunting from the realm of abstraction to the site of a living body.

The nonlinearity and lack of sequential chronology that make up Butler’s narrative structure formally perform the temporal disjointedness of Dana’s experiences. The novel opens with a prologue, which takes place after the events of the core story. Dana is in the hospital after her final time voyage, although the reader does not know the circumstances of that travel and cannot yet logically contextualize how Dana got here. Because the book begins in its story’s future, in its own narrative conclusion, Dana’s present already functions as a form of past to us, tainted by our obscure understanding of what will come. When chapter one begins, it holds an aura of retrospection, complicating the possibility of any easy, natural “beginning” to the story. The origin is unknown, consistently undermined, as Dana’s opening reflection reaffirms: “The trouble began before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember” (Butler 12). Dana’s own doubt and forgetfulness over her beginnings give purchase to the knotty task of memory work, and the difficulty in recording and retelling historical fact. “As real as the
whole episode was,” Dana confesses to Kevin, “it’s beginning to recede from me somehow. It’s becoming like something I saw on television or read about – like something I got secondhand.” Even though Dana’s initial encounter with Rufus constitutes her recent past, she is already experiencing its slippage, as the memory begins to lose clarity. The event is so incompatible with her significantly more comfortable experiences in 1976 Los Angeles that it feels mediated and removed from her, akin to watching the news. She realizes too that she is “pulling away from it because it scares [her] so,” a memory so threatening and violent that she, as has been symptomatic of her nation, wants to forget it (Butler 17). The shift away from linear storytelling punctuates Dana’s dislocating experiences with time, altering not only the way we see time but the way we read time in stories.

When the body of the novel begins, after the prologue, the reader meets Dana on her birthday, June 9, 1976, in Los Angeles. The past she travels to - Maryland in 1815, follows rather than precedes the present. Time is not chronological in *Kindred*, as we are narratively flung forward into the past, to a retrojected before that now is presented as an afterward, because it structurally comes after the narrative’s time present. Here the 1976 present operates as a memory to 1815, as though it had always come before. At stake in this flipped chronology is the suggestion that the events of the present have built toward the past. The tense realities of race relations in 1976 now figure as potential precursors to an incoming slave-state, in which contemporary racist violence
will exponentially breed. Rather than a progress-driven America in which extremist racism subdues to smaller-scale acts of injustice over time, this timeline portrays the present as planting the seeds for a far more oppressive future. This radical reconceptualization of time implicates the now in the then, using the process of reading as a means of newly writing historical time. Recognizing the links between past and present becomes a more feasible task when the present can be seen as mobilizing an antebellum slave future, rather than existing on the edge of time without observable predecessor. We cannot make sense of the problems of the present until time passes and a legacy can settle. The present becomes theorized when it is past, for “each successive present does construct the past in its image, does bring about the history that retrospectively justifies it” (R. Butler 73). This dependence on the movement of time to make sense of time problematizes the experience of living presently, because it evades acknowledgment - as we are happening – of our always already connectedness to distant temporalities. The present fails to be understood as engaging simultaneously with its past, as these connections form only when the moment has passed. Thus with each present there is “the possibility of another always being able to come along afterwards” to forge “a connection between the past and the present that the present cannot see” (R. Butler 73). This future other can release the Benjaminian repressed potential from history, constructing genealogies and kinships between moments that the moments themselves could not theorize (Benjamin 254). A trap is created here,
in which our consideration of any historical period is informed by our privileged contextualization of it, rendering impossible any phenomenology of the past. When Dana experiences the past, she has the unique sensation of being dropped into a historical context, surrounded by figures that have no oracular perspective of what is to come and how they will be remembered. Rather than existing in the past, she feels herself visiting history. But no one can ever live in the history of the antebellum, given the tension between how we conceive of history and how the events actually unfolded in time. Dana understands this after she realizes that her initial ingestion of the era was grounded on performance, placing the past on a theatrical stage:

And I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren’t really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors. While we wanted to go home, we humored the people around us by pretending to be like them. But we were poor actors. We never really got into our roles. We never forgot that we were acting (Butler 98).

What Dana and Kevin must move away from is their practice of history, and toward a practice of historicity, which restricts itself to actuality and authenticity over the constructed mythmaking that has come to ground most interpretations of the past. Cathy Caruth identifies this tension of testimony, arguing that traumatic experience is characterized by “the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully only at the cost of witnessing oneself” (Caruth 7). It is only when Dana is back in her present, and her plantation experiences become phantasmal -- felt but unseen, that she begins to make sense of her own traumatic existence there. Spectral
legacy and memory of the event have the potential to imbue the past with fuller meaning.

Time moves differently between Dana’s two temporal landscapes; the duration of time Dana spends in the past does not run equal to the time in which her body disappears from 1976. For all the months she spends on the plantation, her absence from 1976 Los Angeles only comes to a matter of seconds. The present hardly loses her even while the past can gain her for so long. The ostensive inertia of the present through this time conceit speaks to the present’s inability to enact quick change or progress. As Dana moves through antebellum time, watching Rufus grow older and older, there is a frightening sense that the past is catching up to the present - that, at the slow rate 1976 is moving, the past and present will meet each other. In this merging, the present cannot escape the past, the two temporalities conjoining in an inseparable kinship bound by nearness and similarity. The rapid continuous flow of the past gives a sense of a history that is bursting, squeezing psychological pain, physical burden, and layers of complicated memory into a packed, overflowing moment. All this happens in the stretched time of the past, for which the present barely has time to blink. This unequal temporal distribution captures the extent to which history gets lost in its future, and how little space the present carves out for the past from its privileged distance away. When Dana re-arrives in the present from months away in the past, she realizes that the day she returns to is still the same one she had left, a
maddening disharmony that drives her to feel that “nothing was real” (Butler 115). The present’s indifference to her time away effectively denies the legitimacy of her experience, making her question the believability of the event itself.

The birthday, as a site of remembrance and commemoration, becomes the entry and exit point for Dana’s time travel experience. Dana’s initial voyage occurs on her birthday, and her final return from the past into the present is on July 4, the birthday of the United States. This linkage of the figure and the nation creates a relationship between Dana and a historical, national consciousness. The personal is political, and an individual’s identity and memory is at once wound up in larger systems of nation and politics. Dana is returned finally to her present on the date of the American bicentennial, a celebratory recognition of a nation’s independence, after having spent months witnessing and experiencing institutional slavery on domestic land. This tension between glossy historical storytelling and the truths it betrays localizes itself in Dana’s disembodied arm, which recapitulates the loss and missing record of a wounded national heritage.

II. Split Presents//Split Presence

While Dana’s time travel breaks up her 1976 present, it also unstitches the past from its coherent adhesiveness. Her anachronistic presence exposes
the plantation to a spectral future beyond its imagination. Her visible nonconformity, through dress, voice, and ideology, undoes the predictability and control of the antebellum South. Not only does her very presence unstitch the time from itself, but the characters within the period that come to rely on her— for survival, support, security—reveal the present’s critical dependence on temporalities beyond itself. Dana says of Rufus, “he and I needed each other. We would be taking turns helping each other now” (Butler 121). This mutual codependence comes despite their individual and ideological differences; we are obligated to history even as we are afraid of it. As a black, educated woman, Dana defies the conventions of antebellum southern time, revealing through speech the years of education she received, a life of learning rarely afforded to any blacks of the period. This potential for education opens the possibility for black women to write their stories and themselves into history, to communicate with others through speech and writing. These spectral narratives of mobility dislocate mistaken assumptions of the perpetuity of any present moment, with Dana’s corporeal figuration threatening a sense of continuity between the nineteenth-century slave system and 1970s Los Angeles. The ostensive infinity of a present arises from conceptualizations of the future born from what is already familiar, creating a sense that the entelechial present will always continue on. When Dana discovers a group of black children on the plantation acting out the process of the slave auction block, she realizes that “even the games they play are preparing them for their future...and that future
will come whether they understand it or not” (Butler 99). Without spectral interference to enable an ethics of refuturization, the auction block will remain an ongoing reality, a symptom of a present’s singular trek toward itself. Through her embodiment of “literacy in opposition to the reality of possession, oppression, and violence,” Dana activates a radical ethics of legibility and articulation (Steinberg 467). Dana offers memoir and archival voice through her act of narration, resisting total subjugation through the emancipatory turn of writing, and her commitment to teaching and sharing this education with fellow slaves. The emancipatory nature of her literacy both liberates her body from socially regulated suppression and liberates the antebellum present from itself, exposing it to radical reinvention. Even Alice is able to persuade Rufus to allow Dana to teach their son Joe to read, who proves to be a bright, passionate student. When Dana informs Rufus of the child’s intelligence, it astonishes him:

Rufus looked surprised—as though it had never occurred to him that there might be anything special about the undersized runny-nosed child. He had spent his life watching his father ignore, even sell the children he had had with black women. Apparently, it had never occurred to Rufus to break that tradition. Until now (Butler 231).

Dana’s active tutoring not only provides education for Joe, but it shakes Rufus’ uncritical, passive acceptance of custom. Subsequently, “he began to take an interest in his son,” developing a newfound affection for the child he never considered before (Butler 231). Dana’s influence ripples through the community, affecting more than just those she directly teaches. Further, Butler
herself stages substantial resistance through her own active authorship -- a black, educated woman intervening both in an oppressive past and her still troubling present through the public stage of the book. Through writing she enacts a process of \textit{righting} time, literalizing through time travel storytelling the hauntological admixture of past, present, and future time.

Dana’s returns to the past imagine an impossible condition: to live before you are born. Yet what becomes most startling, to herself and others, is not that she defies biological logic and travels backwards, but that she is socially unlike those of the time. Her presence is inconceivable because of the condition of her difference. Earthly logic aside, she cannot live in the antebellum period because the world has not “made” her through mental comprehension and ideology. The world cannot theorize her into being because she is not yet socially constituted. The most bewildering aspect of her anachronism to the characters on the plantation is not the medicine she carries or the technology she describes, but her social disjunction from their time. In an interview, Octavia Butler argued that “the things that would make our era unrecognizable are mainly the social things” (Kenan 498). Technological transformation and invention hold less significant import than the way social attitudes and ideologies may adjust and change. When Dana first offers Rufus “medicine from [her] own time,” aspirin he has never seen or heard of before, he asks few questions, insisting that she “give them to [him]” (Butler 132). But meanwhile, Rufus cautions Dana that his father “doesn’t like the way you
Weylin was warning me it was dangerous to keep a slave like you – educated, maybe kidnapped from a free state...he said I ought to sell you” (Butler 80). The social threat of a black woman’s education frightens the Weylins more than the anachronistic medicine they physically put into their bodies. Rufus is willing to trust and incorporate futuristic material discovery into his way of life more easily than he can fathom Dana’s characterization and her bodied evidence of an end to the plantation slave system.

III. Wounding and Trauma

While Dana’s destabilizing, distinctive presence in the antebellum era poses a threat to certain characters, her exorcism would mean their own endangerment. Rufus needs Dana so that he can survive the repeated mortal threats he falls into. She saves him from drowning, burning, falling, fighting, and sickness, and he comes to demand and rely on her trustful, resourceful presence. But beyond the value of her life to Rufus, her exorcism would also be impossible – she is able to return to the present when her life is most severely threatened, therefore preventing the possibility of her being killed on plantation time. This regulatory structure narratively demonstrates the impossibility of ever entirely eradicating the specter, because it will survive, and it will come back. When she does finally kill Rufus, this too is not an exorcism, because her homecoming is scarred by Rufus’ final violent act:
ripping off her arm. The combination of his own touch and the swirling 

madness of the voyage home cause Dana to return to her living room bloodied 

and bodily damaged. Her body becomes the visual site at which the 

hauntological presence-absence manifest. She may be returned to a single 

present, but she is now bodily unwhole – tugged by a history known for making 

people invisible, less there. That Rufus can still maintain a visible, painful hold 

on Dana beyond the plantation, that he can render unwhole and vulnerable her 

twentieth century present, underscores how embedded, unending, and 

systemic the racism and violence against black bodies remains.

The haunting power of this ghost arm exteriorizes her traumatic 

memory, propelling on the level of ligament and body the impossibility to 

forget a past that runs through her. As an open wound that cannot heal, the 

severed arm emblematizes the accumulation of absence brought on by 

continuities of trauma and violence, reaping loss through time. This is the 

condition of archival loss, the fate of the past in its future, exposed and drawn 

onto the site of the body and its emptied appendage. This phantom limb holds 

both absence and an attention to absence, giving paradoxical visibility to void. 

Absence becomes reconceptualized as entity over nothingness, providing truth 

and testimony to lost experience. As Cathy Caruth argues, because “the 

traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in 

connection with another place, and in another time” (Caruth 8). The 

belatedness of trauma, its manifestation in returns, is illustrated by the
extremity of Dana’s suffering in twentieth century Los Angeles, rather than in immediate nineteenth century Maryland. Dana’s time travel captures the movement of pain, crossing borders of temporality and space. Pain is portable, and its unresolved, lingering condition worsens when it is denied public space and archive. The horror of Dana’s wounded, vulnerable condition, in which trauma begins a process of erasing her, urges us to recognize the ethical incentive in giving pain a voice. The specter of slavery haunts, infects, halts; the trauma of history amputates growth, never really letting the future run away.

But it is not just the past, or physical wounding, that become the site of trauma for Dana. Perhaps even more frightening than the Antebellum era is the 1976 present, because it always holds, at any moment, the potential to throw Dana back into an unimaginable cavity of the past. This liminality disfigures the formerly familiar, creating an uncanny present that “arouses dread and creeping horror” (Freud 1). The intervention of the past in Dana’s otherwise linear progression through time complicates her relationship to the present, and to her home. Dana reflects that “the time, the year, was right, but the house just wasn’t familiar enough”. This sense of the Unheimlich leads Dana to feel “as though I were losing my place here in my own time” (Butler 191). She falls out of joint with the time she was born into, reaffirming the hauntological assertion that being cannot entail presence. Derrida conceptualizes the arrival of the guest-other as enacting this experience of the uncanny, dispossessing the present of itself. The spectral incorporation into the
present causes the home to feel “itself occupied, in the proper secret (Geheimnis) of its inside, by what is most strange, distant, threatening” (Derrida 186). The equivocal, mysterious secret that unsettles the familiar is central to spectral legacy. Rather than refer to a stable, fixed past, the specter motions toward unknown presents, repeatedly disturbing phenomenological cohesion. Dana’s active participation in history engenders her distrust of her alienating present. When returned to the present, her experiences in the antebellum era suddenly lose their purchase, becoming incompatible and spectral. “My memory of a field hand being whipped suddenly seemed to have no place here with me at home,” she remarks in confusion (Butler 115). That the specific facts of Dana’s sobering engagement with history have no space to be nurtured and recuperated in her present ought to underscore a grim reality: the present offers no public afterlife to the sufferings of the dead. Despite its alien nature, the specter offers a valuable reassessment of the mostly unexamined present, activating a radical drift from the present’s paved, narrow routing. Catapulted back from the past, Dana begins to make connections between past and present, establishing a frightening but necessary genealogy of the contemporary. She draws parallels between Rufus and Kevin, who, despite ideological differences, are both nevertheless implicated in the same history of white supremacy. She finds a shared sense of suffering with Jews, victimized by “Germans that had been trying to do in only a few years what the Americans had worked at for nearly two hundred” (Butler 116-7). Her revised perception of
the present absorbs temporal and global histories, moving away from contemporary isolationist vacuum and toward recognition of the diffuse histories haunting all aspects of her personal experience. Thus the past equips Dana with opportunities of refuturing herself through the act of living more deliberately and consciously inheriting from time. It requires the return and repetition of the past to mobilize the inheritor to actively ensure that the problems of the past not get replicated.

When propelled back in time, Dana participates in a history that she is not yet born for, problematizing the very conditions of her existence. But the problem of presence articulated in this impossibility of being extends outside of the time travel frame. Dana’s time travel formally constructs the problem of presence lying within her own time, a condition haunting every successive black present. Even in 1976 she lives before she exists to others, her humanity - as has been the condition of blackness throughout all U.S. history - rendered systematically illegitimate, inadequate, inferior. For in black America, “this is the afterlife of slavery – skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman 6). While Dana’s experiences in the 1976 of Kindred do not necessarily showcase the still violent, contemporary racism that permeates off-page 1976, her grim experiences at a temporary labor agency referred to as a “slave market” (Butler 52), her white husband’s urge to simply “let go of” (Butler 17) her traumatic memories on the plantation, and his sister’s refusal to “have [Dana] in her
house” all speak to a still ongoing, if disguised, racist groundwork in mid 1970s United States (Butler 110). The hauntological question of personhood raised by the contradictory nature of Dana’s ontology finds its home in the antebellum South, a time well known for challenging understandings of personhood and making spectral the dehumanized black body. The sociologist Orlando Patterson theorizes this spectral condition of the slave, arguing that enslavement produced a social death of the black body, in which the slave is socially constructed as less than human. Social death is a condition marking groups of low social status treated inhumanely, socially murdered through inflicted trauma despite biologically living. The slave is part of society and yet socially dead, enacting a spectral, liminal incorporation. The commodified, captive slave body is rendered effectively anonymous, a tool over a man. This liminal, social death horrifyingly captures the hauntological condition, denying all possibility of whole presence, and giving ghostly absence to living souls.

In what Patterson calls “natal alienation,” the slave loses connection to their past and possible future generations through the loss of cultural heritage and a sense of belonging to a place or origin. He argues that the slave is “culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors...slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory” (Patterson
iv). Dana’s forceful, estranging migration certainly replicates many of these confusions of origin, and not having access to Kevin or her material safety leaves her emotionally stranded and without assurance. Yet her returns to the past do enable her to recover a heritage that has been lost to her in the present, to activate Patterson’s “conscious community of memory” in a way that will come to newly inform the way she views 1976. For the present from which Dana is removed seems already wound up in alienation. Her struggles to establish a writing career and interracial marriage to Kevin have isolated her from her guardian aunt and uncle, and from Kevin’s family. Both her parents are dead, placing her from the outset in a ghostly genealogy. She is the inheritor of a lost parentage, already removed from her makers and origin, the sole body-artifact of a biological line she cannot retrieve. Here lies the paradox of orphanhood, in which the child, removed from their parents, holds the double burden of an emptied ancestry and a sole responsibility to reconstruct a familial legacy. In moving back through time, Dana actually has more exposure to family than she does in her present; she gains connection, an inversion of the expected slave experience. Slavery puts her into contact with her family, creating affinities through blood and social network. She “finds cooperation, collaboration, and nurturing in her ancestral home,” complicating the singularity of Patterson’s argument and demonstrating the possibilities of resistance and solidarity within slave communities (Mitchell 56). Part of Butler’s project is the deconstruction of historical stereotypes and tropes,
classifications that only arise from the passage of time and the impulse to periodize history. Lisa Yaszek identifies Butler’s novel as one engaged in “debunking cultural stereotypes of black women as happy mammies or long-suffering victims,” effectively complicating generalizations of slave psychologies (Yaszek 1061). These nuances problematize the sentimental nostalgia put forward by films like Gone With the Wind, with “its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage,” that now so viscerally nauseate Dana (Butler 116). The complex fullness of Butler’s characterization reveals too that the past was itself haunted, already subject to spectral underpinnings that complicate the singularity of their historical position.

III. Legacy and L’avenir

In experiencing the antebellum past as it happens “live,” Dana is capable of changing the course of history, which now has yet to come. The past becomes unsettled, infinitely prospective, filled with the Derridean possibilities of “l’avenir”. Derrida distinguishes between a future that “will be,” that is “predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable” and a future l’avenir – to come - that “refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected” (Derrida, 2005, 53). The reader and Dana are aware of what one outcome of the antebellum period can be, because it is what, by 1976, has happened. But flung back in time, Dana suddenly is faced with the possibility of what might have
been, namely a history in which her ancestral line might never come to be. It is
the future she has already known, the future that was once her history, which
now runs the risk of becoming lost, undone. Dana takes advantage of the
*avenir* of the now unpredictably malleable antebellum present, through
personal subversions tied to her literacy, and most significantly, killing Rufus
to protect herself. As Rushdy argues, time travel is not “Butler’s most
spectacular gesture in *Kindred*; it is the fact that Dana is able to change history”
(Rushdy 143). As a force of change, Dana actively pivots the past from its
predicted, projected march across time into a more dialectical exploration,
filled with newly recognized possibilities ahead. The very nature of her non-
belonging radicalizes rather than regresses the community around her,
disturbing the unilateral, narrowed perspective any individual has of their
present, and forcing confrontation with the other. This is precisely why
historical periodization is impossible; the persistence of spectral forces denies
the present its potential for singularity. The specter, then, is a crucial aspect of
each successive present, because it allows the present to think outside of itself.

*Kindred* is not strictly a historical novel; Butler does not solely wish to
capture the specific horrors of a still neglected piece of past. She deliberately
brings us into the past through the lens of the present, offering equal weight to
these two dispersed places in time. The horror that Butler looks to place
emphasize on in the novel is not as much in the violence of the Antebellum as
it is in the violence we perpetuate by not paying attention to the past, by
continuing to repeat its injustice in disguised forms. The history considered old and over is instead ongoing and unexamined, frighteningly relevant and alive. Certainly Butler’s thorough examination of history encourages us, as many contemporary novels engaging with historicity have, to apply a more flexible, speculative philosophy toward history. The past often has more to say than has yet been said about it, and attending to the ghost through a Derridean hospitality can enable a radical deepening of historical memory and visibility. But she goes further than this, concerned not only for the past but for the texture of her nowness, and the radical ethics at stake in Dana’s time tourism consider, most significantly, a philosophy of the present. If an interpretive understanding of history is critical, then so too is an open, interpretive relationship to the present. The present is impossible to reduce, constantly complicating and troubling itself, becoming distant to us even as we live it. The present, like the past, is unresolvable, and it must remain open, always “able to be rewritten from some point in the future” (R. Butler 73).

Yet all of Dana’s experiences through time operate within the imaginary space of the text – Kindred is a work of fantasy fiction. The novel as object complicates the novel as narrative, because just as the plot rips off the veneer of distance from history, flinging the reader and Dana into the past, so too must we reconcile the fact that the only real voice in the book is that of Butler herself, feet firmly planted in the twentieth century. Dana’s experiential encounter with history, a history revealed to be different from how she – in the
twentieth century – envisioned it, is mediated by an author who never lived in the antebellum herself, only ever experienced Dana’s time. Access to the past can only ever be mediated. The past remains irreproducible and impenetrable, open to an exponential web of interpretable recoveries.

Over the course of the novel, each of Dana’s involuntary visits to the past become longer than the last, eerily suggesting her growing competence and effectiveness as a slave. If her ticket out of the past rests on a legitimate threat to her life, then the deepening durations of her time there gesture to her growing ability to avoid mortal threats. But what is at stake in these evasions of death? On the one hand, she has greater self-possession, mastering her body’s mortality. Her value grows on the Weylin Plantation, both to the slaves and slaveholders, who come to depend on her for their own futurity. But doing so comes at a psychologically damaging price, as her deepening plunges into the past further dislocate her sense of self. She must depend on approaching death to get out, but even then it only flings her back into her present, which becomes less of a comfort each time. Her inability to be killed almost becomes less of an asset and more of a torture. Survivability and lack of closure create the agonizingly unsettled condition of the specter, which is the condition of trauma: an “oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth 5). Part of the torture of Dana’s condition is that her death is continuously asymptotical; it always approaches
but never actually arrives. Each moment she comes near to death in the
antebellum era, she whirls back into the contemporary present. History
obligates her to exist, providing her no exit, not even suicide. Dana’s lived
reincarnation of a past often thought of as dead evinces the incredible strength
and resistance of the specter to historical burial. The specter’s resurrection runs
counter to the cultural prioritization of futurity and linearity, demanding
ethical memory and remembrance of the past. The terrifying closeness of death
for Dana hauntingly approximates the shadowy experience of slavery itself, a
relentless process that made ghosts of people who hardly ever really lived, and
who have never yet been fully mourned.
Toward the end of Michael Cunningham’s *Specimen Days*, Simon, an android creature, watches the community around him prepare to board a spaceship for a new world, an event that recalls for him similar moments from history – the Mayflower, Columbus’ fleet, Viking ships. Recognizing these parallels, he reflects, “it had probably always been thus” – this time has been here before (Cunningham 293). The event is not new, born from a renewing heritage of accumulating struggles that reanimate the has-happened as a still-happening. Set over a hundred years into the future, the story ends with a dream born from the past, an enduring faith in voyage as a means of reaching utopia, the act of fleeing as a process of finding. This returning urge “to learn to live finally” calls for a different kind of future that repeatedly has yet to find form (Derrida xvi).

Such is the major concern of each protagonist across *Specimen Days*, a series of three short stories set in New York over a 250 year span of time. While the narratives feature different characters, genres, and premises, they reuse the same character names and motifs, linked most explicitly through their shared returns to the text of Walt Whitman, who provides a ghostly glue across Cunningham’s three worlds. And Whitman’s own poetic emphasis on the eternally recurring circulation of life forms and the connectedness of all
species, from past to future, offers purchase to the sense of continuity and
genealogy across the novellas. These recursive literary devices literalize the
culture of historical repetition that the stories of *Specimen Days* thematize,
constantly imprinting the present with a living past. The self-referential spaces
of narrative borrowing construct a palimpsestic overlay that imagines temporal
processes of inheritance and haunting, nurturing a spectral ethos that refuses
to give up the ghost.

*Specimen Days* begins in the Industrial Age, New York of the late 19th
century. After the death of his brother Simon in a freak factory accident, young,
poor, “mishappen” Lucas, who uncontrollably recites Whitman’s verse in
public, replaces his brother at the very machine that killed him (Cunningham
4). Machinery orbits around his family: his father lives with a breathing tube as
a result of his tannery labor, and his mother, paralyzed by grief, depends on a
music box to keep her company. Finding a sinister impulse in machines, Lucas
wishes to save his brother’s girlfriend Catherine from the sewing machines at
her job by staging his own factory accident and thereby forcing her to leave her
workplace. Mutilated and in the process of dying, Lucas does manage to save
Catherine; a tremendous fire burns her building down, and he and her watch
women jump from the flaming windows, a haunting image that anticipates 9/11,
the era of the subsequent novella.

This second novella, *The Children’s Crusade*, shuttles the reader over a
century into the future of the last episode. Cat, a black woman haunted by the
death of her young son, works with criminal deterrence in a dystopic
Manhattan freshly terrified by 9/11. When she takes a call from a child suicide
bomber who soon after hugs an innocent pedestrian until they blow up, she
becomes haunted yet again, guilty over how she could have prevented it. Her
job stipulates that she restore order from chaos, and yet the unfolding
investigation into this “family” of child bombers only propels her frenzy and
alienation. As the investigation gets solved – a woman modeling herself after
Walt Whitman has convinced these children to kill as a means of returning
time to a simpler age – Cat unexpectedly finds and cares for one of these
bombers in secret, and the two impulsively escape Manhattan, heading on a
train toward an unknown destination.

The final story, Like Beauty, is set roughly 150 years into the future of the
previous episode, a 22nd century wasteland of post-humanity where drones
form terrorizing pageants of surveillance in the sky and evacuees take shelter in
abandoned strip malls. New York has transformed into “Old New York” a
theme park nostalgia industry that has “built its reputation on historical
fidelity,” allowing wealthy tourists to enter synecdoche replicas of vintage New
York societies (Cunningham 203). In this simulacrum, visitors test drive
subway rides and capitalists pay to be mugged in Central Park. This world fits,
all too literally, Lucas’ encounter of New York from In The Machine: “He was
aware of a subtle wrongness, as if the most familiar of places...were altered, as if
it had become, overnight, an imperfect copy of itself” (Cunningham 34). As this
imperfect copy, Old New York maddeningly captures the postmodern stagnancy of capitalism, approximating the squeezed, stretched, saturated market system, devoid of freedom and originality. This future, built on the recycled concepts of old cultures, is the landscape through which Simon, an experimental android creature programmed to deliver Whitmanian outbursts, performs professional muggings, and Catareen, a reptilian alien works as a nanny. When Simon’s friend Marcus is shot by government drones, Catareen and Simon initiate a chaotic escape from New York to Denver, the alleged home of Simon’s programming maker. Along the way they are joined by Luke, a young homeless boy, and the three of them meet Simon’s maker, who is preparing a voyage with his small community to another planet in the hopes of starting better lives there. At this time, Simon learns that Catareen has been slowly dying, and she has very little time left in her. As the spaceship ascends, Simon stays behind, remaining with Catareen until she dies. Simon’s choice to care for Catareen in her process of dying offers him opening, nurturing a burgeoning humanity and empathy within him.

Rather than embracing the Derridean l’avenir - the future as open, the rigid worlds within Specimen Days all showcase a closing off of the future, an urge Jameson characterizes as “an attempt to colonize the future, to draw the unforeseeable back into tangible realities, in which one can invest and on which one can bank, very much in the spirit of stockmarket ‘futures’” (Jameson 228). In The Children’s Crusade, Simon’s shadowy position “trad[ing] futures”
appropriately literalizes this industry of control, which profits off of its artificial manipulations of time (Cunningham 107). Defying temporal properties, this treatment of the future as something that can be concretely determined suggests that the future has already happened, the moment of its determination already in the past. “This is the future prepared by the elimination of historicity” - which is not really a future at all so much as a relic piece of a prolonged present (Jameson 228). The cyclical states of eternal return characterizing each novella’s relationship to its predecessor/descendent become symptomatic reminders of this stagnancy, the present rendered detained.

The specter becomes a valuable weapon against this self-containment, as its anachronistic condition activates a break from the present’s crisis in historicity, unsettling the violent erasure of the past. Investing in the ghost and supporting these lost histories become acts of resistance to the injustices that produced them. Already spectral and disavowed by their own presents – Lucas as an impoverished child of immigrants, Cat as a black woman, and Simon as an illegal creation – our protagonist specimens answer the call of the other across time through imagining alternative communities and modes of living for themselves. These figures, each haunted by loss, choose to run away from their communities to activate personal change, creating narratives that allegorize escape from the blind tautologies of each present. Cat decides to leave her boyfriend Simon and the linear, fixed futures of his characterization, opening
herself up to innumerable, refutured possibilities. This “crazy rebirth” leaves
Cat “hurtling forward on a train into the vast confusion of the world, its
simultaneous and never-ending collapse and regeneration” (Cunningham 196).
Fittingly, the episode ends in this haze of non-arrival, with the narrative’s
unresolved ending supporting an ethos of unpredictable possibility. Cat’s train
ride into unknowable futures anticipates Simon’s chosen “crazy rebirth,” his
solitary trek into the unmapped Rockies, where he feels ready and compelled to
“ride into” his future (Cunningham 305). Similarly unresolved, this ending
recuperates the ethos of its predecessor, offering active spectral return in a
social landscape steered by dead inheritance. Desertion becomes survival, as
the deliberately drifting movement of these characters physicalizes their radical
break with their social orders.

Across the stories, the characters encounter the same anxieties and fears
regarding industrialization and mortality, resurrecting the pathos of the past
through the protagonist of each story’s present. The lack of each era’s serious,
critical confrontation with the problems of the past accelerates a cultural
amnesia to technology, in which the same dangers and monstrous events
become reproduced still a century after each other. If earlier traumas were
remembered and foregrounded in public memory, perhaps the future could
avoid them. Aris Mousoutzanis finds these recurrences as articulations of a
Freudian return of the repressed, in which the past we attempt to hide and
deny resurfaces in unavoidable ways. This call of the other is “integral to
Cunningham’s attempt to rewrite ‘History’ from the perspective of the marginalized – his ‘exotic specimens’ (Mousoutzanis 130). These repetitions of loss and trauma stage pronunciations of Freud’s uncanny, an estranging encounter within the realm of the familiar and intimate that disturbs an individual’s relationship to their known present. That the traumatic event of each story figures as “either repeating or related to the previous one and preparing the way for the next one only confirms the association between repetition and disaster” (Mousoutzanis 133).

I. Machine and Mutilation

As technology expands and elaborates upon itself across the stories, so too does the rate of its spectral production. A “new speed of apparition” is created by “the simulacrum, the synthetic or prosthetic image, and the virtual event, cyberspace and surveillance, the control, appropriations, and speculations that today deploy unheard-of powers” (Derrida 67). Such technologies splinter human presence across physical and temporal space, where a voice can be heard and its body not seen. Cat’s job at the terrorist deterrence hotline gives spectral properties to the callers, killers who can hide their identities through disembodied voices. Indeed, the virtualities created by new techno-communications create “a new kind of trembling or shimmering of the present in which new ghosts now seem on the point of walking” (Jameson
The increasing expansion and normalization of technology throughout the novel’s episodes neutralizes the appearance of the thing itself, distilling machinery into the air. The arena of machinery expands across each century, a swelling that begins in controlled, walled structures and gradually tumbles out like fire, roaring onward without stopping. Like the music box within the clutches of Lucas’ mother’s hands, “once wound it would not stop except by its own accord” (Cunningham 27). Throughout In The Machine, the machines are confined mostly to factories and other workplaces, operated by hands that are taught and prepared for interaction. But in The Children’s Crusade, machines have spilled out of windows into the streets and the sky, coming into contact with those unprepared for them. Where once it was possible to consciously avoid the machine, by the early 21st century contact is more chaotic, random, making everyone a potential target. The child bombers commitment to giving death to innocents and strangers positions them in the open streets of public urban space, all pedestrians vulnerable. And when the reader arrives in the futurology of Like Beauty, machines have spilled into souls, fully living in and manufacturing people. The machine’s spatial shift from the professional to the personal realm, into deeply privatized, intimate existence maps the increasing invasion and interiorization of the machine into the human body. “Postmodern virtuality,” Jameson argues, is “a daily spectrality that undermines the present and the real without any longer attracting any attention at all” (Jameson 64).
Normalized and unremarkable by the time of the final story, objects fly and androids speak, and characters hardly look twice.

As a result of the proliferation and normalized clutter of machinery across Specimen’s New York, things begin to disappear, a condition of hauntological time: the proliferation of presences always already produce absences. The conceptualization of Dana’s loss of arm in Kindred as an accumulation of the absence and erasure done to bodies whose histories have been publically forgotten sees itself similarly literalized in Cunningham’s writing. The body in Specimen Days comes gradually to disappear from itself, hollowing into illegible uncertainty through the increasing production of and investment in technologies and machinery. The loss grows over passing time; at first, machines, which themselves operate as mechanical substitutions for human labor, take fingers, arms, lives, damaging and making bodies disappear. By the second story, buildings have now vanished, emptying the skyline, followed by broken bombed bodies. And in the final narrative, populations have gone away, earth bodies fully replaced by alien creatures or android programming. Both these novels depict the progression of historical time as a process of reaping absences and rendering people unwhole. By the last novella, beings do not come to lose but are born already lost. The simulo Simon’s creator, Emory Lowell, recognizes the phantasmic unwholeness produced by his own mechanical practice, coming to feel “guilty about having created beings who are almost but not quite” (Cunningham 232). As a being of this
incomplete creation, Simon feels his own inner ghost, absent composition, confessing, “I want something. I feel a lack” (Cunningham 232). For these cyborgs, erasure not only becomes a thing to actively resist, but a condition into which they are born.

As Simon in Like Beauty watches his friend Marcus get attacked by a drone, he witnesses a terror: “A ray of brilliant red shot out and sheared Marcus’s right arm off at the shoulder...the arm fell. It lay on the ground with its shoulder end smoking. The fingers twitched...He was nothing but head and torso” (Cunningham 215). The process in which the body is erased is faster here than it was In The Machine, an increase in Derrida’s “speed of apparition” whereby virtualities end up accelerating the production of spectral forms. This horror of the body disappearing moves like a current through the three stories of Specimen Days, as each character marvels and fears the threatening condition of industrialization’s contact with the body. The future’s concerns become the anxieties of the Specimen past, the gnawing, unresolved underbelly of a culture sightlessly insistent on narratives of technology as progress and advancement. Centuries earlier, Lucas chooses to escape the hospital, with its promise of amputation, running magnetically toward the Mannahatta fire, where he will die filled with the satisfying knowledge that his personal sacrifice saved Catherine. In evading the amputation of his arm, Lucas’ flight symbolically demonstrates his refusal to be rendered unwhole and erased, his call to be visible and remembered. Echoing Marcus’ impulse to run from
looming erasure, Lucas characterizes the vulnerable terror of becoming undone, an overthrow of the body that proves systematic and relentless.

Simon and Catareen find themselves in the positions of the marginalized, threatened specimens before them, as Marcus’ fate becomes their conceivably approaching future. As they escape their enemy drone, its “second beam burned a hole in the headrest where Simon’s head had been,” the ghostly imprint of those earlier and future unlucky others (Cunningham 227).

Simon’s survival rests on these near-misses, moments of narrowly avoided disappearance, which bring him close to without fully arriving at death. He escapes the attack and his body remains intact, but he is “not alive, technically speaking” – his survival does not imply a condition of living. (Cunningham 216). Like the asymptotical condition of Dana’s impenetrable survival in *Kindred*, Simon’s sense of being “always on the brink of something that never arrives” throws him in a deep hauntology, a crisis of representation that leaves him suspended in deeply ambiguous, quivering existence (Cunningham 232).

Simon’s words capture the consequences of technological contact, a process complicated by the machine’s inconsistent outcomes. The mechanical compounds life and death, as human survival is both threatened by and dependent on the machine: in *In The Machine*, Simon is killed by one, yet his father lives because of one. This complicated, multilayered relationship between the body and technology theoretically enacts prosthesis, in which the prosthetic appendage both offers extension and reveals a lack. Machines
become intimate appendages to human bodies in new ways across the stories: a breathing device in the first, a wearable bomb in the second, the physical body itself in the last. Even when the breathing device supposedly has ameliorative effects, Lucas begins to wonder if it might “be sucking his father’s life away,” while “pretending to help him.” Ultimately even, ”did any machine seem to want the good of its people?” (Cunningham 54). Technology holds together these contradictions and opposites, quivering ambiguously between human advancement and human destruction. How can these narratives of technological progress reconcile themselves against the rising reality of multiplying corpses? Technology can contain both these simultaneous realities, irreducibly contradicting itself and its possible characterization.

The confusing hybridity of Simon in Like Beauty challenges the presumed singularity of the body, vivifying the potential for human plurality. As a portmanteau being, Simon hauntologically emblematizes categorical impossibility, a boundary-crossing figure that occupies oppositional concepts at once. The borders of the body become unsettled by the figure of the cyborg, which threatens ontology itself, making life and machinery indistinguishable from one another. Donna Haraway theorizes the relationship between humans and machines in this undecidable figure of the cyborg in her work The Cyborg Manifesto:

Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the specter of the ghost in the machine...But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve man’s dream, only mock it...Late twentieth-century machines have made
thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert (Haraway 11).

On the one hand, the cyborgian android Simon embodies the frightening potential of humans to become inhuman, to become so fully controlled and consumed by the machine that they lose that idiosyncratic spirit of humanity. Yet simultaneously, and inversely terrifying, he represents the potential of machines to become eerily human, to approach human thought and feeling and soul. In Like Beauty, the government’s decision to declare android experimental creatures illegal results from their having become too humanlike, too convincingly real. The machine is necessarily considered an other, despite increasing evidence to the contrary. Simon’s capacity to feel and act beyond the conditions predetermined for him threatens the definitions of personhood and authority, yet, as Derrida evinces, “all the questions on the subject of being or of what it is to be (or not to be) are questions of inheritance” (Derrida 67). The Like Beauty story-universe is heir to a history, routinely unacknowledged, of figures much like Simon – bodies without borders, identities without end. The past continues to invite the present to receive it, which can be achieved through active Derridean inheritance, extending an ethical attention back toward the social genealogy of the now.

Thus, there is already evidence of the cyborgian compounding well before the android Simon has been made. Luke’s days laboring at the works
come to remove him from emotional thought, from his Whitman, indeed from much of his consciousness: “He entered a state of waking sleep, an ongoing singularity of purpose, in which his mind was filled with that which must fill it, to the exclusion of all else. Align, clamp, pull, pull again, inspect” (Cunningham 18). His mind speaks mechanism, already participating in the language and activity of the robotic without the formalized body programming. For Luke and the other laborers, “their former lives were dreams they had each night, from which they awakened each morning at the works” (Cunningham 29). This condition runs analogous to the android Simon’s flirtations with free thought and felt expression, which also come to him in the receptacle of the dream, removed from waking work and routine. As a space for the unconscious and repressed, the dream becomes the site at which the unexpressed speaks. That intangible dreams figure for both these characters as spaces to step outside of the language and network of machines suggests that technology has dangerously overtaken life itself.

II. Secondhand Futures

It is through the final story that Cunningham offers, as Robert Duggan astutely describes, “a presentation of post-disaster America as having become a new frontier reminiscent of earlier moments in its history” (Duggan 389). Despite being set well over a hundred years into the future, Denver’s dated, retro aesthetic looks more like an enactment of old Wild West folklore than it
does of a society new and advanced. Here, future worlds constantly return to older versions of themselves, resurrecting architectures of the past. Driving through Denver, “Luke pointed out a store that had once, according to its faded gilt sign, been called Banana Republic and was now a saloon, a barbershop, and a haberdashers. In front of the store, a group of Nadian settlers were loading a horse-drawn cart.” Time moves unexpectedly backward through this description, portraying a commercial chain store as the lost, anticipatory relic to a local saloon and small businesses. The future they have built heavily reanimates the ghosts of its past. “Some citizens were on foot. Some piloted hoverpods, most of them old and dented. Some rode horses.” This comingling of seemingly anachronistic transportation methods, in which, as Luke argues, “the horse is making a comeback,” creates a figuration of the future that feels old and recycled, with even the ultramodern hoverpods described in aged terms (Cunningham 270). Cunningham himself has suggested this idea in interviews, arguing that the future has been “dingier and less effective than we thought it would be” (NPR). Amidst all the futurology of Like Beauty, technology still breaks down, glitches, frustrates. The car radio jams and plays “Born to Run” on agonizing repeat. Drones miss their targets and wreck property, eventually tiring of the chase altogether. “It would be nice to have a vid with better resolution,” thinks Simon, disappointedly, “it would be nice to have a lot of things” (Cunningham 208). In Cunningham’s own words, the stories work toward capturing a “worn future in which the machines tend to go
awry and people live as best they can in a highly advanced world that’s falling apart” (NPR). This sense of the future as worn, as already lived in, contributes to Specimen’s unsettling impression of a secondhand future exhaustedly wearing its past. Like the endless repetition of Springsteen’s “Born to Run” stuck on loop in Simon’s stolen getaway car, this future runs right back to where it began, unable to hit a new note.

As the progression through Specimen Days intimates, the future is imperfect, characterized not so much by its newness but by uncanny repetition and ghostly borrowing. Jameson finds this type of cultural recycling as a specifically cultural characteristic of postmodernity and late capitalism, in which “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (Jameson 17). In the dead inheritance of this pastiche, dominant cultural traits persist across time, offering no path of justice to their spectral others. As such, “inheritance is never a given, it is always a task” (Derrida 67). The inheritance Derrida calls for is active, committed to a spectral ethic that prioritizes the oppressed, the marginalized, the specimens. Paradoxically, this inheritance is emancipatory, and is “always the reaffirmation of a debt” to silenced time (Derrida 114).

Jameson’s theoretical snapshot of postmodernity, as a time that commodifies its arrested past, warns of the entropic state of decline that capitalism, and its offspring industrialization have produced.
Writing decades earlier yet encountering, and perhaps also prophesizing, this state of withering time, Walter Benjamin argues that rather than a philosophy of Hegelian progress, history has put forth growing violence and regression. Through the visual metaphor of Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin allegorizes this ongoing backwardness, his Angel of History:

The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is *this* storm. (Benjamin 257).

Paralyzed, the angel bears witness to piling damages, chest warmed by the burning reminder of a productive past, eyes plastered unforgivingly open to a resistive future – one not of gaining, but of recycling: the efforts of old progress shrinking under the unbearable weight of modernity’s unethical violence. Such is the state of growing deterioration and decline that punctuates Cunningham’s novel. The haste with which technology moves and fills new forms across the *Specimen* centuries thus figures more as a process of running away from toxic pasts rather than a running toward ripening futures. The piling rubble of Benjamin’s description takes the form of heaping absences, irrecoverable disfigurings, losses stacked on top of each other. Wings fragile and torn, the angel embodies wounded, defective futures, hopes exhausted and overturned.
As Cat walks through a terrorized twenty-first century Manhattan, she senses, "the danger that had infected the air for the last few years was stirred up now... you could easily, at any moment, make your fatal mistake (Cunningham 105). History moves toward new dangers, new accumulating reasons to fear. And over a century after Cat, Catareen similarly undergoes a process of disenchanting terror: “The Nadians must have hoped for more when they migrated to Earth. They must have imagined themselves as something better than servants, nannies, street sweepers” (Cunningham 218). As galactic refugees, the Nadians encounter similar disappointments with their positions in New York as those ancestral pilgrims before them, immigrants – like Lucas’ family from Ireland, whose arrival in New York is met by the loss of their son, the physical deterioration of the father, and the emotional trauma of the mother. The positive dreams of their voyage are met with violent disappointments, their journeys characterized by backwardness.

**III. Whitman’s Poetics**

Despite growing industrial wreckage, Whitman’s vision carries across the novella generations, indestructible in the face of mounting damage. The lines of Whitman’s poetry disrupt the text like “errant reminders, or obtrusive flashbacks” that “interrupt the narrative's progression,” subverting the story’s easeful linearity (Jenzen 11). These formal juxtapositions, linguistically out of place with the colloquialism of the surrounding dialogue, unsettle the self-
containment of each episode, creating a time travel of tone and register that encourages the reader to think historically. The admixture of Whitman’s text and Cunningham’s writing gives *Specimen* an intertextual composition that brings outside historical text into fictive futures. The book performs a hauntology through this intertextuality; there is no full presence to the text, as it is already bound to and implicated by other texts. Whitman’s positioning in the novel approximates Lucas’ understanding of dead figures: “the dead might be present and absent like this, in the world but not of the world” (Cunningham 70). Whitman occupies space and textual breath in the story universe mostly through other people, who ventriloquize him into reanimated, distilled presence, allegorizing the past’s continuity into new presents. As Whitman proclaims of his own poetry, “living and buried speech is always vibrating here” – here in *Leaves of Grass*, and here too in Cunningham’s *Specimen Days*, where new speech spoken by the novel’s living characters braids with Whitman’s ghostly requiem (Whitman 84). Whitman’s poetry, dated and anachronistic by the final two stories, restructures linear time through animating the past and productively slowing down the present.

Cunningham’s formal choice to conjure the epitaphic voice of Whitman throughout his novellas recapitulates Whitman’s own necropoetic project. His poetry aestheticizes mortality, looking to nature’s cycle of decomposition and regeneration to create a poetics of decay that embraces death as a life-giving process of eternal renewal. Whitman’s perception of the dead as “good manure”
effectively articulates his foundational position within Cunningham’s own literary project (Whitman, 2003, 1294). But when his celebratory message of death finds itself in a new era, and in shaky hands, his words undergo dangerous new readings. In *The Children’s Crusade*, under the leadership of a female, self-imagined reincarnation of Whitman, children strap bombs to their bellies and fashion themselves around Whitman’s message: “’to die is different from what any one supposes, and luckier’” (Cunningham 130). Jarring as the child bombers are, their acts are not historically isolated, existing already in the thoughts and actions of the first story. These bombers, who first hug their victims before detonating, produce death as a service of affection and generosity, equating destruction with self-preservation and restoration. Likewise, “Lucas imagined that if he tapped his father’s head against the wood with precisely the correct force he might jar him back to himself. It would be not violence but kindness. It would be a cure” (Cunningham 39). This frightening perception lingers throughout the novellas, of loving violences and gentle pain as annihilative strategies of refuge and escape. In the final episode, while Simon performs his muggings, he grabs his victim’s “collar in one hand and bumped his head rhythmically against the column. These were called love taps.” As the client wheezes, Simon is compelled to return to Whitman’s textual tongue, ecstatically proclaiming, “‘there is nothing but immortality’” (Cunningham 207). And centuries prior, after Lucas willfully sacrifices his arm to the crushing bite of the machine to save Catherine from a fire, he thinks of
Whitman and “was suddenly proud. Here is what was asked of me” (Cunningham 90). As a result of these actions Lucas believes that he can “recite what Walt had not yet written, for his life and the book were one thing, and everything he did or said was part of the book” (Cunningham 91). These haunting, violent interpretations of Whitman’s message warn of the continuing difficulty in understanding what he stood for, demonstrating the irreducibly plural and often conflicting versions of nation and ideology his poetry has offered. As his ideas move through the hands of people in increasingly damaged social orders, they take new forms, his own and not his own, removed from his specific historical context and manipulated by time.

When Cat speaks with Walt, the silver-haired leader of “the family,” Walt delivers a speech acknowledging the great gains made in the fields of medicine, invention, longevity, only to undermine those narratives of progress with their simultaneous counterparts: drug addiction, mass incarceration, global warfare. The spiraling horror story of technological achievement and its coinciding injury gives a complicated view of time: “‘To someone a hundred years ago, as recently as that, this world would seem like heaven itself,’” yet “would you say this is working out? Does this seem to you like a story that wants to continue?” (Cunningham 171). Despite the deeply troubling nature of Walt’s actions, her words do resonate, offering an important critique of the time she inhabits. Her present is so detached from the wondrous kindness of Whitman’s calling that she grows to believe “‘if we can return to a time like
Whitman’s, maybe we can love the world again” (Cunningham 188). While her nostalgia disregards the racial terrors and pains of his similarly imperfect age, she does reveal herself – disturbingly - to have something of a nurturing humanity, tragically acting under a set of historical conditions that inform her project in a damaging manner. More terrifying than her actions themselves is the resonating logic behind them; in this dystopia, it is a killer who holds a strong amount of sense. As industrialization can disfigure the body of the laboring subject, so too can it distort ideology itself, as Walt’s bombs become both vehicles of resistance and industrial acceleration, involving her in the very violence she wishes to reject. Her fixation on a “return” rather than a release from history implicates her in the cyclical inertia that troubles her present, as she imagines a past to come, not a future l’avenir.
Chapter Three.
*Ghostwriting and Spectral Witness*

Under the moon-soaked sky, a carnivalesque parade of ghosts orbit a Georgetown graveyard in 1862, the arriving site for the recently deceased Willie, President Lincoln’s eleven-year-old son. Cradling his young son’s corpse in despair, sequestered in the crypt as war rages just beyond, a haunted president’s private grief activates Saunders’ twenty-first century chisel: the imagined “melding of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pietà,” an imposing nation made intimately vulnerable (*The Guardian*).

It is a supposedly private moment in a public history, but Lincoln is not alone: the dead are watching, the hidden chorus to an unsuspecting living. These dead become the ringleading storytellers of George Saunders’ 2017 Gothic folk tale, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a collage style composite of phantasmagoric voices. In *Bardo*, dying is only the beginning. Rather than serving as conclusion, death introduces the text, becoming the vehicular life-force of the narrative. The reader enters the novel through the calm narration of Hans Vollman, a dead ghost in a cemetery, recounting how he got there. Only the “there” he believes himself to be in is not a graveyard but a “hospital-yard,” a momentary layover on his return to familiar life (Saunders 6). This assumption of temporary sickness is the imagined condition all the graveyard’s ghosts believe themselves to be in, unable to comprehend their deadness.
Coffins become “sick-boxes,” and the mausoleum a “white stone home” in this rewritten deathlife. This is the bardo, a liminal post-death space filled with dawdling, stuck ghosts, unable to move on because of some unresolved tension or possessive attachment to their former lives. “Bardo,” from the Tibetan Buddhist Book of the Dead, is a purgatorial state of transition for consciousness after the body dies. As a state of stalled hesitation, of layover and delay, the Oak Hill Cemetery bardo evokes its living counterpart, The Civil War, which holds the nation suspended in its own state of historical transition, searching for stable afterlife. Neither a spatial or temporal destination, the bardo is a not-quite-there-yet that the ghosts refuse to leave, fearful of what the unknown beyond might hold. But the longer a ghost lingers in the bardo, the more damaged they become. Staying in the bardo means hanging on to something, being gripped by forces that possess and control you.

A contrast with Butler’s novel, which I discussed in chapter one, may be illuminating. In Kindred, Dana’s time travel is predicated on the condition that she cannot die in the antebellum South, yet she cannot stay in the contemporary present, and she is therefore confined to an indefinitely liminal wavering through space and time. Her final act of killing Rufus, after he threateningly grabs her, results in the severing of her arm, a literal “letting go” of these tormenting forces. In untugging herself from the spirals of a tautological history that suffocates her futurity, Dana exits her own bardo, rewriting her temporal geography. Like a Derridean impossibility, “moving on”
requires forgetting and remembering, the ability to let go of an old, distorted narrative while activating new remembrance for where, who, and why you are. In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, by contrast, the formal construction of the book, with its active departure from conventional single narrator block prose, legitimates this narrative undoing, by fragmenting, pausing, and splitting its storytelling across scrolls of floating ghost dialogue. It is a spacious text, with pages of scarce, skeletal writing carving ample and empty negative space across the page, and it becomes the platform through which these ghosts can stage their own rewriting.

Invisible to the living and existing outside of the restrictions of mortal time, the bardo functions as a magical “place where time slows,” hovering imperceptibly within recognized space and being (Saunders 335). As an otherworld, the bardo becomes a history between the cracks, appropriately foregrounding interiority and private emotion. The graveyard setting is a useful way to imagine subterranean histories, as it materializes those spectral pasts beneath our present. The bardo is far removed from time-present, with ghosts arriving from different historical decades, all detained in ambiguous, unbound time. This supernatural space enables anachronistic interaction, filled with the simultaneous presences of ghosts who comingle despite the temporal incongruity of their bodied lifetimes. The other across time becomes a contemporary and fellow peer, suspended in the leveling clutch of folded time. When the ghosts enter into the body of grieving Lincoln, they encounter, quite
literally, a “body of startling new knowledge” – the revelation that Lincoln is now president. Bevins assumed that “Mr. Taylor was President,” while Vollman was certain that “Mr. Polk occupied that esteemed office,” both ghosts fastened to the old glue of their pasts, to motionless time (Saunders 174). These bardo ghosts occupy the strange position of residing in a future for which they are antiquated, culturally outmoded.

The “perplexity” the ghosts feel at these sudden disclosures of futurity “would be difficult to express,” their encounter with disjointed time a bewildering process of belated arrival: to which present do they belong (Saunders 175)? Caught between the remembered present of their mortal lives and the ongoing, ever-changing present of the time the graveyard moves through, the ghosts in the bardo figure into the construction of a split-present, much like that of time-traveling Dana in Kindred. These flimsy, unreliable allegiances to time make formerly familiar realities feel like anachronism, the announcement of the uncanny. The eruption of the strange and distorting into the domestic finds articulation in the misinterpretation of the mausoleum as a “white stone home” within the ghost imaginary, architecturally approximating the unheimlich, of space rendered unhomelilke. When Willie suddenly discovers and announces to the graveyard ghosts that they are all dead, he takes comfort, having known all along that “something was off”: death is his familiar stranger (Saunders 298).
The novel’s geography, beginning with Vollman’s recounted death story, guides us out of the living world and into the graveyard, where we linger amongst the ghosts before we finally wander with a slave and the president back into the world of the living. Death becomes opening, as this movement maps the requiem of a portable public into private space, and its altered return back, but forward, into the public. Through encounter with this private cemetery space and its evoked past, new futures find mobility, the afterlife of a haunting.

The ghosts see Lincoln’s bereavement, but, crucially, he does not know they are watching him -- he acts without assumption of audience. The reader, allied with the narrating ghosts, becomes the other spectator, also spectral, also invisible. We become the dead, the witness-to-come of a history that its present did not see. The reader of the future and the ghost of the past together bear witness to the novel’s living present, their positions of anachronism authorizing their audience. Like the asymmetrical optics of Derrida’s visor effect, in which the ghost -- much like an obscured face under armored visor (as in Old Hamlet’s appearance) -- has the power to see without being seen, the spectating ghosts gain authority through their disjointedness. The present becomes legible through its specters, whose testimony to private histories haunts and opens a self-contained temporal moment. The anachronistic, the non-belonging, the absent-present ghost, all unsettle a present’s most dominant, visible representations, embodying active witness to buried
suffering. “Tired of being nothing, and doing nothing, and mattering not at all to anyone,” these ghosts, who for so long have seen themselves not be seen, activate their futurity by diffusing themselves into the affective interiorities of others, catalyzing their inheritance (Saunders 260).

I. Authorship & Storytelling

Across the novel, we find eyewitness and scholarly accounts of Lincoln’s life, flickers of historical contextualization that chronicle the night of Willie’s passing, critique the presidency, and build other keyholes into 1862 not made apparent through the cemetery alone. These curated selections of text feature both actual historical writing and fictional Saundersian invention, embroidering fiction upon a fog of factual truth. The historical sources often give conflicting accounts, but these conflicts lack the proportions of historiographical argument. As often as they take the form of ambient minutiae, like opposing assertions of the presence or absence of the moon, they equally stage debate on larger readings of Lincoln, seen by some as a loving father and by others a neglectful one. A party hosted by the Lincolns, to the (invented) witness Margaret Garrett’s perspective was a “rainbow come to life,” filled with “every nation, race, rank, age” but in (invented) witness Albert Sloane’s hands, it epitomizes an “undisciplined human community” turning the nation into a “massive flailing organism” (Saunders 12). Much like the repeated
refrain amongst the ghosts, “there has historically been some confusion around this issue” (Saunders 107), these sources, with their manifold interpretations, create a temporal trembling, an irretrievable blur of history that, like a secret’s riddle, haunts us: “‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’” (Derrida 18).

Historical memory is wobbly here, and it is in the bardo, too, where the specters, plagued by omissions and repressions, become unreliable, mutually contradictory narrators. The result is a textual atmosphere of uncertainty and multiplicity, in which history appears in new, pivoting ways.

These historical sources, many written after the imagined 1862 setting of *Bardo*, function as specters of the future, the anticipatory categorizations of a present as past while it remains ongoing. These remarks manifest Lincoln’s “doom-minded” anxieties over the coming consequences of his actions – he is haunted by the future alongside his past (Saunders 147). He speculates the coming headlines for himself, imagining his present as history: “great course-reversing fool, king of indecision, laughing-stock for ages” (Saunders 155). Ultimately, when he directs his attention to “life out there,” away from the crypt toward the prospects of the living, “no comfort was forthcoming” (Saunders 231).

The future haunts the present not just for what it may know and write of it, but further for that which it will not see, what will be unwritten. When ghosts are ready to leave the burial bardo, after having let go of their possessive attachments, they experience the “matterlightblooming phenomenon,” an
electric, transformative process of earthly departure. In this wondrous moment of a soul's transition out of the bardo, toward final celestial judgment, a phantasmagoric pageant of unrealized future-forms appear, the lost futures of the dead ghost. When Willie departs, the “various selves he had been” form a passing gossamer mosaic, followed by a montage of future-forms “he had, alas, never succeeded in attaining”. From the “jelly-faced toddler” that he was to the “young man in wedding-coat” that he never became, Willie’s personhood is a product of all these spectral selves, a composite of his synchronous presences and absences (Saunders 299). These unreachable stages of life, darting past in their ephemeral texture, build nostalgia for prospective hypotheticals, gestures of hope without actualization. Derrida understands hope as a valuable, energizing impulse toward meaning, without which future utopias cannot be imagined or endeavored. Yet hope, a weak messianic force, must only figure as a to-come, as its actualization would justify an abandonment of the call to active responsibility, yielding instead toward comfortable, stagnant settling. The messianic provides “opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited as such...to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in memory of the hope – and that is the very place of spectrality.” Investing in the cause of justice requires the rejection of its theoretical finitude,

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2 From Walter Benjamin’s Theses, “we have been endowed with a weak messianic power to which the past has claim,” the appeal of a past hope to become instantiated (Benjamin 254). Weak insofar as it detaches from the Judeo-Christian messiah theology, it is here “messianism without religion,” a structural, political promise tethered always to an impossible future (Derrida 74).
maintaining “hospitality without reserve” toward residual, unrealized, or embryonic ghostly matter (Derrida 65). These flickers of unfinished futures convey the difficulty of considering any life fully completed at its end; there will always be ongoing, unfulfilled potential attached to the dead. It becomes the responsibility of the living to locate and carry on these unfinished projects of the dead, who require an heir to uphold, secure, and continue their work, without which their struggles become undone.

Ghosts are the oral composers of the bardo’s ballad, the reader’s guides through the bewildering hereafter. Through these positions of narration, the dead secure a platform to speak for themselves, on their own terms and in their own language. After a ghost speaks, its name appears underneath the text, an authorizing signature that archives the speaker into being through inscription. Resisting anonymous rendering, these signed texts structurally position themselves as epigraphs, establishing an ancestral inventory of past voices as relevant predecessors to which we must assume inheritance. Further still, the epigraph conjures the epitaph here, eulogizing lost lives and identifying their biographical legacies. Bevins, a tormented gay ghost who commit suicide after losing his lover, situates himself within a social lineage, “my father, mother...clergy, grandparents,” who find his “certain predilection...not...natural or wonderful at all, but perverse and shameful” (Saunders 25). After placing himself within this past, he orients himself to the future (“I am waiting to be
discovered...so that I may be revived”), toward “loving whomever” (Saunders 27).

The text, then, locates origin and history while pointing toward afterlife and memory, linking authorship to temporality. The ghost of Reverend Everly Thomas collectively eulogizes the burial grounds (“we had been mothers, fathers”), evoking eternal legacy as a tombstone might: “we had been loved, I say, and remembering us, even many years later, people would smile, briefly gladdened at the memory” (Saunders 70). And yet, this grief takes an indolent form, as Vollman bewails, “no one had ever come here to hold one of us, while speaking so tenderly” (Saunders 72). This disconnect is embodied in the book’s written presentation of names. The full name of each ghost speaker is typographically rendered lower case across the *Bardo* pages, a textual diminution that effectively collapses these phantoms into hollow penumbrae of presence. This is the dead’s underworld, lowered below a living present that halfheartedly commits them to memory. The ghosts, deprived of public attention, must themselves give eulogy to one another, taking up the living’s piecemeal cause. When the ghosts speak of and call to each other, names are returned to capitalized states, assigning a formalized, firm hereness to the specter, imputing dignity to dead identity.

Not only do the dead speak, but the living can only be translated to us through these dead. Entering mortal bodies becomes an act of transcription, as the dead author the living through ventriloquizing them into textual being.
The intangible ephemera of felt interiority finds oral archive through these ghosts, whose documentation of Lincoln stands sympathetically next to the formalized, combative historical sources. Lincoln’s thoughts are filtered to us through the ghosts that hear him, represented through italicized text within the specter’s epigraphic speech. On the page, Bevins’ documentation of Lincoln holding Willie reads as follows: “He sat, distraught and shivering, seeking about for any consolation. He must either be in a happy place, or some null place by now” (Saunders 157). In this typographic toggle, Bevins moves from third person omniscient narrator to fully embodied Lincoln in the next line, becoming our point of mediation to the living world. The reader’s access to Lincoln is dependent on what the ghost can gather through possession and proximity, but, crucially, he cannot speak for himself. This restriction magically inverts the relationship between the living and the dead, amplifying and rescuing ghost voices from silencing and manipulation. Further, these ghosts author the living through becoming the voices inside their head that motivate specific impulses, emotions, actions. The entry of Bevins into Lincoln causes the president a “thought-swerve,” activating his mental periphery and putting pressure on patterned interiority (Saunders 147). The Lincoln body-nest can hold an infinite capacity of visiting ghosts, enabling their collective authorship of a body that does not know it holds them: “what a pleasure it was, being in there. Together. United in common purpose” (Saunders 252). When they orchestrate a mass movement into Lincoln imploring him to help rescue Willie
from the bardo, these ghosts take communal action, sharing in the responsibility of activating living change. Compelling Lincoln to think certain things and move specific ways, the bardo phantoms appropriately ghostwrite him, becoming the invisible signature of his imminent vision.

Part of the torture of Willie’s experience of death is his involuntary encounter with invisibility. Lincoln cannot see or hear Willie even while they are side by side, propelling Willie into a deep “agony of frustration” with “being denied the attention” of his father (Saunders 18). For Willie, this condition of invisibility is only realized through death, yet for the oppressed slave of the same era, it is the lived, systematically violent trauma of their social positioning well before the grave. Invisibility is not merely a condition of visual representation but of audible presence, to be invisible signifies existing unheard. While the dead do speak in Bardo, not all physically can, a reminder of the historical silencing of spectral storytelling. Litzie Wright manifests the brutal erasure of the sexually terrorized body, a biracial ghost so traumatized by repeated rapes that her voice has altogether disappeared. These systematic horrors, so unspeakable, produce silence and invisible language in her. Her speech is textually represented as a handful of asterisks, a typographical symbol conventionally assigned to specify omission or unacceptable utterance. Quite literally, “*******” hovers incoherently above its authorial pedestal “litzie wright,” without any letters or words, jarringly fragmenting the flow of language. On the page, this visual curation of illegibility and silence gains
typographical hypervisibility, the horror of her verbal absence becoming its own explicit presence. Her story is told by another ghost, Mrs. Francis Hodge, an “outwardly jolly presence in that previous place, who was not jolly at all now, but livid, and scowling” (Saunders 221). Hodge painstakingly inventories Lizzie’s traumas with specificity and nuance, articulating the systematic terrors done to Lizzie that “drove her to this obstinate silence”. She implicates those still walking, unpunished male oppressors, “big men, small men, boss men...teen sons...a trio of men,” all moving along the earth without injury, secured by patriarchal tradition (Saunders 222). Hodge’s commitment to Lizzie’s past, her empathic fury with these sexually violent injustices, compels her to use her position to help tell Lizzie’s story. Through storytelling, Hodge unburies Lizzie’s life history, carrying and resurrecting it across time. Authorship becomes a form of human sponsorship here, as this oral history offers Lizzie necessary memorialization and continuity, vitalizing the ethical responsibility to share.

II: Satirizing The Spectral Body

The hyperbolically distorted bodily characterizations of these lingering dead yoke together the graveyard, the ghost, and the grotesque. Bevins, a gay man who instantly regretted his suicide for the loss it caused to his senses is described as having “several sets of eyes,” “several noses,” and “multiple sets of hands,” which are altogether a “little bit scary” (Saunders 27). The sight of
Vollman, with his “member swollen” and a “body like a dumpling,” leaves Willie incredulous, and he “could not take [his] eyes off” of him (Saunders 28). These mutilated graveyard bodies, so markedly abnormal yet macabrely enthralling to recently arrived Willie, analogize the spectral with the spectacle, saturating carnivalesque exposition into the cemetery space. These ghosts become the neglected sideshow of the living world, “the last place [they] had ever been taken seriously” (Saunders 276). The dead are body spectacle, ghoulish caricatures of non-belonging that wear an urgent, deforming nexus of dreams and terrors that harmfully accumulate the more they go unexamined. The ghosts propensity to deny, reject, or otherwise forget their pasts renders them unable to confront a future for themselves, stuck under the overlay of parodied repressions. Spectral neglect materializes here as an ugly practice, fabricating mythic grotesquerie onto life histories to which it bears no real relation. Like Simon’s social location as a cyborg in Specimen Days, these othered ghosts, with their magnified membrane and accumulating appendages, destabilize corporeal boundaries, hauntologically embodying both expression and repression. Death-other, like the machine-other, reveals itself to be suffuse with affective human textures, a life-presence it holds in conjunction with its life-absence. These ghosts supersize the human body, suggesting the ongoing swell of life within the dead; the dead still belong to humanity. In their bloated physical forms, these ghosts quite literally become larger than life, ballooning with excess and exaggeration despite their condition of invisibility to the living.
Vibrant, specific, and complex, these ghosts satirize the specter’s invisibility; they are so distinctively present, so flagrantly right here. “Here I am,” affirms the slave ghost Elson Farwell, of his continuing, neglected presence, “I am here” (Saunders 314). Even being dead is a being “here,” the assertion of relevant presence in a continuing present, an urgent plea for recognition of the ongoing “I”, notice me, see me. The task of the ghost becomes one of negotiating legibility and legitimacy amidst public erasure and personal repression. Given the kinship these ghosts feel for each other, and indeed for Lincoln too, these “neglected overlooked misunderstood” imagined others must be recognized instead as vitally part of humanity as a whole (Saunders 82). Spectral recognition comes from the deconstruction of the human form as a fixed, closed entity, and the legitimization of its affective expansion.

In the process of inhabiting Lincoln, the ghosts realize that they can absorb one another’s interiorities as well, seeing for the first time into the souls of their fellow phantoms. Vollman, seeing through Bevins’ eyes, notices “the great beauty of the things of this world,” while Bevins, seeing through Vollman’s, finally “understood his reluctance to leave” his wife behind (Saunders 171). “Infused with some trace of one another forevermore,” these ghosts inscribe themselves upon the spirit-palimpsests of their spectral peers, building new surfaces of memory that enable the soul to transcend its origin body (Saunders 173). This process of interiorized opening disturbs the tenet of bardo lingering: “to stay, one must deeply and continuously dwell upon one’s
primary reason for staying; even to the exclusion of all else” (Saunders 255).

The inherent exclusivity implicit in this impulse toward a single, uncomplicated narrative of memory and identity finds necessary alternative in the “serendipitous mass co-habitation” of ghosts into one another’s souls (Saunders 256). Collectively authored, radiating polyvalence, the ghosts marvel, “what a thing! To find oneself thus expanded!” (Saunders 255). Exclusion transforms to expansion; the parochial single-mindedness of a contained philosophy replaced by a hospitable, inclusive consciousness that attends to the absent-present. The ghosts come to realize that such exclusionary identity practices “had cost us...we had forgotten so much, of all else we had been and known.” But through these openings in consciousness, the specters excavate an inner sense of “natural fullness,” unburying themselves “like flowers from which placed rocks had just been removed” (Saunders 256).

This cohabitation leads the ghosts to newly recall memories from the “previous place,” of meaningful, social connections and forgotten sensations of joy. These realizations propel them into deeply sensuous, pleasurable freedom, where the physically manifested features of the burdens and repressions from their previous lives soften and unravel, stripping them of their distorted grotesqueness. Mr. Vollman’s “member shrunk down to normal size,” and Bevins is “no longer a difficult-to-look-at clustering of eyes” (Saunders 257). If we can agree with Derrida’s assertion that a ghost’s apparition becomes fuller when it is rejected or denied, then here the reverse becomes true: the ghost’s
apparition condenses as it is recognized and affirmed. The deflationary undoing of the specter’s pronounced body symptomizes its amputation from repression and disavowal. Clarified and uncluttered, the ghosts feel finally that “the knowledge of what we were was strong within us now, and would not be denied” (Saunders 329).

**III. Grief & Sorrow**

The graveyard, a site of body management, which seals up and sanitizes the dead through tombstones and crypts, closes off but does not give closure to the bardo ghosts. The “dreaded iron fence” of the cemetery’s perimeter, a “noxious limit beyond which we could not venture,” materializes this spectral containment, and simultaneously the living world’s need to distinguish and maintain itself. The graveyard night-watchman, Manders, moving through the crypt, thinks of the “long sad eternity” of lonely nights experienced by these dead, and he “cannot bear the thought” of his son “lying still in such a place as this.” Manders’ fixed notions of the dead, in assigning them “place” and temporal “eternity,” other them from a mobile living world in which his son runs around “positively lit up from inside with joy of living” (Saunders 342). The ghosts cannot leave the sequestered burial space, but the living can enter it, should they choose. Lincoln’s returns to the cemetery to enter the crypt and hold his son -- all within the span of a night -- ritually unbury the dead, providing the graveyard with opening, a private encounter become
complicatedly public through a collective spectral witness. Willie’s tomb, “completely undiscoverable to the casual cemetery visitor” through its location in the “extreme far reaches of the grounds,” constructs an illusory privacy that becomes subverted by the landscape’s watchful phantoms, the witnesses to the living’s secret vulnerabilities (Saunders 24). Lincoln’s mourning practice shocks the ghost community, who find peculiar novelty in witnessing a mourner who tenderly lingers. His loving attention to Willie gives the other ghosts the “hope” that they are not so “unlovable” (Saunders 70). This act of remembrance has a “vivifying effect” on the ghosts, the textures of his grief and sorrow working to actually animate the dead (Saunders 66). Like the hybrid Lincoln Memorial- Pietà of Saunders’ literary architecture, the sepulchral has a sculptural quality, as the ghosts hold quiet audience to Lincoln’s iconographic bereavement: “he might have been, in that moment, a sculpture on the theme of Loss” (Saunders 145). Grief is aesthetic and affective, rendering sadness a type of haunted, immortal art. Sanctified through sorrow, Lincoln provides the ghosts with a newly placed hope in the affective capacity of the living, who for so long have neglected their dead.

Under the aerial fog of angels, glowing with radiant promises of paradisiacal escape, the ghosts only find alienating terror, committed to their damaging cemetery world. Here again, pain finds artful arrestment: “A remarkable tableau of suffering: dozens of us, frozen in misery: cowed, prone, crawling, wincing before the travails of the particularized onslaught each was
undertaking” (Saunders 95). This condition of suffering, growing all the stronger amongst the ghosts as they dwell, becomes a condition Lincoln identifies in the living, establishing commonality between these modes of being. Vollman translates Lincoln’s grief-stricken mind after having passed through him:

His mind was freshly inclined toward sorrow... all were suffering (none content; all wronged, neglected, overlooked, misunderstood), and therefore one must do what one could to lighten the load of those with whom one came into contact; that his current state of sorrow was not uniquely his, not at all, but, rather, its like had been felt, would yet be felt, by scores of others, in all times, in every time. (Saunders 303-4)

Lincoln conceptualizes the intimate pain of his grief as an experience of loss that affects all individuals, and it is through this loss that he gains a sense of connection, of kinship. From a space of sorrow, his “sympathy extended to all in this instant, blundering, in its strict logic, across all divides” (Saunders 304). Lincoln’s sympathy enables ethical expansiveness, a shared sense of identification with past and future others. By nature of its intimacy, grief unsettles Lincoln, placing pressure on his emotional character and altering his relationship to his social reality. The recognition of the ephemeral, a symptom of loss, provokes Lincoln to rethink the stability of life forms, newly recognizing that “all alter, are altering, in every instant” (Saunders 244). These words come to us through the italicized typography that characterizes ghostly translation of the living’s thoughts, stylistically subverting the rigidity of Lincoln’s language and capturing the slanted shakiness of human subjectivity.

Given the power of his political position, a change in interiority through private
experience holds the tremendous potential to activate public change. The loss of Willie opens Lincoln up to the accumulating reality of losses continuing beyond his own, to the innumerable past and future lives taken by his Civil War. Holding himself responsible for a grief he has “exported” to a nation of mournful survivors, Lincoln, like the ghosts of the bardo must also do, becomes acutely aware of deadness, of mortal inevitability. “He is just one,” Vollman catches Lincoln thinking, an individual loss in a national necropolis (Saunders 155). The private encounter at the graveyard clarifies public and political realities for him, ushering an understanding of the specific fragility and finite capacity of the human body, the recognition of others as “suffering, limited beings” (Saunders 304).

Attending to the ghost necessitates an encounter with the melancholic, with that “slow remembering sorrow-wince” of memory and haunting (Saunders 236). But sadness is not inherently immobilizing, as Judith Butler argues in her Precarious Life. Centralizing “the body as the site of a common human vulnerability,” Butler warns of the ways vulnerability has become a violently crafted articulation of state power, unequally shaping how suffering bodies are read and recognized (Butler 44). Uplifting grief as a resource, Butler finds encounters with personal vulnerability to enable collective responsibility and outward action. She recognizes that “many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing,” yet she identifies this grief as a vehicle through which an
intricate political community can form, “by bringing to the fore the relational
ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical
responsibility” (Butler 22). Lincoln's newfound, sharpened recognition of
universal suffering enacts Butler’s investment in grieving power, which can
extend beyond the self and toward an understanding of the vulnerability of
anonymous others. In universalizing this experience of loss and recognizing it
as inextricably bound to the mortal conditions of suffering life anywhere, all
bodies become grievable, the fragile fossils of a past that must be recuperated
and learned.

As the ghost Thomas Havens, a slave expected to ignore the “small,
resistant voice” within him, enters Lincoln’s body, he becomes that subverting
voice, demanding that the president “endeavor to do something for us”. This
emancipatory hope feels possible to him because he uncovers that Lincoln is
“an opening book. That had just been opened up somewhat wider. By sorrow”
(Saunders 312). Havens animates sorrow as a valuable, action-motivating
emotion with ethical potential, capable of expanding an individual’s
perspective of care. In being “made less rigidly himself through this loss,”
Lincoln indeed experiences opening, an ideological thaw in his self-
containment that cultivates sympathy, sensitivity, and space for the specter
(Saunders 305). Butler articulates the disorienting experience of loss:
“Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? What sense does it
make? What claims us at such moments, such that we are not the masters of
ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized?” (Butler 21). These seizures, the inexplicably loosening grip of an individual on their self, become imaginatively conjured in the accumulation of ghost spirits swirling inside Lincoln’s humbled frame, propelling sudden relationships to reality that he cannot explain. This is the backstage theater of haunting, a process that unsettles the body’s script and resists its total control. The ghostly visitation into living bodies literally imprints the living with spectral forces, bringing that which is outside of and greater than the self into the individual’s interiority. Paradoxically, letting the dead enter into the living is a humanizing process, nurturing interdependency, communion, and the recognition of fellow lives.

The entry of ghosts into the threshold of Lincoln’s body gestures toward and complicates the guest-host relationship. In Derrida’s conceptualization of hospitality, he advocates for our ethical obligation to the other, in the form of receiving the ghost as a guest and a host. The Old French “hoste” holds these two dialectical ideas in one term, signifying both guest and host, and this etymological root haunts the contemporary discourse of Derrida’s native French. It is impossible, then, to separate the host from the guest-other. As a stranger, the ghost must be welcomed as a guest, yet it also has been there before, it precedes the host. Hospitality becomes a Derridean impossibility – its very condition of possibility is also the condition of its impossibility. Implicated in hospitality is an inhospitable system of power relations, requiring one to have the power to be a host and a power over those that are hosted through the
assumption of control and the construction of boundaries. To really be hospitable then, one must surrender their rights of ownership and possession, yet in so doing they fail to remain a host. While the ghosts do enter the “host” body of Lincoln, they come to mutually receive from and give to each other, a relationship of emotionally informative reciprocation that echoes the “hoste” origin: the ghost hosts Lincoln as much as he hosts the ghost, each soul wound into the other.

IV. Racial Geographies

The bardo afterlife sustains painfully the thick, tormenting racism of its “previous place,” the antebellum period. The graveyard itself spatially recapitulates nineteenth century racial geographies through its system of division and material markers of burial. White buried characters, commemorated through gravestones and ornate Gothic crypts, freely roam the sprawling, stately cemetery, as black slaves occupy a nightmarishly confined, abandoned ditch outside the cemetery’s fencing. As the resting place of the president’s son, the graveyard is a synecdoche for the nation, embedded in a political register. As such, it captures “the central paradox of equality and exclusivity” that folk scholar Doris Francis identifies in cemetery landscapes: “Americans believe in democracy and equality, but go to extremes to differentiate themselves in death” (Francis 225). Indeed, Vollman describes an “unmarked disreputable common sick-pit just beyond the dreaded iron fence,”
where “several members of the dark race” were thrown without a “sick-box in which to properly recover” (Saunders 87). Bodies vulnerable to the elements, without tombstones or archival recognition, these discarded slaves are afforded no performance of preservation and memory, spectral even to the graveyard. The subjugation of racial histories is continued and secured through these violent burial processes, which further render black presence subterranean. This abject, carceral horror-space of deaths without dignity literalizes the construction of “black geographies as dead spaces of absolute otherness” (McKittrick 8). The archaeology of contemporary United States social and political infrastructure demands an excavation of the racist underearths from which antiblack architectures feed. Literally beneath the ground, these slaves are native to national history, the skeletal, concealed foundations of the state. These brutalized black bodies corporealize the “piling wreckage” of the Benjaminian angel’s movement through time, the accumulating rubble of manmade catastrophe.

When the ghosts of these slaves do cross the boundary-fence into the cemetery, the white Lieutenant Stone “brusquely cleared the black suppliants away from the white stone home, pushing at them” (Saunders 222). Here, the architecture of racial exclusion that built the segregated graveyard space finds enforcement from the white dead, whose supremacist ideology of entitlement and ownership of land gives the guarded “white stone home” a haunting, racially charged new meaning. All this happens and yet “Mr. Lincoln heard
none of this...to him it was just a silent crypt in the dead of night” (Saunders 225). The literal invisibility of these violent acts of white supremacy to Lincoln approximates too his own bodied racism, his senses blind to the pervasive horror of antiblack oppression. The screaming histories of the crypt are rendered “silent” to him, like Lizzie Wright, despite their long lineage of presences all around him. Through this neglect, the living still disturbingly haunt the unrested dead. A violent fight between Lieutenant Stone and Mr. Farwell, a black ghost he terrorizes, proceeds unfailingly “with a fury that suggested the two might well fight on into eternity.” Allegorizing the despairing, perennially tenuous condition of United States race relations, which continue into the twenty-first century of Saunders’ writing, this fight carries no promise of an ending “unless some fundamental and unimaginable alteration of reality should occur” - a refuturing that must foreground empathy (Saunders 321). The reification of race and the survival of white supremacy carry on past death, into afterlife, as the Bardo dead give ghostly testimony to the immortality of racism.

Surprisingly, in the loquacious frenzy of the novel’s ghost chorus and its dominating presence of white voices, the final word comes from a slave, Thomas Havens. After having passed momentarily through Lincoln in his exit from the crypt, Havens “decided to stay,” occupying the body after feeling a “kinship” with the president. He finds a new, restorative thrill from acting “without having been ordered to do so, without having sought anyone’s
permission,” and chooses to commit himself to making Lincoln understand and
give justice to his fellow black ghosts (Saunders 311). And so the novel closes
with this nebulous, slave-inhabited presidential body, moving out of the
graveyard and into the streets, the fog of Havens’ lullaby prose rounding out
the page: “And we rode forward into the night, past the sleeping houses of our
countrymen” (Saunders 343). Havens’ wandering passage on Lincoln’s horse
toward an undetermined someplace returns us to the panoramic ending of
Specimen Days, where Simon, heading impulsively westward, “rode until the
farm was out of sight, until he was no one and nothing but a man on a horse in
a vast emptiness” (Cunningham 305). These negotiations of place and
movement map processes of refuturization, enabling the body to give footprint
to unworn, open futures. Alone in the outskirts of Denver, threatened with
possible governmental execution, Simon occupies an arrested, alienating
present without prospect. And as a slave in an oppressive grave, subjected still
to the suffocating, disadvantaged confinements he endured during life, Thomas
is repeatedly derealized, his future withheld from him. Emerging from
conditions of institutionalized anti-futurity, Simon and Thomas actively
abandon their physical environments to enter the l’avenir, a fugitive future
born from the dispossession of the present.

Trotting presumably back toward The White House, out of the
graveyard at last, the final image of Bardo’s close offers hope without securing
it. A slave given scarcely any “free, uninterrupted” moments in life, left to
tortuously dream of the white men who “enjoyed whole lifetimes comprised of such moments” now moves pleasurably through the city, escaping repetition to activate futurity for himself where none had existed (Saunders 220). But despite this release, he walks free through a white man’s body, himself unseen.

Justice for Havens is dependent on the actions taken by the living, their concretizing ventriloquism of his thoughts, concerns, imagined modes of being. After finding an affiliating kinship with Lincoln, Havens commits himself to this living body. Refusing to be buried, Havens initiates inheritance through impressing himself into the president’s body, his chosen heir. Rather than burying himself in an irreversible past that cannot actually be changed, Havens abandons the bardo to mobilize an afterlife of black survivalism, committed to changing the future of those anonymous others that come after.

Productively letting go of the past requires an active grabbing hold of the future. The process of softening and vulnerability that Lincoln underwent in the graveyard equip him with the receptive potential to animate Havens’ emancipatory project. In possessing Lincoln’s body and haunting his interiority, Havens visually emblematizes the task of Derridean inheritance. This is how we keep the dead alive: through letting them enter us. “Moving along together,” a slave and a president ride onward as one back to the living, “step for step,” the soles of the present filled with a still walking past (Saunders 312).
Conclusion.

And so we are left here, drifting out into the Civil War air alongside a ghost. In an evocative gesture back to the twenty-first-century present, within a storied white president resides an unseen black slave demanding emancipation, the oracular vision of a future black president. Our present becomes the product of this long history of invisible work, an unfinished process of often unrecognized critical trespass through which new movement occurs. As heirs, we must help carry ghosts across time, recuperating their efforts through embodiment. In their intangible presence, ghosts have “started as nothing, latent within a vast energy-broth, but then we named them, and loved them, and, in this way, brought them forth” (Saunders 335). A thoughtful, loving living become the amplifying site of spectral expression, a means through which a haunting becomes legible. Legitimating and supporting the ghost become acts of ethical resistance to the injustice that produced them, enabling future survivals.

Moving chronologically by publication toward the immediate present, the novels I have analyzed become increasingly melancholic, inward. This permeating, growing mood of sadness reveals that urgent work is to be done with the ghost; we have not yet fully inherited it. Attending to the ghost oftentimes involves attending to sorrow, but these affective experiences can be mobilizing, activating hauntological recognition of a lingering presence within
absences. In *Specimen Days*, Lucas understands that “Simon’s flesh had been stamped and expelled, but his invisible part remained” (Cunningham 43). Despite corporeal damage, Simon does not completely vanish, irreducibly still present in the spaces he inhabited and the haunting story that became him. The erased body and emptied past become vitally present through their ghosts, which haunt us, and their condition of irresolution, that at once terrifies and captivates us. “It was impossible not to be struck by the emptiness where the towers had stood,” Cat thinks as she makes her way through post-9/11 Manhattan (Cunningham 104). The ghost’s invisibility offers it uncanny presence, an animating vehicle through which it can locate public representation. *Kindred’s* recent adaptation as a graphic novel and *Lincoln in the Bardo’s* forthcoming filmic interpretation both suggest to me that these stories are finding necessary afterlives, that spectral matter is subject matter worthy of public audience.

I have argued that the spectral matter across these three novels provides openings of possibility in worlds of damage and melancholia. It is precisely in and through the specter that we begin to imagine fragmented time and ways of being that centralize subversion and postulate the Derridean dream of learning to live finally. Moving ahead, we must first understand what came behind us, and how we can bring it forward. In etherealizing the present, these three novels offer the past ongoing, active elegy, making space for those spectral textures of sensitive feeling cultivated so many years before.
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