Utrecht University

To Revisit Troubled Histories

Exploring Reparation for Slavery Through American Time Travel Fiction

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Abstract

Discussions about how to confront and work through the legacy of slavery, including reparation, have been on an upturn the past few decades, with no resolution as of yet. This thesis posits time travel fiction as a valuable space for exploring reparation and underlying questions about history, responsibility, memory, and temporality. In order to gain a better sense of the contributions literature can make to debates about reparation and historical injustice, the thesis presents a close reading analysis of three works of time travel fiction: Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), Zetta Elliott’s *Genna & Judah* novels (2010; 2016), and Diana Gabaldon’s *Drums of Autumn* (1997). Through the time travel device, these novels each reflect on mediated practices of commemoration and embodied forms of remembrance. They also present a more nuanced model of temporality than the commonly assumed linear and progressive one, allowing for a better understanding of responsibility over time. Lastly, they emphasize the need to start any effort at repair by acknowledging the specific and contextualized needs of those affected by injustice, questioning the efficacy of top-down processes of reparation. Though focusing on the history of slavery in the U.S., the thesis has implications for any context in which reparation for or after historical injustice is being sought.

Preface

The thesis before you, “To Revisit Troubled Histories: Exploring Reparation for Slavery Through American Time Travel Fiction,” addresses the role of literature within ongoing debates about Atlantic slavery and reparation. It was written as part of the graduating requirements for the Research Master’s program of Comparative Literary Studies at Utrecht University. I worked on it from February to July, 2022.

The past touches us all, but the way it impacts us as individuals differs wildly. Accordingly, working on this thesis has demanded a constant awareness and negotiation of my own privileged—but also limited—position as a White scholar and citizen. The finished product, I hope, speaks to my personal sense of responsibility for the history and legacy of Atlantic slavery, even as it seeks to clarify what exactly that responsibility is or ought to be. Far from offering a final word on history or on reparation, my work aims to open up new avenues of thought that might direct us toward a kinder, more just future.

The guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Ann Rigney, has been invaluable in helping this thesis take shape. Many thanks also to my parents, sister, and brother for their support throughout the past few months. Last but not least, I owe a warm thanks to my peers in the CLS program—their positivity and kindness have meant the world.

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# Introduction

What if we could travel back in time?

At first glance, this question belongs squarely within the domain of science fiction. Alternatively, it might be presented to speculative scientists as a metaphysical puzzle. It may not be immediately guessed that in the cultural sector of historical remembrance, the notion of time travel pops up all over. Engaging with history today, it seems, must involve some form of personal interaction with times gone by: a ‘meeting with’; a ‘returning to.’ Accordingly, many museums and historical sites draw their visitors in by offering a semi-metaphorical journey into the past, promising them the ability to temporarily see the world through the eyes of a famous historical figure or to experience a day in the life of a person who lived centuries ago through “immersive and authentic” reconstruction (Gapps 183). Commemorating the past has become an experience, rather than ‘mere’ representation (183). The Dutch museum park *Archeon*, for instance, proclaims:

Roam through prehistory, get very close to the Romans, discover Archeologyhouse [*sic*] of South Holland and dive into the Middle Ages. Step into the middle of history and discover how it used to be. (“Park”)

Such advertising suggests that the past can be revisited, not just indirectly through stories or artifacts, but as a still existing place into which one can physically enter. The idea of ‘stepping into’ an earlier era also speaks to the related and popular practice of historical reenactment, which involves participants—sometimes professional actors, but more often hobbyists and amateurs—dressing up in period-appropriate clothing and replaying a famous battle or other historical event. But even in media that lack a clear dimension of bodily presence, the concept of time travel seems to be a natural go-to for talking about history nowadays: for example, one history podcast describes itself as “time-travelling through women’s history, one era at a time” (“Welcome to The Exploress”).

 Time travel, then, is not merely an Einsteinian conundrum; it is bound up with the way we think of history and engage with the past in the modern period. Understanding how the past lives on in the present is no minor task in Western society today, which continues to struggle with complicated legacies of repression and violence alongside established narratives of victory and progress. In the past few decades, the heritage of colonialism and Transatlantic slavery has become an especially prominent topic of debate in many Western countries, leading to difficult questions about reconciliation, reparation, and cross-generational accountability. The past, in this context, is certainly not simply “past.” Ongoing calls for justice, like Ta-Nehisi Coates’ famous article “The Case for Reparations” (2014) and the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, demonstrate that legacies of violence are a fundamental part of today’s world. More importantly, these voices demonstrate that the past is very much in need of attention: without addressing it properly, we cannot move unburdened into the future.

This thesis proposes that thinking with time travel can be a productive way to disentangle the colliding temporalities involved in debates about historical injustice. Specifically, it investigates how Transatlantic slavery has been represented in literary time travel fiction. In these stories, unlike most other media, the narrative lens of time travel is made continually explicit. Time travel fiction, therefore, constitutes a particularly self-reflective space that invites critical thought about the interplay between narrative, history, time, injustice, and reparation.

In this introductory chapter, I first set up the conceptual framework of the thesis, building primarily on the fields of cultural memory and transitional justice. I then address the practical progression of the reparations debate in the United States. The third section discusses the existing literature on time travel fiction as a form of historical and cultural criticism. In the final section, I outline the project of this thesis, its goals and the research questions it seeks to answer, the methodology, and the structure of the chapters.

## Cultural Memory and Reparative Practice: A Conceptual Framework

Cultural memory scholars have long concerned themselves with difficult histories. It is a basic tenet of the field that history is never recalled objectively ‘as it was,’ but always in mediated form, shaped by contemporary needs and desires (J. Assmann 126). The way history comes to us, then, is in part through cultural artifacts—from buildings to literary texts—which are retroactively constituted into a larger narrative that we call ‘history.' This construction of historical narrative is not a straightforward process. It involves multidirectional interaction between various human actors, from governments to grassroots activists, as well as locations, symbols, and other material carriers of information (Erll 9; 27). Moreover, there is rarely just a single narrative in play: different memory cultures—groups who share a particular historical narrative—exist side by side, and frequently clash with each other over discrepancies in their understanding of history (Hodgkin and Radstone). All of this means that cultural memory is never stable, but subject to constant revision and reinterpretation.

 The precise way in which cultural memory is (re)produced remains contested. Michael Rothberg, for instance, has proposed a framework of *noeuds de mémoire* ("knots of memory"), in response to Pierre Nora’s influential *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") project. His "knotted" understanding of cultural memory stresses the interplay and overlap between different memory narratives, the thorough entanglement of individual and collective agencies, and the fact that memory construction is not greatly constrained by national or territorial borders (Rothberg, “Between Memory” 7-9). If literary works are one site where memory is (re)constructed, this occurs in connection to a massive web of other meaning-making practices.

As Rothberg and others have noted, memory scholars have always been particularly concerned with traumatic histories; that is, with memories of large-scale injustice (Rothberg, “Between Memory” 10). In this, cultural memory overlaps with other academic fields, such as postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and transitional justice, which also address these troubled legacies. As this thesis pertains to the relation between mediated memory and reparative practices, the emphasis here is on the intersection between cultural memory and transitional justice. However, these fields are also understood to intersect, so that the concepts and theory introduced here are influenced by insights from different theoretical angles.

Transitional justice refers to a collection of societal responses to major human rights violations and attempts to move beyond them. These include measures within and outside of the judicial system that have the goal of addressing “legacies of horrendous atrocities” and “end[ing] recurring cycles of violent conflict” (“Transitional Justice Issues”). In other words, transitional justice involves recovering and sharing the truth about past injustices, redressing the needs of injured parties, and preventing further harm. It includes such varied practices as financial reparations, criminal trials, legal reforms, and the memorialization of victims. The transformative justice framework has become fundamental for thinking about historical injustice and possibilities for reparation and reconciliation, though it has also been criticized, among other things for relying too strongly on a top-down and institutional approach (Gready and Robins 12) and for suggesting a clean break between past and present where there may actually be significant continuity (Rigney, 2012 254). This thesis, being concerned with a non-institutional response to (in)justice—in the form of literary works—recognizes these limits of transitional justice. Chapter One discusses a number of theorizations of transitional justice that significantly reconfigure the temporal dimension of historical injustice, problematizing the past/present distinction. Regardless of how injustice is framed, though, the discourse around reparation remains vital, and requires some illumination here.

While most commonly associated with the direct financial reimbursement of victims, “reparation” can refer to a number of compensation practices, such as (re)instating political or civil rights and securing access to necessities. Moreover, material reparations often go hand in hand with other reparative measures, like formal apologies. The term “reparation” is sometimes used to denote both material and non-material reparative measures. Michel Wood has pointed out that in the context of international law, “reparations”—in plural—has a strong connotation of financial payment after conflict, whereas “reparation”—singular—suggests a broader notion of “a legal consequence of an internationally wrongful act” (541). The latter can involve “restitution, compensation, and satisfaction” (542). For the sake of clarity, this thesis will use “reparation(s)” in reference to material forms of redress, while non-material practices may be described as “reparative” if they are understood to contribute to a process of implementing justice.

Another common site of confusion has formed around the perceived overlap between “reparation” and “reconciliation.” Both of these terms have a long history of (re)definition. As “reparation” for some scholars came to indicate a variety of cultural as well as material practices, the term moved away from “restoration”—the endeavor of restoring the material situation from before the injury was done—and toward reconciliation—with the focus being on repairing relations between people or groups (Walker 1-2). As such, “reparation” and “reconciliation” have sometimes been used synonymously. To others, however, the terms do have significantly disparate meanings that require some illumination. A difficulty with defining reconciliation, finds David Bloomfield in his investigation into the term, is that it is frequently used to denote “both process and outcome”: at once the road toward “an end-state of harmony,” and that end-state itself (6). He proposes using “reconciliation” as an umbrella term for “the overall relationship-oriented process within which these diverse instruments [such as justice, healing, truth-telling and reparations] are the constitutive parts” (11). A similar approach is taken by Linda Radzik and Colleen Murphy in their entry on the term in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, though they ascribe more complexity to the relation between reconciliation and justice (28-30). This thesis adopts Bloomfield’s notion of reconciliation as an overarching process, to which reparation and reparative practices can contribute.

While transitional justice largely falls within the legal domain, it also has close ties to cultural processes. In particular, the notion of reparative remembering forms a bridge between these two areas. Graham Dawson, looking at the context of the Irish Troubles, has conceptualized reparative remembering as “opening emotionally to the disavowed past” in a way that contributes to healing “so that life may continue along fresh paths” (77). Public commemoration, the sharing of personal testimony, the recovery of suppressed documentation of injustice, and many other (cultural) memory practices have been constituted as means of repair (Tonry 234). Literature is one space in which such reparative remembrance can be enacted. In the tradition of cultural memory studies, literary works—especially historical fiction—can be understood as cultural artifacts that help constitute (and are constituted by) cultural memory. Their memory work can be called reparative when they seek to challenge or change an unjust historical narrative (Dawson 78). In the context of Transatlantic slavery, for instance, many literary authors have sought to imaginatively fill in gaps in the historical record, redress misrepresentations of history, and thereby “reclaim the humanity of the enslaved” (Anim-Addo and Lima 1).

A useful way to think about the relation between memory and artifacts in the context of this thesis is through the concept of prosthetic memory, introduced by Alison Landsberg. Prosthetic memories originate in the public sphere and are circulated through mass media technologies, but are internalized into a person’s body through engagement with these technologies. These memories “thus become part of one’s personal archive of experience, informing one’s subjectivity as well as one’s relationship to the present and future tenses” (Landsberg 26). That is to say, cultural artifacts do not merely (help us) tell stories about the past, but they can lead us to internalize these stories as actual memories that affect how we perceive ourselves and our position in society. A key feature of prosthetic memory is that it allows for “the possibility of taking on memories that are not naturally—ethnically, racially, or biologically—one’s intended inheritance” (Landsberg 26). Whereas cultural memory is generally understood to be group-specific and constitutive of group identity, prosthetic memory is associated with commodification and does not imply or require a shared identity between individuals who internalize the memory. This “democratic” access to memory can be seen in a positive light, as fertile ground for “political alliances” and the dismantling of essentialized identities (34). However, there is also always a risk of appropriation and misuse in failing or refusing to recognize the material context in which experiences originate. Indeed, Landsberg acknowledges that mediated memories are not equal to the “actual” experience, though they are “acutely felt” (33). Landsberg ascribes the creation of prosthetic memory primarily to film and other “experiential” media of the late twentieth century (48), but I suggest that certain works of literature are similarly involved in memory production. As the case studies of this thesis demonstrate, the body can be powerfully invoked in literary works, even if the literary medium is not usually associated with bodily experience.

This section has introduced a number of relevant concepts surrounding memory and reparation. In the third section of this introduction, I explain why time travel fiction is a particularly relevant place to look for reparative remembrance. But first, the next section describes how the debate around reparation for slavery has taken shape in practice in the United States.

## American Slavery and Reparation

In her transnational genealogy of reparation demands for slavery, Ana Lucia Araujo begins by noting that calls for reparation—though not always referred to by that name—have existed for as long as the practice of Atlantic slavery itself (1). The shape of these calls, however, has differed across former slave states. Araujo points to various factors that have determined the form of reparation demands, from “the peculiarities of the slave systems that prevailed in the societies where they emerged” to “the ways black activists responded to the legal systems that imposed segregation and to the ruling ideologies that promoted racism and reinforced white supremacy” in these particular societies (4). Notably, historical movements for in the United States have primarily focused on material reimbursement, whereas movements in many Caribbean areas foregrounded the attainment of citizenship by former enslaved people and other non-material forms of redress (3).

The intensity of the debate, moreover, has fluctuated over time, impacted by local as well as global developments. In the United States, the reparations movement reached a peak with the legal abolition of slavery after the American Civil War (Araujo 2). However, the post-war government ultimately failed to fulfill its promise of land and financial aid to all freed people (the famous ‘four acres and a mule’ order), and the reparations movement all but faded away over the following decades as new systems of racial inequality replaced the older structures of chattel slavery. Only in the late twentieth century—contrary to the expectations of many scholars and activists who had declared the issue “dead” (1)—did the debate pick up again, with the notion of reparation gaining international traction after World War II and the Holocaust. The increased memorialization of slavery across continents over the past decades has also contributed to a resurfacing of reparation demands, by rendering ever more visible “the scars of racial violence and racial inequalities” still affecting most former slave societies today (1). In 2001, the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance recognized (Atlantic) slavery as “crimes against humanity” (Araujo 3), lending new strength to proponents of slavery reparations. In the Caribbean, the rising interest in the history of slavery culminated in the CARICOM reparation program (2014), which combined “material, financial, and symbolic demands” (Araujo 3). Points of the program include a “full formal apology” from “the governments of Europe”; the “development of community institutions such as museums and research centers,” and cancelling the debt of “Caribbean governments that emerged from slavery and colonialism” (CARICOM). Inspired by these developments, the discussion was also reinvigorated in the United States (Araujo 4). Ta-Nehisi Coates’ article led the way in this debate, directly linking past and present injustices against Black Americans, as well as connecting reparation to “a revolution of the American consciousness” that would reconcile America’s “self-image” with its historical reality (Coates).

As of yet, there have been no material reparations made for slavery in the United States. Neither, it should be said, has there been agreement among proponents of reparation about what reparations should look like, or even *why*, exactly, they should be made (Forrester 23-24). For the time being, the reparations debate is just that: a debate. At the same time, the past decade has seen a continuance of relatively high public interest in both the history of slavery and the current struggles of Black people in the United States. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been particularly successful in making these issues visible, nationally and internationally, calling attention to structural police violence against Black Americans. To a lesser extent, BLM has also addressed the histories of slavery and colonialism that underlie contemporary structures of racism, critiquing the ongoing valorization of the colonial past and those involved in it (Cornelius 9). Of course, BLM is only one of many activist movements in the United States; the overarching platform Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) has over fifty attached organizations that endorse its “vision for Black lives.” Reparations form one of eight planks of this vision (other planks include “End the War on Black People” and “Political Power”), and the demands associated with this plank are notably focused on a combination of historical and structural injustices as well as proposing both material and non-material forms of reparation. For instance, the third demand reads:

Reparations for the wealth extracted from our communities through environmental racism, slavery, food apartheid, housing discrimination and racialized capitalism in the form of corporate and government reparations focused on healing ongoing physical and mental trauma, and ensuring our access and control of food sources, housing and land. (“Reparations”)

This approach to reparation suggests that the debate in the United States has broadened to include a wider variety of reparative measures, as M4BL’s list of demands are not dissimilar to the CARICOM plan—with of course the not unimportant distinction that CARICOM’s justice plan is supported on the state level (by the member states of CARICOM, though not as of yet by the colonial nations of which reparation is demanded), while M4BL remains a comparatively marginal movement.

## The Historical Time Travel Novel

Literature may not be at the forefront of most people’s minds when thinking about reparation, but, as I have mentioned, literary works are part of a network of cultural meaning-making that forms the foundation of any political debate. Some works have been constituted as forms of testimony, contributing to processes of justice and repair by constituting personal accounts of injustice, especially when these may not be available to the public through official or institutional channels (Daoudi). James R. Moore also sees a place for literature and the arts in educating people about the reparations debate, arguing that “their proper implementation can improve thinking, problem-solving skills, creativity, and spawn greater empathy and a respect for the human condition” (52-53). The idea that literature can contribute to education has existed for much longer, especially in the context of children’s history education. Arguments continue to be made for the use of historical fiction in classrooms as an effective and affective entryway into history (Brugar and Whitlock; Rodwell). While not inherently related to reparation, works of historical fiction can make their readers conscious of troubled histories, bringing into the public eye injustice in the past as well as the present. Especially the neo-slave narrative genre, a successor of sorts to the slave narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, has been configured as a constructive way for literature to engage with the history of slavery. Not only do these works revisit the past, but they draw explicit connections between the history of slavery and the present context of structural racial inequality, as well as self-consciously seeking to reconcile the imperative to remember with the limited remaining knowledge about the lives and experiences of enslaved people (Anim-Addo and Lima).

The language of time travel has appeared in the context of literature, too. In 1992, Nancy M. Johnson and M. Jane Ebert put forward an argument for understanding historical fiction and biography as a form of time travel, describing these genres as a way to "move beyond learning facts; […] experience the past and feel the joy and despair of persons who have lived before us" (489). This notion of non-academic history writing as more experiential and educational than academic texts could be seen as a precursor to the more recent interest in reenactment practices. However, textual narratives should by no means be dismissed just because other forms of storytelling are rising to the fore. For one thing, while reenactment performances and historical sites are without a doubt valuable tools for learning, they are also highly localized, precisely because of their reliance on physical presence. Literature, as well as film and television, are far more accessible. For another thing, while literature may lack certain affordances of performative media, it does have an essential ability to reflect on (embodied) practices of remembrance from a critical distance (Erll 153).

Next to the possibility of reading historical fiction as time travel, there is a much longer tradition of time travel in literature as an explicit trope. Going back to classics such as Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) and H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), time travel has become a staple of the speculative fiction genre, appearing in a variety of literary works as well as in film, television, comic books, and even video games. This popularity, however, has not been met with a corresponding interest among literary academics, for a number of reasons I will set out below.

William J. Burling divides time travel fiction into two strands, each with very different goals. Most common is the *temporal location form*, in which the central concern is scientific development, while ideology and history take a backseat (11). There is also the *temporal contrast form*, in which the mechanism of time travel is used precisely to explore history and perform ideological critique (12). The latter, clearly, is of higher relevance to this thesis. However, its limited production means that scholarly interest in this type of literature has been relatively minor as well (12). Not only is time travel fiction predominantly studied for its ability to imagine the ethical and practical consequences of time travel as a hypothetical scientific invention (see Bigelow; Richmond)—thus foregrounding the temporal location form—but David Wittenberg has noted a frequent dismissal of the genre as a whole as ‘popular’ or pulp fiction (2). Indeed, when scholars do remark upon the historical dimension of time travel stories, it is usually to disregard them as the embodiment of escapist fantasy and nostalgia for the past (Nahin 2). This completely passes by the implications of time travel fiction as a conduit for cultural criticism that Burling has begun to outline.

I suggest that time travel fiction—specifically, the temporal contrast form—should be studied in the context of slavery and reparative practices for two main reasons. First, time travel fiction has an innate ability to compare and contrast different time periods, and therefore to critically (self-)reflect on the historical content it depicts as well as the contemporary society that produced it. The device of time travel emphasizes the novel’s constructedness in the present, so that its depiction of the past becomes not just a reflection on history as such, but also a reflection upon its own practice as a historiographical narrative (Wittenberg 2). This allows one to perceive the very structures of commemoration—the production of cultural memory—at work, in addition to the manifest content; it also allows these novels to themselves engage with commemoration and memory. As such, these works are particularly able to explore the possibilities and limits of reparative remembering. Second, in complicating the strict distinction between past and present, I posit that time travel fiction reflects on temporality and history in a way that is particularly meaningful to an understanding of historical injustice. I will develop this notion further in the next chapter; for now, suffice to say that time travel fiction is well-suited to question the assumptions of linear and progressive temporality in which the reparations debate has become entangled.

## Aims and Questions

The connection between time travel fiction and reparative remembering has already been made in reference to Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (see Flagel and Wolfork among others). However, there is not yet any broader understanding of how the time travel trope has been used to explore themes of (cultural) memory and historical injustice. In a rare attempt to address this gap, Jolie C. Matthews has argued for the use of time travel fiction as an education tool in history classrooms; however, her analysis is still limited to a single work (an episode of the *Doctor Who* television series), and her work remains largely theoretical. Moreover, as Burling states, it is important to look not just at “the manifest content of this or that individual time travel text,” but also to consider the “same formal strategies” that appear across these works “in order to consider their broader, shared, historical meaning(s)” (27). The current project seeks to continue the work started by Burling and Matthews, setting up a theoretical framework for engaging with time travel fiction as a form of cultural criticism and testing it to a selection of literary works.

The first aim of this thesis is to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between literature and contemporary debates about historical injustice and reparative practices. Though time travel stories describe only a fraction of literary works, and many of their significant features will be genre-specific, I argue that their function as imaginative works has implications for literature—and the arts—more broadly. The second aim is to elucidate how time travel fiction can be a means of engaging with the legacy of slavery and questions of reparation (in the broad sense) within that context.

This thesis is guided by the following questions: How have fictional stories about time travel to the past represented Transatlantic slavery or the experience of being enslaved? What is the role of the time travel device in this representation? What, if any, connection can be made between these stories and reparative (memory) practices—can they themselves be considered reparative, or do they reflect on reparative practices directly or indirectly? And finally, based on these insights, what can be said about the role of literature as an imaginative space within ongoing debates about legacies of historical injustice? To answer these questions, I perform a close reading of three literary works (including a two-novel series) that depict one or more characters time travelling to the past. This analysis focuses on depictions of slavery in the novels, as well as the thematization of time, history, and storytelling in connection to the time travel trope.

## Corpus and Case Studies

Time travel fiction has a modest but persistent presence in the literary sphere. *Wikipedia*’s “List of Time Travel Works of Fiction” describes a collection of over 170 written works, more than 260 movies, and close to 80 television series “in which time travel is central to the plot or the premise.” This list should by no means be taken as exhaustive, especially since it consists almost entirely of Anglophone fiction. In fact, the ‘shelf’ of time travel books on the popular online platform *Goodreads* contains as many as 25,654 entries (“Time Travel Books”). Even accounting for the possible inclusion of different versions of the same work (e.g., paperbacks and hardcovers), this number is impressive. To compare, the “Speculative Fiction Books” shelf on *Goodreads* has 50,430 books listed, while “Science Fiction Books” has reached an apparent maximum of 100,000 entries.[[1]](#footnote-2) These lists are clearly not exhaustive, either, but they do indicate the significant space taken up by time travel fiction, despite its status as an ostensibly minor literary category.

 For the purposes of this thesis, I looked for U.S.-centric time travel novels of the historical contrast variety that deal explicitly with the topic of slavery. The time travel element, moreover, must involve one or more characters travelling from the present (within the lifetime of the author) to the past (before their own birth). This temporal structure is most suited to the research questions of this thesis—rather than depictions of travel to or from the future, or from past to present—as it pertains directly to the contemporary perspective on the past. The above criteria led me to three works: Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979); Zetta Elliott’s *Genna & Judah* duology (2009 and 2016); and Diana Gabaldon’s *Drums of Autumn* (1996). These works span different decades, subgenres, intended audiences, levels of fame, and contexts of publication.

Butler’s *Kindred* is a classic work of speculative fiction and a linchpin of Black American literature. It is also by far the most acknowledged contemporary work of time travel fiction in literary scholarship, and can be described as a neo-slave narrative. As such, the novel forms a natural starting point for any discussion of slavery and reparation in time travel fiction. The book centers around Dana, an African-American writer in the 1980’s, who is repeatedly pulled into the early nineteenth century to save the life of her White ancestor, Rufus. As her stays in the past grow longer, Dana must navigate life on the slave plantation of Rufus’ father, complicated further when she accidentally brings her White husband back in time with her. As noted above, the function of time travel in *Kindred* has been analyzed before, but it has not yet been linked directly to reparation.

The second case study of this thesis consists of two novels by young adult writer Zetta Elliott: *A Wish After Midnight* (2009) and *The Door at the Crossroads* (2016). The novels form a duology, with the publication of further installments as of yet uncertain. They tell the story of two Black teenagers who are transported into the American Civil War; Genna becomes involved in New York’s free Black community of Weeksville, while her boyfriend Judah winds up enslaved in the south. While much less renowned than *Kindred*—a status that can be at least partly ascribed to the marginalization of (especially Black) Young Adult literature—Elliott’s novels revisit many of Butler’s thematic concerns from a twenty-first century perspective, so that they form a worthwhile site of comparison. Elliot foregrounds intersectional identities, and draws parallels between racism and religious persecution in the U.S. post-9/11 and the multifaceted conflicts splintering New York during the Civil War. The novels’ younger audience also brings to the fore the question of literature as an educational tool, particularly in the context of memory and reparation.

Finally, Gabaldon’s *Drums of Autumn* is the fourth installment of the hugely popular *Outlander* series (1991-present) and the first of that series to be set predominantly in the United States. The novels describe the travels of British WWII-nurse Claire, who first journeys to eighteenth-century Scotland and—after two more decades in her own time—decides to return to the past definitively, moving to the colony of North Carolina with her husband. Though slavery is not a major theme in *Drums of Autumn*, as it is in the other two case studies, it is a constant background presence and in part becomes meaningful through that marginalized position. Within this thesis, the novel forms a kind of counterweight to the other case studies, providing insight into the traditional view on time travel (and historical) fiction as overly nostalgic and possibly appropriative. Though I want to make no presumptions about the relation of any of these novels to reparation or reparative practices, the different subject positions of their authors and the literary traditions in which they write must be acknowledged as affecting the reception and interpretation of the works themselves. Butler and Elliott’s works have clear ties to Afrofuturism, whereas Gabaldon’s novel is more closely aligned with historical romance; genres with very different backgrounds, goals, and ethical affiliations. To get a proper understanding of the affordances of time travel fiction and of literature’s role in debates about injustice, I maintain that it is vital to account for popular works that may not immediately strike one as reparative or (self-)reflexive. Popular fiction by definition reaches a wide audience, and may therefore be able to impact society to a degree that more ‘serious’ literary works cannot. Consequently, it is important to at least be aware of the historical narratives presented by popular works, and perhaps even to seek reparative potential within them that readers might be guided toward.

## Outline

The current chapter has introduced the topic of time travel fiction, provided an overview of key concepts and the historical context of reparation in the United States, set out the goals and questions central to this thesis, and introduced three case studies. This final section provides a brief overview of the remainder of the thesis.

In Chapter One, I further develop the theoretical framework of this thesis. Chapters Two to Four each perform a close reading of a literary work. Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, as the best-known and most discussed work of time travel fiction that deals with slavery in a major way, forms the starting point of analysis in Chapter Two. Chapter Three discusses Zetta Elliott’s *Genna & Judah* series, of which two novels have thus far been published. These novels are approached as a single case study due to their narrative entanglement, as they partly describe the same events from different points of view. Finally, Chapter Four centers around Diana Gabaldon’s *Drums of Autumn*, a sequel to the hugely popular novel *Outlander*.

# 1. Theoretical Framework

This chapter further develops the theoretical framework presented in the introduction. The first section dives deeper into reparation and reparative practices, and their relation to literature. In the second section, I explain why thinking about time and temporality is particularly important in the context of reparation and reparative (memory) practices. I then discuss several theorizations of transitional justice that renegotiate the temporal framework underlying the field.

## Literature and Reparation

In Chapter One, I introduced several key concepts of the debate on reparation. I first connected reparation to the field of transitional justice, which has come to define much of the global discourse around reparation—though, as I have also noted, calls for reparation in the United States were being made long before the emergence of transitional justice as a field of theory and practice, and reparations for slavery are not always placed within a transitional framework. I then distinguished between the related concepts of reparation(s) and reparative practice; with the former, I specifically refer to material and institutional forms of redress, while the latter denotes a wide array of cultural efforts at repair. I also made a distinction between reparation and reconciliation, with the latter functioning as an umbrella term for the overarching “relation-oriented process” (Bloomfield 11) to which reparation(s) contributes.

The current section builds on these definitions from Chapter One to create a clearer picture of how literature relates to reparation and reparative practices. This discussion is guided by two complementary understandings of literature’s reparative potential: the first pertains to literature as reparative practice, and the second to literature as a tool for reflection on reparation and the theoretical frameworks that surround it. As will become clear, these functions rarely operate separately, especially in what is known as Black literature.

In the context of literary studies, discussing reparation immediately brings to mind the recent turn to ‘reparative reading.’ First introduced by Eve Sedgwick in the 1990’s, reparative reading provides an alternative reading strategy to the previously (and to some extent still) dominant critical analysis, denounced by proponents of reparative reading as “paranoid” (e.g., Felski 34). Where current forms of cultural criticism usually seek to uncover the underlying ideologies and presuppositions of a text, in order to lay bare the hidden power structures of the society that produced it, reparative reading rather focuses on the constructive potential of texts; their positive affects and the social change they can accomplish (for a critique of reparative reading, see Stuelke). This meaning of “reparative” at first glance seems quite removed from “reparation” in the transitional justice definition, but there is some relevant connection.

A direct link between material reparation and reparative reading has been made by Mireille Rosello, who investigates how ‘the reparative’ intersects with narrative. Rosello defines the reparative as “an energy, a process, a specific set of narrative choices” that serves to engage the past in a way that neither repeats its injuries (leading to further societal division), nor presumes it can ever be truly repaired or left behind (22). The latter is important because it does away with the notion that a reparative narrative constitutes a conclusive version of history that requires no further reflection; this would be inaccurate to reality, and harmful to those who continue to suffer the effects of historical injustice. All narratives that revisit the past, Rosello finds, are inherently also attempts to recover from or “work through” that past (17). However, some do this in more productive—that is, non-divisive and non-definitive—ways than others. When looking for the reparative, “[t]he issue is … to analyze what happens when the narrative is aware of being a narrative involved in the production of truth and values” (24). In other words, reparative narratives revisit the past self-consciously and without pretense to closure; the reparative consists precisely in the recognition of reparation as a forever-ongoing process of renegotiating and redefining history. This notion of the reparative resonates with Saidiya Hartman’s work on the nonlinear time of mourning and remembrance, and particularly her perspective on irreparability, which critiques the notion that reenactment or commemoration can constitute an undoing of the past, while paradoxically declaring awareness of “the necessity of redressing the irreparable” (“Time of Slavery” 767). Rosello notes that the reparative in narrative is not tied directly to material reparations, but she considers that the former “may produce the profound symbolic and cultural changes that need to take place” before material reparations can be put in effect (22). That is, while narratives may not be reparative in the same way as, say, financial compensation, they could have a reparative function through their influence on cultural memory or other societal impact.

 What do the “narrative choices” (Rosello 22) that constitute the reparative look like in practice? Scholars in Black studies and related fields have found a prominent role for contemporary literature in its ability to supplement the historical archive, and some see a reparative function for literature here (see for instance Lambert; Perez). Despite recent efforts to expand the archive, there remains a relative paucity of documentation on Transatlantic slavery as an institution, and particularly a dearth of material produced by enslaved people themselves, compounded further by factors such as gender (Ze Winters 338). Contemporary Black literature has, to the extent that this is possible, sought to address and sometimes redress the limits of the archive through a variety of formal tools. Using literature to write ‘beyond’ the archive is not a new practice, nor one beholden to the context of slavery; it is a longstanding part of the tradition of historical fiction to establish cultural memories within a fictional framework (Rigney, 2005 378). However, works about American slavery in particular require a great deal of imagination to represent missing parts of history. “Within the U.S. context, Black literary works have long been part of the teaching of African diasporic histories, filling in gaping holes in dominant historiographies of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, colonialism, and liberation,” notes Lisa Ze Winters (338-339). These works—frequently referred to as “neo-slave narratives,” though they do not always adhere to the conventions of the traditional slave narrative (Anim-Addo and Lima 3-4)—try to make the past legible by speculating about the historical unknown, centralizing the experiences of enslaved Black people, and resisting the dominant narratives that have resulted from a long tradition of White-centric historiography (Ze Winters 339). Saidiya Hartman has notably used the term “critical fabulation”—the self-conscious merging of theory, archival research, and fictional narrative—to describe her own creative and constructive way of engaging with the archive (“Venus” 11-12).

In line with the reparative practices of truth commissions and public memorials, the imaginative revisiting of the past in literary narratives could be conceived of as reparative in its own right, as a form of reparative remembering. However, the idea that collective remembering or truth-telling *as such* is reparative has been acknowledged as too simplistic. Rather, uncovering suppressed or marginalized knowledge can be part of a broader reparation effort, as well as—more obviously—being a condition for such efforts in the form of establishing the relevant facts (Walker 528). In a situation where ‘the relevant facts’ are largely inaccessible, reparative remembering is complicated even further. Accordingly, many authors of Black literature engage with the past in a self-reflexive way, thematizing the unknown and the unknowable even as they creatively fill in gaps in the record (Ze Winters 343). They do not (just) propose a new historical narrative, but question the very possibility of any such narrative ever doing full justice to the enslaved people whose records are lost.

The reparative in (certain works of) literature, then, could be constituted precisely in its refusal to repair. As Rosello proposes, reparative narratives about slavery might be reparative in terms of their societal effects—the calls they make upon the audience—rather than some inherent quality. This is not to say that the way history is presented in these works does not matter, but rather that the focus should be less on the extent to which literature presents a ‘true’ story and more on the cultural work these narratives seek to perform. For instance, according to Anim-Addo and Lima, neo-slave narratives “demand that we re-evaluate a vexed history of trauma and violence but also urge us to re-consider the modern history of the representation of black bodies and selves” (3). While recovering knowledge of the past is certainly one part of the project of these works, the emphasis is on assigning significance to memories—or lack thereof—in the present (2). Anim-Addo and Lima find that the purpose of neo-slave narratives is often to “expose systemic inequality and the unjust treatment of (black) peoples everywhere” (5). Works of this genre strive to contribute to real, tangible change by asking an investment of their (White) audience: “Re-imagining the subjectivity of enslaved peoples by telling their stories, using narrative as a way towards telling that history, may educate the present generation into accountability for that sordid past” (6). This way of framing the neo-slave narrative’s goals also reveals how these texts speak differently to Black and White readerships, perhaps legitimizing the experiences of the former while calling the latter to action.

Beside these more practical reparative efforts, literature can also be a space for thinking about reparation and reconciliation theoretically. For instance, Yomaira C. Figueroa has proposed that “literary narratives offer discursive spaces through which to imagine and reimagine the possibilities of decolonial reparations as amends that are both material and immaterial” (43). The literary works she analyzes, Figueroa argues, actively reflect on what reparation should look like “through radical (re)definitions of social and political concepts,” particularly love (46). In a similar fashion, Aretha Phiri shows how two pioneering works—Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Antje Krog’s *Country of My Skull*—critically question the possibility of true “existential reparation” while also expanding the concept through new imaginings of subjectivity (80). These works are not (necessarily) reparative themselves, but contribute to the discussion on a theoretical level by creatively exploring both the possibilities and the limits of reparative practice; that is, by asking and investigating what “reparation” (and reconciliation, cross-generational accountability, historical injustice, etc.) really means.

These reflections on the reparative finally lead me to the time travel novel as a site of cultural critique. As demonstrated in the introduction, time travel fiction engages with history and memory in a uniquely self-conscious manner that fits very well with Rosello’s understanding of ‘reparative’ narratives. Additionally, though of course not all works of time travel fiction are neo-slave narratives and vice versa (aside from the interpretation of historical fiction as a form of time travel in itself), the next chapters will show that these two genres have crossed paths in productive ways. Lastly, the narrative affordances of time travel fiction also provide a valuable means of engaging with reparation on a more theoretical or conceptual level. The next section addresses one area of critical contemplation to which I consider time travel fiction particularly well-suited: that of time and temporality.

## Time and Reparation

This thesis takes it for granted that time travel fiction *does* something with time. Regardless of how the time travel device is used in a particular work, the fact of a character moving through time means that temporality is made into an explicit theme, though the implications of this will of course differ. A historical contrast novel, moreover, might be expected to reflect specifically on historical time; that is, on the relation between past, present, and future. While this does not mean that time travel novels always take a revolutionary or even critical perspective on time, I propose that time travel novels in general are useful tools for conceptualizing (particular frameworks of) time, and that they provide an incentive to reflect on our assumptions about temporality.

So why is it important to think about time in the context of reparative practices? Notions of time and temporality are implicitly present across the fields of transitional justice and memory studies. In fact, both the notions of ‘transition’ and of ‘memory’ already include a temporal register: the former suggests a passing stage from one time period to another, while the latter indicates a form of retrieval of the past within the present. The functioning of time in the context of memory has already received significant attention, including but not limited to the relation between memory and history (see A. Assmann; Hałas; Hodgkin and Radstone). However, when it comes to transitional justice—and related topics of reparation, responsibility, and historical injustice—the importance of time and temporality has only recently come under scrutiny.

This section engages with several recent theorizations of transitional justice temporality. The purpose of this is, first and foremost, to clarify why frameworks of temporality are integral to any and all questions about reparative practice. Second, building on the expectation that reflection on time is a key component of time travel fiction, this section sets up a frame of reference for linking temporality in time travel novels to reparation and transitional justice. Though it should not be assumed that the theoretical temporal frameworks discussed here directly correspond to conceptions of time in the case studies (or any other time travel novels), they do provide a direction from which to approach temporality and reparation in these works. I return to (time travel) literature at the end of the section, connecting the theory discussed here to the project of this thesis.

In 2011, Berber Bevernage described the importance of temporality to justice and ethics in his book *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*. He centralizes the contrasting temporal registers of history and jurisdiction. While the former considers the past to be linear and *irreversible*, so that it is impossible to return to a state of affairs before injustice or injury, the latter sees the past as *reversible*, allowing for the possibility of true repair after injustice (2). Within the field of transitional justice, Bevernage argues, historical time and the time of jurisdiction have intersected and merged. Caught between the seemingly contrasting imperatives of reparation and reconciliation, transitional justice must constantly oscillate between reviving the past—to ensure that justice is done—and leaving it behind in order to keep or restore the peace (7). To better understand the non-linearity of jurisdiction time, Bevernage builds on a distinction made by Vladimir Jankélévich between the *irreversible* and the *irrevocable* past. Whereas the irreversible past is experienced as “fragile and as immediately dissolving or fleeting from the present,” the irrevocable past is felt as “a persistent and massive depository that sticks to the present” (4). That is to say, the irreversible past disappears right away, while the irrevocable past—in some shape or form—stays and continues to haunt the present. Bevernage draws a line between this notion of the irrevocable past and various theorizations of memory that similarly contradict the linear structure of modernist time (14). Like jurisdiction time, the temporality of memory can thus be said to directly oppose that of history.

A shift in temporal registers is at the core of recent changes in attitude toward reparation and reparative practices, according to Bevernage (11-12). Whereas intentional forgetting used to be the norm for societies in transition, since the 1980’s, the sense has grown that the past *should* be addressed, particularly in these transitional situations. The first truth commissions, Bevernage suggests, came into being as a compromise solution to the two temporal impulses of history and jurisdiction. As trust in linear, progressive time failed, and the continued haunting presence of the past came to be recognized (partly due to the increased emancipation of minority groups), simply deciding to forget was no longer a viable option. However, the rise of memory and reparation also caused great anxiety, as it threatened the progressive temporal framework that—Bevernage argues—formed the foundation of modernity. By turning to the discourse of history, truth commissions and other reparative programs sought to relegate the past to the past and “pacify the troublesome force of memory” without seriously disrupting modernist linearity (15). The past is welcomed into the present, but only from a distance, as a narrative to be excavated and studied, ultimately preserving a hard line between ‘then’ and ‘now.’

Despite Bevernage’s argumentation that transitional justice is rightly situated at the conjunction of different temporalities, the modernist conception of time has almost entirely predominated in the field. In 2018, Natascha Mueller-Hirth and Sandra Rios Oyola’s *Time and Temporality in Transitional and Post-Conflict Societies* noted a glaring lack of academic reflection on the role of time in many areas of transitional justice. On the whole, they argue, transitional justice has uncritically presupposed a Western, linear and progressive model of time (2). Not only does this model fail to acknowledge the much more varied experiences of time of—especially—many marginalized and victimized groups, but it also frequently fails to account for the realities of reparative practice, both material and cultural. Taking a more practical approach, Mueller-Hirth and Oyola refer to four problematically undertheorized dimensions of time in transitional justice that affect the actual implementation of reparation programs: the intersection of (experienced) temporalities; power relations and reparation; social acceleration; and collective memorialization.

With the intersection of temporalities, Mueller-Hirth and Oyola mean predominantly the collision between top-down accountability projects and the lived experiences of those who were involved in a particular conflict. Transitional justice functions within a set time frame that distinguishes clearly between past and present, whereas the embodied experience of injustice is rarely so orderly (5). Accordingly, local projects of justice—such as commemoration and reconstruction—often do not follow the temporal logic of transitional justice. In connection with this, Mueller-Hirth and Oyola connect time directly to uneven power relations. The hegemonic, chronological understanding of time imposed by top-down justice frameworks puts pressure on individuals and local actors to conform, with potentially negative (emotional and practical) consequences for the latter (6). Efforts to recognize localized alternative temporalities, moreover, can be counterproductive, as they risk reducing particular groups to anachronistic ‘others’ (5-6). The acceleration of society, to Mueller-Hirth and Oyola, is responsible for at least part of the problem with different temporal registers. Modern society’s rapid pace demands a swift resolution after injustice that ultimately results in the ineffectiveness of many reparation and reconciliation projects. This desire for speed conflicts, first of all, with the reality of reparation, which often take a long time to be put into effect. Moreover, hurrying to resolve conflict passes by the need of victims to process and grieve (7). Next to the assumption that justice and reconciliation can be straightforwardly achieved through linear progression, then, implementations of the transitional justice framework also tend to impose a strict time frame in which this resolution should be attained, underscored by a ‘the sooner the better’ mentality.

Lastly, as already touched on above, many memory practices show that the experience of history is rarely simple or chronological. As Mueller-Hirth and Oyola indicate, “[m]emories, as acts of representation, allow individuals to locate themselves in time and distinguish themselves from the past” (8). At the same time, commemoration brings the past into the present; within transitional justice discourse, this often takes the form of drawing lessons from the past, under the motto of “never again” (7-8). In this sense, remembrance is also connected to the future, as memories are instrumentalized to imagine new routes forward. The constant renegotiation of memory suggests that “past, present and future are less part of a linear continuity but overlap, revolve in circularities and can influence each other” (9). This notion of remembering as an inherently nonlinear act resonates with Bevernage’s opposition of memory and history.

Bevernage presents an argument for the importance of time to questions of ethics and justice, and to the field of transitional justice as a whole. Mueller-Hirth and Oyola show that reparative efforts are deeply entangled with experienced temporalities. In light of this, it comes as no surprise that on a theoretical level, argumentations for or against (material) reparations are also deeply dependent on an underlying understanding of time. The way time—and, by extension, history—is conceptualized in contemporary society determines our perspective on historical injustice and responsibility across generations, which in turn affects the degree to which we perceive claims for reparation as legitimate.

Alasia Nuti divides the debate around historical injustice and reparation into two main strands of reasoning, each of which is problematic in a different way. First, there are backward-looking approaches, which consider past injustices to be meaningful and redressable in themselves. This way of thinking is subject to the ‘impracticability objection’: there are no grounds for determining which past injustices need redress and which do not, and redressing them all is impossible. Second, there are forward-looking approaches, which hold that repairs for past injustices are an indirect means for solving contemporary problems. Here, the ‘redundancy objection’ comes into play: if the goal is to solve contemporary problems, the history behind those problems does not matter. Within the currently dominant, linear framework of time, Nuti finds, neither of these approaches sufficiently explains why historical injustices should be redressed in the present. In fact, “[t]he debate over historical injustice seems to have reached an impasse, which amounts to a theoretical difficulty in explaining the normative importance the unjust past has for present-based considerations of justice” (19). That is, without a proper theoretical understanding of history—the way past, present, and future relate to each other—any argument for reparation is doomed to fail.

Nuti argues that transitional justice transcends the modernist temporal framework. However, whereas Bevernage claims different notions of time have already come together in transitional justice, Nuti—like Mueller-Hirth and Oyola—finds that modernist time has thus far been the assumed framework of the field. Drawing on Reinhart Koselleck’s work, Nuti suggests a rethinking of history in terms of “long-term structures.” Unlike events, which are sequential and have a specific position in time, long-term structures are systemic and processual, extending throughout generations without a clear ‘before’ and ‘after.’ They form the background conditions that enable particular events to be actualized, though the actual shape of events is determined by other factors, such as individual human agency, as well. The same long-term structures can give way to various events over time, and these structures are in turn affected by the events that actually take place. Nuti’s framework makes it possible to think of history in non-causal terms; not as events and their troubled legacies, but as repeated actualizations of the same structures in new ways. Consequently, the connection between ‘past’ violence and present societal problems becomes much more meaningful: problems in the present are not simply the *result* of events in the past, but they are instantiations of unjust structures that span past, present, and future. On a more experiential level, Nuti’s structural framework speaks to Christina Sharpe’s conception of “being in the wake,” which expresses a particular Black consciousness of “occup[ying] and [being] occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (13-14); that is, an experience of injustice still ongoing, not (just) past.

While Nuti derives present-day responsibility for past injustice from structural continuity on the societal level, Michael Rothberg approaches cross-temporal accountability from the perspective of the individual in his highly influential book *The Implicated Subject* (2019). Problematizing the victim/perpetrator binary on which traditional understandings of (in)justice and responsibility are based, Rothberg’s “implicated subject” refers to the subject position of those who are not directly responsible for injustice, but who had or continue to have some role to play in its instigation or continuation. Especially in the context of race and racism, Rothberg argues, the framework of implication can help address “different scales and temporalities of injustice” (*Implicated Subject* 2). To clarify the temporal dimension of this framework, he distinguishes between synchronic implication and diachronic implication, which pertain respectively to contemporary and historical injustice. Furthermore, he uses the term “complex implication” to indicate “the coexistence of different relations to past and present injustices” (9). That is to say, any individual is likely to inhabit various subject positions of synchronic and diachronic implication in regard to different injustices; they may also inhabit the position of victim or perpetrator in some situations while being implicated in others (9).

Rothberg agrees with the scholars discussed above that “how we think about the relation between past and present is the product of a politics of time” (*Implicated Subject* 9). He finds this “politics of time” especially pertinent in the context of racism and slavery. As he phrases it, “the debate over reparations focuses attention on the problem of how to calibrate responsibility for a transnational system of chattel slavery that was eliminated more than a century ago but that … continues to shape today’s unequal social relations” (9-10). Like Nuti’s long-term structures, the implicated subject provides a model for bridging the gap between a seemingly extinct system of injustice and contemporary forms of injustice by bringing time into the equation. Looking at these models side-by-side brings into focus both the long-lasting and ongoing nature of certain forms of injustice, and the role of the individual in processes of reparation.

## Conclusion

This chapter has made several connections between time and reparative practices. How, then, do these pertain to literature? First, there is the understanding of memory and commemoration as inherently nonlinear phenomena that contest the progressive modernist discourse of history. Literature forms one site of cultural remembrance, and hence has the potential to deconstruct linearity through memory work. This is even more relevant to, and visible in, works of time travel fiction, which openly disrupt the linear flow of time. Secondly, I propose that time travel fiction is generally well-positioned to reflect different experiences of temporality. Time travelling characters may find their own perspective on time violently challenged, while the collision of past and present facilitates interaction between people in very different stages of processing injustice (whether from the perspective of a victim, perpetrator, or otherwise implicated subject). Even if there is no direct mention of reparation or other transitional justice processes, the lived experiences of time depicted in time travel novels may still be instructive in contrast with each other and with general assumptions of progress and demands for swift resolution to conflict. Lastly, the models of cross-temporal responsibility presented by Nuti and Rothberg serve as a theoretical basis for engaging with time travel novels in this thesis. These models show unequivocally that “politics of time” influence the shape of the debate on reparation, and while they differ in focus, their respective frameworks of long-term structures and implication provide a useful vocabulary for analyzing structures of time and responsibility in time travel fiction.

 Next to temporality, this chapter has discussed ‘the reparative’ as it pertains to literature. I have defined ‘reparative narratives’ as texts that situate themselves self-consciously within an ongoing process of (re)addressing historical injustice, working through troubled histories without seeking to definitively move past them. Reparative narratives are thus involved in reparative remembering, as cultural artifacts, but they also reflect on what it means to remember the past in a particular way. In the following chapters, I will show how the three cases of this thesis combine acts of remembering with meta-reflection on narrativity and mediation, to different effects and varying degrees of success.

# 2. Octavia Butler’s Kindred (1979)

In Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, African-American writer Dana is repeatedly transported from her home in California, 1976, to early-nineteenth-century Maryland. On each trip, she is called upon to save the life of her White ancestor, Rufus, the son and eventual heir to the wealth of plantation owner Tom Weylin. Forced to assume the position of a slave on the Weylin plantation during her increasingly lengthy stays in the past, Dana assigns herself the troublesome task of ensuring the birth of Rufus’ daughter, Hagar, which she comes to understand will be the result of his raping Alice, a free Black woman. Additionally, Dana’s position on the plantation is endangered when she accidentally brings Kevin, her White husband, into the past with her.

Previous readings of *Kindred* have related the novel to memory practices and trauma (e.g. Long; Yaszek), but none have considered the novel as a work of or on reparative practice. Building on the existing scholarship, I therefore present an interpretation of the novel centered on reparation. What and how does *Kindred* contribute to reparation; that is, to a process of implementing justice? I begin by investigating how *Kindred* depicts and deconstructs time, and the consequences of this for notions of progress, responsibility, and reparation. The second section further explores the novel’s perspective on responsibility through Michael Rothberg’s theory of implication. Finally, I address mediation and the role Butler envisions for literature in representing the historical archive.

By framing the novel through reparation, I place *Kindred*—as I will do the cases of the next chapters—within a global context that goes beyond the American perspective from which it is usually studied. Though the novel’s content is highly specific to the United States, its message about reparation may prove meaningful to other settings in which matters of historical injustice, responsibility across generations, and efforts at repair are currently being discussed. At the same time, the novel’s specificity should not be overlooked. The field of transitional justice has been criticized for its top-down approach that fails to address the actual lifeworld of victims, which may differ across and even within contexts (Mueller-Hirsch and Oyola). Generalizations, therefore, must be made only where appropriate.

## Time and History

In Chapter 1, I explained the importance of a suitable temporal framework for any discussion of reparation and reparative practice. In particular, I showed that a nonlinear notion of time is needed to accommodate people’s real experiences of historical injustice and trauma, as well as to understand how responsibility might be extended or transferred over time. In this section, I bring the theoretical perspectives on time from the previous chapter into conversation with *Kindred*. How does Butler give shape to temporality and history in the novel? What does her particular interpretation of these concepts imply about reparation—in other words, to what extent does the novel depict the past as reparable? And, building on the theoretical frameworks of Rothberg and Nuti, where and why does the novel assign responsibility for (dealing with) slavery and its aftermath?

The starting point for discussing temporality in *Kindred* ought, of course, to be the mechanism of time travel at its center. Lisa Wolfork has noted that, unlike in most traditional science fiction, time travel in *Kindred* is not a “controlled form of movement” (22). Instead, Butler presents it as an unwelcome abduction into a dangerous past that Dana can neither predict nor predictably manage—it takes a suicide attempt for her to intentionally return to the present (Butler 267). Both Nadine Flagel and Angelyn Mitchell compare Dana’s journeys through time to the disorienting experience of slavery, and especially to the Middle Passage as another form of involuntary travel (Flagel 218-219; Mitchell 52). Time in *Kindred*, then, is immediately associated with disruption rather than linearity.

The conception of historical time in *Kindred* has been analyzed by Christine Levecq. She demonstrates that time in the novel is cyclical, full of repetition, and resistant to “notions of individual or communal progress” (534). Dana’s repeated attempts to “impose some form of ‘progress’ onto” the past, to Levecq, exemplifies the lack of both personal and communal change (537): Dana ultimately fails to have a notable impact on Rufus or the plantation, as Rufus comes to resemble his father more and more, and she cannot keep her enslaved friends from being abused and sold. Indeed, as Kevin tells Dana, they “know what’s going to happen. It already has happened. … We surely can’t change it” (Butler 106). Moreover, by the end of the novel, Dana has become unable to communicate her experiences, even to Kevin, “leaving it open for a possible new cycle of conflict” (Levecq 540). History in the novel, then, is deterministic, but not linear or progressive.

*Kindred* is a good example of a historical contrast time travel novel. As Butler herself has intimated, time travel “is just a device for getting the character [Dana] back to confront where she came from,” rather than an exploration of science (496). The time travel device thus serves to measure different societies—here, early nineteenth- and late twentieth-century America—against each other. Through this contrast, Butler performs a cultural critique of the present, emphasizing the differences and especially the similarities between the time periods in which Dana finds herself.

One passage that directly contrasts past and present describes Dana’s former labor agency. Dana and her fellow “regulars” commonly refer to this agency as “a slave market,” though Dana humorously adds that “[a]ctually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn’t have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered” (Butler 52). She continues the comparison, admitting that when no work was available, people might, “in desperation, sell some blood” (51)—insinuating that the bodies of working people are still commodified in the present day in a manner not unlike chattel slavery. Indeed, she takes this connection even further by calling the workers “[n]onpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks” (52). This early in the novel—Dana has only travelled back twice and for short periods, having significant interaction only with the child Rufus—this passage does not yet have the impact it has when read retrospectively against the descriptions of Dana’s and others’ experiences with slavery in the nineteenth century. Within the broader context of the novel, Flagel interprets the passage as a reinvestment of literal language with “power and violence,” as the rhetoric of slavery Dana uses in it emphasizes the extreme disconnect between the way slavery is talked about in the present and its actuality in the past. Not only does Butler show that language cannot do justice to violent reality, but the easy comparison Dana makes leaves the reader uncomfortably aware of how easily the language of slavery is appropriated and deprived of its literal meaning. As Flagel notes, *Kindred* makes clear that “[t]he use of figurative language is only possible in safety” (235). One way to understand the passage, therefore, is as a reminder that language has power, and a nudge toward awareness of the reader’s privileged position in the present. By translating the rhetoric of slavery into the present, the text suggests, we only distance ourselves further from the literal reality this language describes, and fail to do justice to the violence of history.

The novel frequently shows continuity between past and present; sometimes in small ways, like when Dana wryly remarks that she “did know how to sweep and dust no matter what century it was” (Butler 85). Other parallels have more significant implications. When Tom Weylin threatens to whip her, Dana remembers: “My aunt used to say things like that to me when I was little … And she’d get my uncle’s belt and use it on me” (224). While she takes Weylin’s threat more seriously than her childhood beatings—even fearing that Weylin may “literally” skin her alive (224)—the resemblance Dana sees between past and present violence shows that the present is not as sophisticated as contemporary readers may be inclined to believe. Dana’s flashback to Kevin’s marriage proposal provides another such example of painful continuity, as well as resistance to modern narratives of progress. In lieu of answering, Dana asks Kevin, “You … don’t have any relatives or anything who’ll give you a hard time about me, do you?” (118). Kevin “looked surprised” at her concern; a response reminiscent of the “strange look[s]” he gives her earlier. Though Kevin is sure race will not be a problem for his family, Dana remains suspicious, and is proven right when Kevin’s sister refuses to “have [Dana] in her house” (118). The sister’s response mirrors Rufus’ earlier outrage at the idea of a mixed marriage (61), again emphasizing that behaviors and ways of thinking in the present are not so different from—and hardly more ‘evolved’ or ‘progressed’ than—those in the past.

An even more powerful instance of comparison occurs when Dana returns to the twentieth century badly injured. When her “favorite cousin” visits her, she immediately assumes it was Kevin who hurt Dana (Butler 125). This confusion between the violence of slavery and domestic violence establishes a connection between racialized and gendered structures of power, as well as continuity through time. After her cousin comments that she “never thought you’d be fool enough to let a man beat you,” Dana privately admits to herself: “I never thought I would either” (126). While it really was “a man”—Weylin—who beat Dana, he did so in a context of racist, not gendered, violence. At the same time, the passage implies that social structures of race and gender cannot be separated, either in the past or the present. The exchange between Dana and her cousin makes clear, first of all, that Dana, as a woman of color, is still in a fraught position in twentieth-century society not entirely unlike she was in the nineteenth century. Though she knows her cousin is misreading the situation, Dana’s response indicates that she has recognized the overlap between the two eras and can easily translate between their respective social frameworks. Moreover, in accepting the phrasing of “a man” having beat her, Dana invests her experiences in the past with a gendered dimension that—as Lisa Yaszek has argued (1060)—she herself often does not fully recognize. The insertion of gender here subtly critiques the disregard of gender dynamics in traditional analyses of the social structures of race (and vice versa), pushing the reader to recognize the intersection between these aspects of social organization.[[2]](#footnote-3) Conversely, it should be noted, the passage can also be read as Dana appropriating a victim discourse that is not suitable to her situation; her cousin is, after all, wrongly blaming Kevin for Dana’s injuries.

 Nuti’s terminology of long-term structures provides a useful way of thinking about the past/present dichotomy—or lack thereof—in the above passages. In Nuti’s structural injustice framework, past and present are simultaneously distinct and indistinct: history is made up of events that are temporally located, and of long-term structures that are not. The continuities *Kindred* describes between the nineteenth and twentieth century can be interpreted as instances of long-term structures at work: structures of white male domination, for instance, that were actualized in the form of slavery in the nineteenth century, and in patterns of domestic violence in the twentieth century. While it is possible to argue that present-day problems merely have a distant, causal relation to past ones, the almost wry juxtaposition of past and present accounts of violence in the novel, combined with the temporal rupture of Dana’s time travel, makes a structural framework preferable. To Dana, there is no distance between past and present: the societal problems she encounters in the nineteenth century are directly transposed onto those of her own time, and vice versa. In line with Nuti, the novel suggests that historical injustices are still relevant because they still, in a very practical sense, need to be resolved. This is not to say that there is no difference between past and present—after all, Dana and Kevin could not have been married in the 1800s—but rather, that there is a structural continuity that forms the foundation of the racial and gendered violence in both times.

A structural interpretation of history demands, more than just recognition of continuities between past and present, a thorough reconsideration of what ‘past’ and ‘present’ mean. The mechanism of time travel itself becomes a means of interrogating temporal relations in *Kindred*, reassessing the very structure of time. David LaCroix has already criticized the centrality of the present in most readings of *Kindred*, arguing that a key aspect of the novel is its ability to constitute different time periods in a symmetrical relationship; that is, to assign a similar level of agency and responsibility to each moment in time (111). Dana—along with, LaCroix observes, most scholars who have addressed temporality in the novel—continues to privilege her original time of 1976 as “the present,” and consequently misses the fact that she is physically *present* (in both senses of the word) in the nineteenth century (113-114). Through time travel, *Kindred* proposes a framework of time in which there is not a single ‘present’ but many, each mutually constitutive, as the past structures the present, and the present always retroactively imposes itself on the past (111). To LaCroix, the murder of Rufus and Dana’s subsequent return home most astutely present the agency and interdependence of past, present, and future. On the one hand, these events demonstrate a sense finality that indicates that “at a certain point the past must be absolutely past” (115): there will always be an experienced ‘present’ that determines other moments as ‘past.’ On the other hand, the enmeshing of Dana’s arm in the wall of her house symbolically represents the enmeshed nature of past and present. The wall in the present immediately replaces Rufus’ body in the past, the two objects momentarily taking up a single space, so that “the two times are, for the briefest moment, paradoxically coextensive” (LaCroix 116). The past is at once distinct from the present and thoroughly entangled with it.

If past and present cannot be understood separately, as Nuti and LaCroix propose and *Kindred* seems to support, it follows that people in the present must contend with the past; that is, we must bear some responsibility for it. Indeed, LaCroix argues that within *Kindred* “there is an ethical imperative to approximate [firsthand] knowledge [of the past] by learning about earlier times and about the ways that our present privilege might lead us to misrecognize them” (117). He does not, however, indicate what should be done once we have educated ourselves and become aware of our privileged position. He also makes no distinction between differently situated—Black or White; male or female—readers in the present. Rothberg’s theory of implication can help here to nuance the intersection between temporality, responsibility, and reparation in the novel. I propose that *Kindred* sets up a relational matrix between the four main characters: Dana, Kevin, Alice, and Rufus. In the next section of this chapter, I show how these characters, read against each other, engender various forms of implication.

## Implication and Responsibility

Though the relation between Dana and Rufus is arguably at the core of *Kindred*, it is Dana and Kevin who most clearly represent different forms of implication. Both being transported from the twentieth to the nineteenth century, the two initially find themselves facing a similar challenge of adapting to an unfamiliar situation. However, almost immediately, it becomes clear that they have very different “roles” to play in the past (Butler 65). As miscegenation is illegal in nineteenth-century Maryland, Dana and Kevin decide to go along with Rufus’ assumption that Dana is Kevin’s slave. Consequently, Kevin is invited onto the Weylin plantation as a guest, while Dana is directed to the slave quarters.

The couple’s experiences from this point on diverge wildly. As Dana witnesses the beating of an enslaved man, she ponders that “Kevin was in the main house somewhere, probably not even aware of what was happening” (97). Twice, she finds that he “looked at [her] strangely”: first when she approaches him “without any sign of the eagerness or relief [she] felt at having him nearby again” (79), and again when she responds bitterly to Kevin’s excitement about the possibility of heading West that “[t]hat’s where they’re doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!” (103). In both cases, Kevin completely fails to recognize the danger Dana and other nonwhite people face under the rule of white supremacy. From his perspective, the nineteenth century “could be a great time to live in” (103). For the same reason, he suggests going to Baltimore to find work; Dana proposes Philadelphia instead, reminding him that Pennsylvania is a free state. His remark that he “should have thought of that” (89) only drives home the fact that he *was* able to forget it, whereas Dana—who is directly affected by the laws of slavery—never could. Kevin embodies a form of what Rothberg calls the “beneficiary” position, benefitting from racial inequality without active investment in it (*Implicated Subject* 15). Up to this point, however, his implication is primarily synchronic within the nineteenth century, and does not yet make a statement about his positionality in his own present.

If the comparison between Dana and Kevin signifies a distinction between the implication of contemporary Black and White Americans in slavery, the respective parallels between Dana and Alice and between Kevin and Rufus expand on the diachronic dimension of their implication. At first glance, Dana and Alice share very similar subject positions in the nineteenth century. Both are born free—though Dana’s agency in the twentieth century significantly exceeds Alice’s in the nineteenth—but are brought into slavery as soon as the situation allows it. In fact, the two are so alike that Rufus comes to think of them as “[o]ne woman. Two halves of a whole” (287). Kevin and Rufus, meanwhile, are also placed in comparable positions, with Rufus inheriting his father’s slave plantation and Kevin hesitantly taking up the role of ‘master’ to Dana. Yet the novel soon complicates these identifications.

Despite their resemblances, Dana and Alice are ultimately not in the same position. In fact, Dana becomes deeply implicated in Alice’s eventual enslavement and rape. It is her intervention in a fight between Rufus and Isaac, Alice’s husband, that paves the way for Alice to be sold to Rufus. Even if the alternative—letting Isaac kill Rufus—might have proven worse for Alice in the end, Dana’s actions irrevocably involve her in the events that follow. The same is true for her unwilling role in preparing Alice to become Rufus’ concubine. Though Dana insists that she “can’t advise” Alice, and seeks to reinvest her with agency by telling her that “[i]t’s your body,” Alice refuses to accept Dana’s bid to avoid responsibility for helping Rufus, replying that her own body is “[n]ot mine,” but Rufus’s (183). Furious at Dana’s attempts to remove herself from the situation, she adds that “[t]hat’s what you for – to help white folks keep niggers down” (184). To Alice, at least, Dana is not (just) a victim, but also a perpetrator.

Dana’s knowledge of the future sets her apart from Alice from the start. She knows that Alice must bear Rufus a daughter in order for Dana to be born, a fact that constantly shapes her attitude and actions. Knowing that the past must play out as it has for her present to be brought into existence, Dana chooses to work within the established order. She becomes what Rothberg calls a “perpetuator,” being “implicated in the production of further injustice” (*Implicated Subject* 120). Interestingly, Rothberg also uses this term to refer to “citizens and taxpayers who bear political responsibility” for the actions of their nation (145). *Kindred* puts a slightly different spin on this: as a twentieth-century American citizen, Dana is implicated in slavery because it has made her life as it is possible. This does not, however, mean that the novel condones slavery or depicts it as a positive thing; other futures might have been possible without Transatlantic slavery, and Dana’s is simply the one that actually came to be. Rather, through Dana, Butler illustrates the material endebtedness of all people in the present to everything that came before—the good as well as the bad.

The relation between Kevin and Rufus is in many ways an inversion of Dana and Alice’s. Where Dana presents a distorted version of Alice’s victim role, Kevin complicates the perpetrator role that Rufus embodies by striving to use his privilege for the betterment of the oppressed. Meanwhile, Alice and Rufus themselves also deconstruct the homogeneity of their own assigned subject positions: Rufus is the victim of violence at the hands of his father (Butler 20), creating a disconcerting overlap between him and the people who eventually become his slaves, while Alice resists oppression by running away, refusing to become complacent to a system designed to dehumanize her, and eventually taking her own life to escape it (see Levec 545). In both cases there is a parallel to Dana, who is also beaten by her caretakers as a child (Butler 224) and also risks suicide to escape (267). None of these characters can be definitively designated as victim, perpetrator, or even as one particular type of implicated subject. They display different levels of agency at different moments throughout the novel, which causes them to constantly shift between positionalities. Despite the undeniable influence of race, gender, and even temporal context on each of their lives, the resemblances between these four characters make the case that these structures are not all-powerful, and that some form of understanding is possible between people in spite of the sense of alienation they impose.

Interestingly, Kevin’s tie to Rufus is one of association by marriage, not lineage. Dana is the one who is directly descended from slave owners, and thus the one who would be implicated in slavery in the biological or familial sense on the side of victim as well as perpetrator. The question of lineage has often been invoked in debates about reparation, the argument being that those who are not descended from slave owners cannot bear responsibility for slavery, and that any questions of reparation should be confined to perpetrators and victims only (Rothberg, *Implicated Subject* 60). Within Rothberg’s framework, however, family inheritance constitutes only one form of implication. By removing descendance from the equation in Kevin’s case, *Kindred* directs the reader to consider other implicated subject positions. Indeed, through Kevin, the novel is able to reflect with particular poignancy on both synchronic and diachronic forms of implication.

Even before Kevin is brought to the past, he becomes implicated in it. Dana, on her second return home, in her panic mistakes Kevin for the patroller who was assaulting her, and scratches his face. Having “the face of a [White] man” is enough for Kevin to take the patroller’s place: though he has nothing to do with the assault, his physical presence reignites Dana’s fear. Flagel has reflected on the way *Kindred* uses the symbolism of wounds rather than scars to signify unhealed trauma and unrepaired injustice (232). Kevin’s wound, then, represents how the past can still inflict injury on the present. The structures of racist violence that Dana has just experienced in the nineteenth century find resonance in her own time, to the point that Kevin is literally ‘marked’ by them.

In regard to Kevin, much more than herself, Dana demonstrates an intuitive understanding of synchronic implication. Even though she knows she is safer with Kevin by her side, she instantly “wished he were back home” when she accidentally brings him into the past with her (Butler 58). She “didn’t want this place [the past] to touch him except through me” (58). Merely being in the nineteenth century, she believes, is enough to implicate him in the systems of oppression that structure society at that time. “A place like this,” she later reflects, as she considers the possibility of accidentally stranding Kevin through her own involuntary return, “would endanger him in a way I didn’t want to talk to him about. … [I]f he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here” (80). Though she is not saying Kevin would willingly partake in slavery, she does suggest that there is no way for him to live in the nineteenth century without becoming indirectly involved in the practice, if only because surviving would mean to some extent accepting its existence. “The place, the time, would either kill him outright or mark him somehow,” Dana muses (80).

The past does indeed mark Kevin once more, both figuratively and literally. Back home after his five-year stay in the past, Dana finds that “[h]e had a slight accent …. Nothing really noticeable, but he did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin” (Butler 210). Soon after, his “closed and ugly” expression again reminds her of Weylin (215). Kevin also has an unexplained “jagged scar across his forehead” (203). Unlike the fresh wound Dana inflicts on his face earlier in the novel, this one is already healed, which indicates—following Flagel’s distinction between wounds and scars—that Kevin has now found a way to leave the past behind. Hardened by his experiences, however, he has changed, as Dana feared, subtly becoming more similar to Rufus and his father. At the same time, Dana is relieved to confirm that Kevin spent his time in the past “helping slaves to escape” (214). Kevin is still implicated—‘marked’—but his material efforts to deconstruct the system of slavery to Dana are “enough” to satisfy her (214).

So what do these various forms and levels of implication say about responsibility in the present and the process of reparation? And what moral call does the novel make upon the reader? Against the backdrop of an unfamiliar world, Dana and Kevin form a point of reference for the reader, who goes through the process of familiarization with the past along with these characters. The reader is thus made to identify with the characters from the ‘present.’[[3]](#footnote-4) Consequently, the novel puts the reader in a position of reflection about their own relation to the past. The different ways in which the two become implicated in the nineteenth-century world provide handholds for the reader, without forcing a particular subject position on them. Rather, the novel seeks to create awareness of what it means to engage with the past through narrative, while cognizant of the fact that contemporary people’s identities—like Dana’s and Kevin’s—significantly shape their experience of and place within that narrative. The final section of this thesis further explores the role of (literary) narrative as a mode of historical remembrance in *Kindred*, and the ways in which the novel deals with mediation on a meta-level. Since the reader cannot actually travel back in time the way Dana and Kevin do, and physically interfere in the history of slavery, how does the novel propose contemporary readers engage with the past? And what is the role of literature in working through historical injustice?

## Mediation and Memory

*Kindred* reflects thoroughly on literary remembrance and other forms of memory mediation, particularly positing embodied remembering as an alternative to narrative remembrance. Many critics have foregrounded the novel’s self-reflexive skepticism regarding any form of (literary) representation of slavery. According to Lisa A. Long, for instance, *Kindred* explicitly questions the adequacy of narratives “to convey the fullness of historical experiences” (476). Indeed, the novel is deeply concerned with mediation. Watching the beating of an enslaved black man, Dana comments:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (Butler 33)

Filmic reconstruction of the past falls far short of the physical experience of it: even a child, having lived her brief life in the nineteenth century, can tolerate real violence better than Dana, who has grown up with only representations. Her dismissal of film is interesting in light of contemporary concerns that television violence desensitizes the audience. It rather seems that, to Dana, the contrast between what she knows from the screen and what she now sees happening before her only makes the experience more jarring. Television and film provide a distorted version of the past that distracts from what history was ‘really’ like.

Somewhat paradoxically, literature is also discredited as a useful source of historical knowledge. Flagel remarks that Dana’s criticism of film in the passage above “distracts from the fact that what we are reading is another representation of violence” (236). Through the use of “artificial gestures” such as the word ‘literally,’ and Dana’s explicit positionality as a “twentieth-century spectator” established by her reference to new media, the passage creates a discursive distance from the scene it describes (Flagel 236). And yet, compared to film, “the written word is a privileged representation” (Flagel 236). As the chosen medium of the novel, written text does offer an experience of slavery to the reader, even as the very possibility of providing the full experience in mediated form is rejected. Such ambiguity around literary representation, and the usefulness of textual narrative in remembering the past, continues throughout the novel, at once calling into question and reaffirming the value of literary representation.

Dana and Kevin, while in the present, continuously seek to improve their knowledge of the past through books and other textual sources. After Dana’s second trip to the past—which, to her, takes a few hours—she and Kevin look through “everything [they] had on black history” to find information that might help Dana survive if she is called back again (Butler 46). However, they find “[n]othing,” and Dana comments that she “hadn’t really thought there would be anything in these books” (46). They cannot find, for instance, what a certificate of freedom would have looked like in the nineteenth century, and so they cannot forge one to allow Dana free movement in the past. Not only does this dearth of information show the severe limitations of the historical archive, but it does so on a meta-level; even textual evidence is not actually preserved in textual representations of history. Moreover, the example of the certificate of freedom reiterates the novel’s view of remembrance through narrative: the description of a thing does not constitute access to the thing itself. The awareness that certificates of freedom existed is a poor substitute for the certificate itself. By referencing not the (textual) object, but the textual representation of the object, Butler reminds the reader that they, too, are only facing a description of history and not the real thing.

Occasionally, Dana’s book knowledge about history does have some value. She remembers from “[her] books,” for instance, to “look away” from Rufus’ father so as to not appear “insolent” (Butler 67). On the whole, however, the information she brings with her from the future does little to make her life easier. On her fourth trip to the past, she brings a history book and a map of Maryland, but she is forced by Rufus to burn them both to avoid being seen with them by his father. When Dana later attempts to flee north, she is caught and viciously beaten. She reflects: “I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn’t done me a damned bit of good!” (195). Weylin had told her before that “educated didn’t mean smart,” and she now feels that “he had a point. Nothing in my education or knowledge of the future had helped me escape” (195). The little she knows of history is barely enough to keep her alive on the plantation, and it certainly cannot free her; a fact that, Flagel has noted, counters the conventional (male) slave narrative, in which education and literacy are associated with freedom (228). Moreover, in order to survive, Dana must take on the role of an enslaved woman; this makes any victory of knowledge—such as knowing to avoid a white man’s eyes—a bitter one at best. Flagel goes so far as to argue that Dana’s education “leads her to complacency and acceptance of slavery,” as it brings her to try to reform the Weylin plantation from within, relying on a letter to reunite her with Kevin rather than “do[ing] the work” herself (228-229). All of this can again be taken as a warning not to assume that retrospective knowledge about slavery, attained through books and education, amounts to an experience or real understanding of it.

Instead of narrative, the reader is continually referred to the body as a more valuable site of remembrance (Long 476). Dana’s critique of television is one example of this, evoking senses other than sight—the smell of sweat and the sound of “pleading and praying” (Butler 33)—as well as contextualized, physical experience. In the same vein, it is first-hand, or sometimes second-hand, experience that is most valuable to Dana. She mentions that she “liked to listen to [the enslaved people visiting Sarah’s cookhouse] talk sometimes and … find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive” (99-100). It is remarkable that oral storytelling is so clearly privileged over textual narrative here, since word-of-mouth is also a narrative form of mediation. The situational embeddedness of these encounters, however, differentiates them from written text. The conversations Dana overhears are not aimed at her; unlike most written slave narratives, they are not shaped to suit a political purpose (i.e. abolition). Moreover, there is an immediacy to them that written text can never emulate. Even if Dana does not witness the events being described, she is still observing actual enslaved people going about their lives and, in this sense, seeing their survival in action. Butler notably does not provide any direct dialogue, effecting a kind of absence within presence. Like the certificate of freedom, the only (relative) certainty available to present-day readers is that conversations between enslaved people happened; we cannot know what was said or, as Dana does, learn from their own words and actions “how they survived” (Butler 100).

The passages cited above are indicative of a critical and skeptical stance toward contemporary knowledge of the past. At the same time, the very existence of *Kindred*—and its reliance on sensory-focused “documentary realism” (Flagel 218; see also Levecq 529)—implies that, according to Butler, engaging with history is still worthwhile. The novel does not let the reader forget that the story they are reading is only a distorted and diminished reflection of reality; the information that is emphatically *not* provided is as relevant to this as the creative license Butler takes in (re)imagining the past. And yet, *Kindred* seeks to bodily engage the reader and effect something of a material experience of the events it depicts. The novel thus constitutes at once a warning against prosthetic memory (Landsberg; see Introduction) and an attempt to create it. Literature is privileged as a mode of remembrance over visual media like television, but also over the historical archive and any supposedly objective historiography. If no narrative medium can lay claim to historical or experiential authenticity, literature—as *Kindred* demonstrates by example—has the least pretentions to doing so; and yet it seems able to translate at least something of a historical reality to the reader, however tenuous and provisional. Consequently, literature is posited as a favored medium for reparative remembrance, though only so long as it retains a clear view of its own limitations.

## Conclusion

By combining a historical narrative with a thorough interrogation of time, memory, and mediation, Butler produces a text that can very well be called ‘reparative,’ by Rosello’s definition. Constantly aware of its own inadequacy in replicating the past, and forcing the reader to share that awareness, *Kindred* performs a commemoration of injustice that does not just confront the reader with the dark side of American history, but pushes them to consider their own position within the legacy—in Sharpe’s terms, “the wake”—of slavery. The novel’s own reparative remembering is thus deeply entangled with its reflection on reparation, enabled by the time travel device that directly ties the historical narrative to the question of contemporary implication.

For Rothberg, the main goal of recognizing implication is to make possible new or improved coalitions between different implicated subjects (*Implicated Subject* 20). *Kindred* delivers a similar message. Though the novel resists the idea of true repair after slavery, insisting that no amount of commemoration will ever do justice to historical reality, it still calls for cooperation and suggests that differently positioned people—embodied in Dana and Kevin—can and should search for ways to come to terms with the past together. The novel provides no easy answer to the question of reparation, refusing to posit a simple opposition between White perpetrators and Black victims. No American citizen in the present can wholly avoid the burden of historical slavery. The lines of implication between past and present are complex and multiple, so that nobody living in the United States in the twentieth (or twenty-first) century can claim either a total separation from or a straightforward connection to slavery. And yet, the structural nature of historical injustice in *Kindred*—seen, for instance, in the systems of violence that ties past and present together—emphasizes that, while slavery may be gone, the ways of thinking that made it possible have not disappeared. The past cannot be undone or repaired, but its violent histories should be remembered so that their structural continuance in the present can be recognized and, hopefully, rectified.

# 3. Zetta Elliott’s *Genna & Judah* (2010—)

Zetta Elliott’s young adult series, *Genna & Judah*: *A Wish After Midnight* (*WAM*, 2010) and *The Door at the Crossroads* (*DatC*, 2016), sits in the marginalized space of “SSF [speculative science fiction] featuring Black youth protagonists” (Toliver 2). Situated in “the tradition of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*” (*WAM* back cover), the novels depict two American teenagers unwillingly transported from the present—the early 2000’s—to the Civil War era. Due to external circumstances, the novels were published twelve years apart. This means, most importantly, that *DatC* was published and partly written during what Elliott herself calls the “era of Black Lives Matter” (*DatC* “Acknowledgments”), while *WAM* precedes it. Elliott states that the social developments around Black Lives Matter have significantly influenced the shape of the sequel, resulting in a “grim” tone and new considerations about the central themes of “home, community, and belonging” that she ascribes to her work (“Acknowledgments”). Indeed, the novels differ in form as well as tone. *WAM* is divided into three parts and is narrated entirely by one protagonist, Genna. In *DatC,* chapters are narrated by either Genna or Judah, her boyfriend. Judah’s narrative initially overlaps with *WAM*, whereas Genna’s narrative in *DatC* continues directly from the end of *WAM*. These two storylines eventually merge, and the remainder of the story is told chronologically from alternating perspectives. In this chapter, I analyze how Elliott’s novels are engaged in and reflect on reparative practice through four main themes: education, identity, progress, and memory. Through these themes, I investigate how literature relates to reparation in the BLM era, and the place of young people in this relationship.

The first part of *A Wish after Midnight* is entirely set in the year 2000, and describes Genna’s life as a Black teenager in Brooklyn, New York. She lives in a small apartment with her mother and three siblings, their father having returned to his home country of Panama. Her relationship with her older sister and brother—Toshi and Rico—is difficult; even more so when Rico is arrested and Toshi runs away from home with her boyfriend. Genna, a good student and her mother’s “best bet” at academic success (21), has to take on much of the housework, as well as care for her baby brother, Tyjuan. After an argument with her mother, however, Genna leaves home and makes a wish for a different life at a fountain in her favorite garden. In the second part of the novel, Genna is stranded in the Brooklyn of late 1862 as a result of her wish. Narrowly escaping a pair of slave catchers, she is brought to an orphanage in Weeksville, a free Black community close to the city. Genna spends a few days recovering from her inexplicable injuries, then she is placed in the service of White abolitionist Doctor Brant and his wife. Working as the nanny for the Brants’ son, Henry, and later as Dr. Brant’s assistant, Genna quickly adapts to her new context. She befriends Mattie, a runaway slave living in the orphanage; the Brants’ Black housekeeper, Nannie; a young Irish-American girl named Martha; and Paul Easterly, the White-passing son of a wealthy merchant. Months later, she unexpectedly encounters Judah among a group of escaped slaves from the South. It is revealed that he followed her into the past, but was captured and sold into slavery right away. As the two struggle to reconnect, tensions around the Civil War draft—and the possibility for rich men to buy their way out of it—grow more and more pronounced. When the New York Draft Riots of 1863 finally break out, Genna and Judah flee from an angry mob together. However, Genna is attacked, and she finds herself traveling through time once more. A short third section describes Genna’s return home on September 10th, 2001.

In *The Door at the Crossroads*, Genna has returned to her own time, only to be faced with the 9/11 attacks and their fallout. She settles back into her old life, but is determined to find her way back to Judah in the 1800s, looking to “black magic” for answers (174). She reluctantly accepts the help of Judah’s friend, Peter, whose family practices Haitian Vodou. Meanwhile, a second narrative describes Judah’s experiences in the past. His story is subtly framed as a slave narrative—or a rough version of it—presented to Reverend Garnet, a Black abolitionist who invites Judah to become a public speaker and win support for abolition. After Genna successfully travels back in time, she reconnects with Judah only to find that he is no longer interested in her or their present. Distraught, Genna focuses instead on helping her community in the nineteenth century, and starts a relationship with Paul Easterly. At the urging of Peter, whom she has accidentally brought into the past, she agrees to return to the present so that he can go home. Paul agrees to accompany her. When she opens the “portal” once more, however, Genna unintentionally pulls along Judah as well as her friend Mattie’s little brother. The novel ends with her abstractly promising to “make it right” (393).

Though the debate about reparation in the United States has traditionally been associated primarily with financial reimbursement (Araujo 3), current activist movements are also concerned with the non-material side of reparation. In 2016, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) published a list of reparation demands “for past and continuing harms.” While this list does make reference to material compensation in the form of “access and control of food sources, housing, and land,” as well as access to and financial support for education and “a minimum livable income for all Black people,” it also cites acknowledgment of the “lasting impacts of slavery” at the national level and “mandated school curriculums” addressing slavery as key components of reparation (“Reparations”). Reparation, moreover, constitutes only part of the platform’s demands; these also include reforms of the prison system, changing laws around drug use, and self-government of Black communities. State-sanctioned violence against Black people formed the catalyst for the formation of the M4BL coalition in 2015, and much of the platform is dedicated to opposing violence against Black communities and especially vulnerable people—women; queer people; youths; disabled people—within them (“Vision for Black Lives”). Elliott’s *DatC* (and to a lesser extent, *WAM*) is a product of this context of heightened awareness of structural violence and increasingly vocal opposition to it. Though the novels are set just after the turn of the millennium, Elliott draws heavily on themes relevant to the current social context, from school curriculums to intersectional identities. Her novels can thus be seen as a reflection of the ‘BLM-era,’ but also, as I will demonstrate, as a contribution to activism in its own right.

## (Hybrid) Identity and Reconciliation

Elliott’s novels can be read as a coming-of-age story, depicting the protagonists’—especially Genna’s—evolving understanding of her identity, and providing resources for the reader to think about their own positionality as well, particularly within the contemporary context of racial (as well as ethnic, gendered, and religious) conflict. Race is a major, though not the only, factor in Genna’s self-conception. She is surrounded by people with varying ideas about race relations and the best way for Black people to position themselves in contemporary (and nineteenth-century) America. A big influence on Genna’s worldview is her mother, who “doesn’t like white people” (*WAM* 28), even maintaining that “white folks are evil” (38). She is adamant that Genna not befriend any White person or take jobs from them, insisting that Genna will “understand why” when she’s older (28). At the same time, she tells Genna to ignore her Latin heritage (5) and to “talk white” (50) to make life easier for herself. Genna’s mother considers herself fully American and prefers the United States over “a Third World Country [like Panama]” (5), but takes a pessimistic view of the options of nonwhite citizens, suggesting that they must either adapt to White norms or be excluded. This point of view refuses hybrid identity as a meaningful form of social existence, and, reasoning from a strictly binary notion of identity, holds reconciliation between Black and White people to be impossible.

Genna’s mother only forms the starting point for exploring identity and race relations in the novel, and her pessimism is quickly contrasted with a nearly opposite perspective. Contrary to her mother’s orders, Genna does strike up a friendly relationship with Mr. Christiansen, a Danish immigrant whom she meets in the garden. Though she deems him “a really sweet man” (*WAM* 28), there is a deep disconnect between their views of society, reminiscent of that between Kevin and Dana in *Kindred*. Mr. Christiansen repeatedly “talks about America being ‘the land of opportunity’ or ‘the great melting pot’” (28), whereas Genna finds that, at least in New York, “people are separate” (27). Genna ascribes their different experiences to race. “Maybe he just sees what he wants to see,” she says of Mr. Christiansen; “Maybe he can do that ’cause he’s old and white” (29). The scene emphasizes that having an outsider status in society is not necessarily linked to immigration: Mr. Christian is an immigrant while Genna is not. Yet, Genna also emphasizes that race is not the only divisive factor in contemporary society. Wondering “what happens to the folks who get left at the bottom of the [melting] pot,” she comments that it is “[n]ot just black people” who fail to see the promised “opportunity” realized (28). Genna’s friendship with Mr. Christiansen symbolically demonstrates that positive relations between Black and White Americans are not unimaginable, but it simultaneously illustrates the problems of communication—resulting from differences in privilege and, consequently, life experience—that must be overcome before any true reconciliation, or process of establishing harmony between (in simplest terms) Black and White Americans, can take place.

A tension between celebrating diversity and hybridity on the one hand, and recognizing material differences between people in different positionalities on the other, runs through the novels. In *WAM*, Genna gets to know a White woman named Hannah, with whom she bonds over their shared interest in psychiatry when their children—Genna’s brother, Tyjuan, and Hannah’s son, Chad—take a liking to each other. Without her mother’s knowledge, Genna starts babysitting for Hannah every week. But though Genna keeps insisting that “Hannah and all white people” shouldn’t be “lump[ed] … together” (37-38), she is still upset when Hannah tries to give her clothes as well as her usual payment. “Sometimes people … give *too much*, ’cause they want to fix all your problems,” she remarks (37). More forgiving than her mother, Genna refuses to make generalizations about either herself or others, wanting “people to accept [her] for who [she is], with [her] own ways, and [her] own ideas, and [her] own future that’s separate from everything else that’s going on” (38). Through Genna, Elliott is telling her readers, especially young Black people, that they can and should claim agency for their own identity, while acknowledging that this is a difficult process in a society eager to force a predetermined identity on them.

Judah’s perspective on African-American identity is radically different from Genna’s. A large part of the two novels is dedicated to exploring their respective viewpoints, and the consequences these have for imagining a process of reconciliation between Black and White Americans. While Genna prefers the label ‘African-American,’ Judah is insistent that all Black people “come from Africa” and are “African” (56). Genna’s dream is to go to college and become a psychiatrist, but Judah, following the imperative of Sankofa, wants to go to Africa and “find out the truth” about “what’s going on” there (57). To Judah, being African is irreconcilable with being American; to Genna, on the other hand, these two identities cannot be separated.

Roots are a frequently used metaphor for origin and identity. Elliott links this figurative language to Genna’s decision to grow her hair into dreadlocks, like Judah does. Genna is taught to care for her “baby locks” as though they are seeds that must be cultivated (*WAM* 54-55). However, Judah also tells her that “it’s not enough to just care for [her] locks on the outside”; she has to learn about African history and the Rastafari religion as well (55). The seed symbolizes a point of origin, and the comparison with dreadlocks—associated in the Rastafari movement with Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I—directs Genna and the reader to Africa. Genna, though, quickly appropriates the metaphorical language to describe her own position on identity: “I’m not sure which matters more—where the seed comes from, or where it takes root and grows” (57).

Elliott’s self-stated mission is to represent marginalized identities. She does this in her novels, first of all, by discouraging a homogenous perception of racial or ethnic groups. The differences in opinion between Genna and Judah about their own identities contribute to a more nuanced view of what it means to be “Black,” while Elliott’s depiction of discrimination against Irish immigrants by other White people in the nineteenth century helps deconstruct the meaning of “White.” Elliott further de-homogenizes the category of ‘Black’ by depicting a number of hybrid identities, with most of her characters belonging to multiple marginalized groups or deriving their sense of identity from more than one source in another way: Genna is Hispanic on her father’s side; Judah belongs to the Rastafari religion; Peter is gay as well as a Vodou initiate; Paul passes as White but identifies as Black. For readers who identify with these characters, such representation can be validating and lead to an improved view of their own culture; for other readers, engaging with diverse representations may lead to greater tolerance and a more positive attitude toward minority groups, as stereotypes are contested and the White reader is removed from their usually central and privileged position(Short 293). In this sense, Elliott’s focus on hybridity contributes to the goal of opening up the literary field to alternative voices. The deconstruction of the Black/White binary also complicates the notion of reparation, however, as it becomes increasingly less clear who can demand reparations and who must pay them. Genna’s struggle to give a place to her Panamanian heritage, suppressed most of her life by her father’s absence and her mother’s insistence on identifying as Black only, goes some way to explore diversity beyond as well as within the essentialist categories of Black and White. Elliott does not carry this investigation very far, though; Genna’s self-identification as African-American still excludes her Hispanic background, and the focus remains on pluralizing Black identity. The result is not an attack on the concept of reparation, but rather a tentative interrogation of it, asking questions that are not answered with any certainty, at least at this point in the series’ publication. At the same time, it remains clear throughout the novels that there *is* something to repair in the wake of slavery, making these questions about reparation a matter of ‘who’ and ‘how,’ not ‘if’.

Contemporary structures of identity in Elliott’s novels cannot be separated from history, with slavery being centralized as a major influence, and from the categories produced by past and ongoing systems of inequality and discrimination. Elliott posits the deconstruction of identity stigmatization, both inter- and intra-cultural, as a necessary part of reconciliation: it is in releasing essentialist notions of identity that people can come closer together. Conversely, identities that are imposed by others, Elliott shows, lead to societal division and can reinforce structures of oppression. She invites her young audience to freely explore and develop their own identities beyond uniform categories, and urges them to resist stereotypes about others as well. Simultaneously, by placing a conflict about identity—Genna’s acceptance of hybridity versus Judah’s insistence on “sides” (*DatC* 315)—at the heart of the series, and giving space to both points of view, Elliott emphasizes that alternative perspectives should be respected, even when they seem irreconcilable with one’s own. She acknowledges that reconciliation and reparation both are complicated and long-term processes. With the series itself open-ended, at least at this time, she presents no ultimate solution to the opposing viewpoints Genna and Judah embody. Whether true reconciliation is possible therefore remains uncertain, though Genna’s final promise to “make it right” (*DatC* 393) supports a hopeful interpretation. Rather, Elliott places value on the effort of trying to understand the other as a path to repair.

## Progress and Responsibility

The past, to Genna, is a world separate from her present. During her first stay in the past, she assumes that time continues in “the Brooklyn [she] know[s]” at the same pace it does for her in 1863, musing that “folks will be getting ready to celebrate the Fourth of July [while] here we’re still stuck in the middle of winter” (*WAM* 130). She later revises this notion, finding that “four days in [the nineteenth century] equals one day” in the twenty-first (*DatC* 42). On her second journey, facing traumatic memories of the riots, she reminds herself to “*Anchor yourself in the present moment*” (*DatC* 291)—this being her current present of 1863. This understanding of time opposes linearity insofar as it refuses to prioritize either time period as *present* (see my discussion of LaCroix in Chapter 2). Even if Genna sometimes uncritically imposes twenty-first century views onto the nineteenth century—for instance, explaining to her friend Mattie that they are both *African-American*, despite that term not being used until the 1980’s (*WAM* 109)—she fully accepts 1863 as her current reality. On the other hand, Genna’s repeated references to the past as a world separate from her own time create a cognitive distance between these eras that clashes with the sense of continuity Elliott otherwise establishes.

As I have noted above, Genna and Judah take up contrasting positions on Black identity. This conflict of opinions extends to their views on social progress. In *WAM*, Genna takes a relatively optimistic perspective, reflecting for instance that Black people have far more options for work in her own time than in the nineteenth century (213). Judah, though, insists that nothing significant has changed in American society in the years between 1863 and 2001. “I know how the story ends,” he tells Genna. “A hundred years from now black people will still be asking to be treated like human beings. … And they’ll still be no better off than they were before” (*WAM* 202). Consequently, Genna is eager to find a way to return to their own time, but Judah is content to stay in the past. In *DatC*, however, Genna becomes increasingly disillusioned. When she returns to her own time at the end of *WAM*, she is transported from the 1863 draft riots to September 10, 2001; clearly an intentional choice on Elliott’s part. Watching chaos erupt around the city the next day, Genna finds that “[t]he fires that burned in 1863 are burning once again. … Nothing has changed—not the hatred, not the killing. I have traveled more than a hundred years, and nothing has changed” (*DatC* 2). The aftermath of 9/11 and the draft riots continue to form a parallel throughout *DatC*, linking questions of race and racism to those of immigration and religious violence in the present (outrage against Muslims and people from the Middle East in the wake of 9/11) and the past (conflicts between Black, White, and Irish social groups in Brooklyn). Genna’s linking of these events, calls to mind Nuti’s framework of long-term structures (Chapter 1): even though she is talking about conflicts between different social groups and in quite different circumstances, Genna perceives—and the novel posits—these conflicts as the result of the same underlying structures of racism and social inequality.

The benefit of applying Nuti’s framework here is that it accounts for change as well as stagnation, validating Genna’s despondency without confirming Judah’s bitter insistence that Black people in the present are “no better off.” Genna’s therapist tries to shift her somber view of history, asking whether “anything positive ever happen[ed] in the past” and suggesting that American society has “made progress” (132). This frustrates Genna, who retorts that the societal response to 9/11 shows continuing hatred toward nonwhite people. However, her therapist slowly leads her to acknowledge that she is feeling “angry and afraid” (133), and tells her that this is a logical reaction to recent events but that it is “important […] to keep on living” (134). Likewise, she suggests that Genna’s fear of not being believed is reasonable, but if she wants to recover from her difficult experiences, she must find a way to connect to the people around her again, to “be honest with [her]self and with others about how [she] really feel[s]” (133). Their conversation concludes with the therapist saying that “I think you have an interesting story to tell, and I’d really like to hear it” (136). Genna’s experiences are made to matter through her testimony, and she matches the therapists’ willingness to listen by agreeing to return “one more time” (136). This outcome of their exchange shows, firstly, that Genna’s gloomy outlook is not a definitive one, but part of a developing understanding of the world around her, fitting with the novel’s coming-of-age theme. Secondly, it implies that remembering injustice or trauma can help a victim recover, but only when done by choice, in a safe environment; a notion I return to in the next section.

When she returns to 1863 to find Judah, Genna intends to stay in the past with him, either moving to Africa as they planned in the first book or settling down in the United States. This plan falls apart when Judah refuses to reconnectwith her, as he believes she is able to control her time travel and left him stranded in the past on purpose. Meanwhile, Peter puts pressure on Genna to find a way back to their present. As the narrative progresses, Genna starts to consider that she might be better off in her own time. When Paul asks her what “the world [is] like in the future,” she replies that “[a lot of things are different…but some things are the same. … There are things I can do in the twenty-first century that I could never do here and now” (339). While still critical, Genna gradually adopts a more nuanced view of societal improvement that allows for both positive development and structural stagnation.

The juxtaposition of narration from Genna and Judah’s first-person perspective allows Elliott to posit both of their viewpoints as valid responses to the world around them, even if she takes a more critical stance toward Judah’s worldview. The latter becomes clear in several ways. Many of Genna’s friends—characters presented to the reader as sympathetic—are distrustful of him. Furthermore, Judah’s thinking grows increasingly rigid, to the point that he himself acknowledges that he prefers living in the past because “everything’s black and white. Makes it easier to take sides” (315). His rough dismissal of Genna and continued assertions that she “only thinks about herself” (314), contrary to the way she is characterized in her own chapters, further serve to discredit his perspective. His rejection of Peter, his best friend, for being gay is likely to put a wedge between Judah and many contemporary readers; particularly those interested in the themes of identity and belonging with which Elliott’s novels are concerned. Finally, of the last six chapters, only one is focalized through Judah. The series thus both opens and closes with Genna’s viewpoint, (re)establishing her as the primary protagonist. Nevertheless, Elliott does not dismiss Judah’s point of view entirely: while she shows how his choices and beliefs distance him from the people around him and ultimately lead him to give up on the present (now his future), she also depicts Judah successfully integrating himself into the abolitionist movement and doing valuable work there.

Elliott ultimately does not imply that there has been no progress in American society, but rather that some things have changed while other—some rather major—things have not. One way to read these novels, then, is as an exploration of what these continuities despite (or within) change mean for contemporary society’s relationship with, and responsibility for, its past. Should people be mindful of the ways society has improved, or does this detract from their sense of responsibility for the injustices that are still ongoing? Does the recognition of historical injustice as structural have to lead to resentment—as it seems to do for Judah, and initially for Genna—or can it also be a source of action and cooperation? And finally, who should be held accountable for structural injustice?

One way in which Elliott addresses the theme of responsibility is through depictions of the ‘white savior’ ideology; a contemporary form of Rudyard Kipling’s “White Man’s Burden” (1899), notably reimagined as the “White Savior Industrial Complex” by Teju Cole (2012). This ideology describes a tendency to privilege the “sentimental needs” of White people within efforts to achieve justice for nonwhite people, to the detriment of justice as such (Cole). Hannah, the woman for whom Genna babysits, shows tendencies of this complex by trying to help Genna beyond what she is comfortable with, offering free books and clothes on top of Genna’s agreed-upon salary. Though Genna recognizes Hannah’s good intentions, she also “get[s] the feeling [Hannah] wishes [Genna] was more messed up” so that she could “do more” (36)—in order, Elliott implies, to feel better about herself. In assuming responsibility beyond what she is being asked for, Hannah inadvertently deprives Genna of agency and reinforces the unequal relations that she seeks to undo.

In the past, the Brants even more poignantly display the white savior ideology. Talking about the Emancipation Proclamation, Mrs. Brant confesses that while she is “thankful” for its passing, “I miss the early days of agitation. … I especially miss those mock auctions Reverend Beecher used to perform. Nothing stirred my soul quite so much as seeing a poor wretch up there on the stage beside him, cowering as he took the bids” (146). Her nostalgic and condescending tone clashes with her proclaimed distaste for slavery and contributions to abolition, exacerbated by her claim that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is “so moving, and *such* a realistic portrayal of slavery in the South” (147). Mrs. Brant turns the abolition movement into a spectacle for her own enjoyment, rather than a matter of principle, embodying Cole’s assertion that “[t]the White Savior Industrial Complex is not about justice. It is about having a big emotional experience that validates privilege.”

The integrity of Dr. Brant, initially a sympathetic character (unlike his wife, who is immediately established as an antagonist), is similarly called into question. Genna is furious to learn that, despite his kindness toward her, Dr. Brant has an extremely condescending view of both Black people and women (*WAM* 164-165). Moreover, Dr. Brant pays for another man to take his place as a soldier in the Civil War. The novel is ambiguous about Brant’s reason for avoiding the draft. On the one hand, he is occupied tending to the sick and wounded at home. Genna mentions that he is “one of the best doctors in Brooklyn” (*WAM* 180) and that he cares for the poor without payment. When a large group of sick escaped slaves arrives in Weeksville, Brant spends most of his time helping them. On the other hand, the angry mob accuses him, not unreasonably, of cowardice because he has sent someone else to fight in his stead (240).

Mrs. Brant’s attitude toward abolition exemplifies the anti-reparations argument that White people as a group cannot be held accountable for slavery, because some of them supported abolition and helped effect emancipation, ostensibly absolving them of responsibility (see Young 177 for an example of such an argument). Her melodramatic monologue makes this standpoint appear ridiculous, suggesting that at least for some, supporting abolition was merely a performance that allowed White Americans to cast off implication in slavery and instead posit themselves as heroic figures. Her husband’s words and the discrepancy between his stated belief in equality and his refusal to physically fight for it similarly call into question the genuineness of his care for nonwhite people. This image is maintained by other depictions of White abolitionists in Elliott’s novels: the “well-dressed White ladies,” for instance, who visit the Brants’ church before “heading south to ‘save’ the poor Benighted Negroes,” as one of Genna’s acquaintances says derisively (*DatC* 295). Meanwhile, Elliott foregrounds the often-overlooked efforts of Black and Native American people to bring about abolition, rectifying the historical record and restoring agency to those historically deprived of it.

Elliott does not simply designate all White people as perpetrators or all nonwhite people as victims but, like Butler, gives room to a broad spectrum of what Rothberg would call implicated subject positions. At the decisive moment, both of the Brants do prove themselves true supporters of the abolitionist cause. When an angry mob threatens to break into their neighborhood, Mrs. Brant refuses to hide, insisting that “I have *my* duty … and it is to safeguard our child and our home” with a Union flag over the door (220). To Genna’s amazement, Mrs. Brant agrees to take in both Martha—whose Black boyfriend has been murdered by the mob—and a family of Black refugees without protest. Meanwhile, Dr. Brant is out in Weeksville tending to those who have been wounded by the mob, at great risk to himself and with the added necessity of leaving his wife and child behind. On the flip side, Elliott shows that Black people also engage in discriminatory practices: Judah is exceedingly derogatory toward Irish immigrants (*WAC* 214); Paul faces prejudice for being too ‘White’ (172); and in Genna’s own time, her Black classmates assault a girl for wearing a head scarf (*DatC* 159). Elliott’s goal is of course not to point the finger at Black people, but to present a more nuanced account of accountability for social problems and to show how frameworks of discrimination—based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, age, etc.—can intersect. The latter, especially, takes her work beyond Butler’s narrower matrix of race and gender, proffering an entangled network of multidirectional responsibility grounded in twenty-first century identity politics.

## Memory and Trauma

Reparation is generally understood as a societal or collective process. Yet, as many critics of current reparative efforts have noted, there has been an unfortunate disregard for the local and personal within these efforts, with top-down processes being enforced on individuals who may not be prepared to accept (that form of) reparation (Mueller-Hirth and Oyola 5-6). In bringing historical remembrance into the personal realm, as at its core an individual practice, Elliott touches on the imposed time frame of many such institutional reparative processes (see Chapter 1) and constitutes reparation—or perhaps, *recovery*, emphasizing the individual rather than the relational—as a process that is as much personal as it is communal. Despite her “mission” to create space for marginalized stories (*WAM* “Preface”), her novels express the message that “no one has the right to make you talk” and that “[m]emories are sacred—you respect them or you leave them alone” (*WAM* 132). Commemoration, then, should only happen when those affected are ready for it. Like reparation, commemoration is usually considered a communal affair. However, Elliott stresses that the act of public remembering as such, while important, does not supersede the needs of those involved in the commemoration. This is demonstrated most clearly in Judah’s reluctant decision to become a spokesperson for abolition. His acquaintance Reverend Garnet asks him to become “a witness … in the court of public opinion,” testifying to his experiences of slavery (*DatC* 3). Distraught over having killed a White man during his escape, Judah has refused to share his story with Genna in *WAM*, reiterating that reparation—here in the form of testifying—should not be hurried or forced. *DatC* centralizes Judah’s testimony, framing Judah’s narrative as a rough written draft of what will eventually become a speech. Months after the events took place, it seems Judah has become ready to partake in public commemoration, though he finds the process of narrating his experiences exceedingly difficult. Genna’s meeting with her therapist, discussed above, similarly expresses a need for patience when it comes to recovery.

Reconceiving reparation as recovery here is particularly meaningful, since it moves away from reparation as a tool for reconciliation—that is, a process in which victim and perpetrator come together—and toward a more insular form of repair that centralizes only the victim as an agential and self-reliant social actor, dependent not (just) on reparative gestures from the perpetrator but on support and healing from within their own community. This means that reparation cannot be seen as merely a stepping stone toward reconciliation, as I have approached it thus far, but must also be considered a goal in its own right. Neither, however, does Elliott return to the older definition of reparation as restoration; that is, an attempt to revive an earlier state of being (see Walker 1-2). Instead, she posits reparation and reconciliation as partly overlapping processes, each potentially contributing to and sometimes depending on the other, but still moving in subtly different directions.

 The themes of memory and trauma are connected through Genna’s interest in psychiatry, reinforcing the framework of recovery. Her (limited) knowledge of psychological terminology allows her to frame some of her experiences in medical terms. For instance, finding her friend drunk in a brothel in *DatC*, she tells Dr. Brant that “Martha was self-medicating …. She used alcohol to block out her memory of the riots” (287). Similarly, she self-diagnoses her own response to the riots as PTSD (291). Ironically, in the twenty-first century, Genna’s continuing desire to engage with the past after her return is pathologized by her mother and teachers. She is made to see a therapist, reassured by her mother that “she’s a Black woman” and “can help [Genna] understand why [she’s] so—interested in the past” (102-103). The desire to remember alienates Genna from the people around her; especially her mother, who is eager to “try to go back to the way things were” (25). Genna herself, meanwhile, is highly aware of the importance of remembering, both for working through individual trauma and for dealing with history productively.

In conversation with her therapist, Genna makes a hard distinction between history as a school subject and as reality, reiterating the message that engaging with history should be a personal endeavor separate from institutionalized practices. Genna vehemently denies that history is her “favorite subject,” instead explaining that she “just like[s] learning about the past” (131). When the therapist asks why this is, Genna answers: “You have to know where you come from in order to figure out where you’re going. And some people think if you don’t learn from the past you’ll repeat it.” She adds that “[f]or African Americans [that] wouldn’t be so great” (131). The idea that commemorating unjust history is necessary to avoid repetition is often contrasted with the opposing thought that remembering injustice is itself a form of repetition that can renew old injuries (see Stockwell 121). With Genna, Elliott appears to support the former position, but does invite her readers to think about these conflicting impulses toward remembering and forgetting. Revisiting the past, after all, is not easy for Judah and Genna; especially Judah suffers greatly from his encounter with living history. Moreover, Judah’s eventual choice of past over present threatens to separate him from his loved ones—including Genna—for good. While remembering is certainly important, Elliot thus also warns against giving too much precedence to the past and losing sight of the present and future.

The motif of wounds, prominent in *Kindred*, also appears in *WAM* and *DatC* to make tangible the damaging influence of historical injustice that can last into the present day, and the risk involved in engaging with violent histories. When Genna arrives in the past, her body has inexplicably changed. Her back is badly hurt from what appears to be a severe beating and she has “scars that look like somebody used [her] to stub out their cigar” (*WAM* 130). The White men who find her immediately take her for a runaway slave, remarking that she “smells like a runaway” (85) and that “[a]ny fool can see this gal’s been running” (86). Judah, meanwhile, finds a brand on his ‘past’ body that marks him as an “African.” If wounds are a symbol of being affected by one’s historical context in *Kindred*, in Elliott’s novels they have a slightly different significance, suggesting that a Black body cannot exist in the nineteenth century without being marked by slavery. In a present-day analogy, Genna often remarks she feels like she has “a tattoo on [her] forehead that says ‘ghetto’” that she cannot escape (35).

Though Genna did not actually experience the beating that injured her, she does seem to have inherited her new body’s mental trauma, as her wounds remain painful even after healing over. Dr. Brant states that “scars inflicted on the body heal much faster than the scars inflicted on the soul” (117). The changes to Genna’s body are never explained, but she herself thinks of the body as previously having belonged to someone else; if not a specific person, then an alternate version of herself born in a different time and place. Early in her stay in the past, she “crie[s] for the girl who was tied down and beaten until the skin blistered off her back” (132). This way of thinking of her body is reminiscent of the concept of prosthetic memory (Landsberg; see Introduction): Genna adopts the previous experiences of the new body through the material traces they have left, until the wounds become her own, a part of her identity. At the same time, it is clear that Genna does not actually possess the corresponding memories. As she admits to Paul: “[E]verything I know about slavery I learned in a book” (338). Though returning to the past leaves painful marks on Genna, she ultimately must acknowledge that she still does not know what it was like to be enslaved. By extension, Elliott is commenting on the reader’s prosthetic memory: they, too, must recognize that reading about slavery does not constitute real experience, whether their source is a textbook or literature.

Giving presedence to a framework of recovery over that of reconciliation, Elliott reconfigures reparative remembering as an individual endeavor, with communal processes of commemoration always secondary to personal processes of coming to terms with the past and evaluating one’s relation to history. Such a focus on the individual is perhaps to be expected in a coming-of-age novel. At the same time, it can be seen as reflective of a particularly twenty-first-century individualist perspective on reparation. Additionally, by directly referencing the field of psychology, Elliott at once utilizes the contemporary discourse of medicalization and exposes its limits, rejecting the pathologization of Genna’s interest in the past while legitimizing the conception of slavery and its legacy as a form of trauma. By tying this traumatic experience to the body, both in the form of prosthetic memory and physical wounds, Elliott emphasizes both its specificity—only certain bodies are affected—and its intensity. However, she also stresses the difference between direct and inherited experiences: contemporary bodies and minds may be deeply affected by slavery, but this is not the same as living through it. The resulting perspective on reparation is one that seeks to carefully balance an investment in the past, and its structural survival in the present that demands redress, against the recognition that society has changed and that exessive focus on past harms stands in the way of both personal and societal healing.

## Education and Mediation

Elliott makes explicit her views on the relation between history and literature in the preface to *WAM*. She states that the book “is a work of fiction” and “has elements of both fantasy *and* reality,” warning her readers to “keep that in mind” while reading. She further describes her work as “speculative fiction,” and expresses a hope that “readers will become intrigued by the past and start to investigate and speculate more.” The goal of her novels, then, is in the first place to educate (young) readers about history and to provide incentive for them to further educate themselves. As Elliott notes, “History is written by people who interpret the past, and those interpretations often vary” (*WAM* “Preface”). She is especially interested in acknowledging and giving space to interpretations that differ from the institutional norm; that is, stories focusing on nonwhite characters and cultures. Having struggled with the publication of *The Door at the Crossroads*, Elliott set up her own imprint, Rosetta Press, dedicated to “generat[ing] culturally relevant stories that center children who have been marginalized, misrepresented, and/or rendered invisible in traditional children’s literature” (*DatC* “About the Author”). She is thus concerned with not only the historical, but also the literary archive. She particularly wants to “decoloniz[e] kid lit,” so that more diverse children’s books can be published and, just as importantly, accessed by young readers (*DatC* “Acknowledgments”). Her work pushes against the boundaries of the publishing industry in order to make space for new forms of representation and remembrance, striving to create a more just and equal literary sphere.

On the level of content, investing readers in the past, and particularly in learning about slavery and African-American history, is an important reparative goal of Elliott’s novels, in line with the reparation demands M4BL propagates. Elliott describes many items and practices Genna and Judah encounter in the past in a way that appears primarily educational rather than integral to the story, sometimes disrupting the flow of the narrative to do so. Dr. Brant, for instance, goes out of his way to describe a device used to beat slaves (*WAM* 91-92); another character mentions, that “[m]any former slaves are unsure of their exact age” (101). At other times, Elliott mentions names or concepts without explanation, providing an incentive for the reader to find out more on their own. For example, Judah gives Genna “books about African history and teaches [her] about his faith in Jah, the twelve tribes of Israel, Haile Selassie I, and red, gold, and green” (55); Elliott provides little further information about these things, leaving it up to the reader to learn about them just as Genna does. More subtly, Elliott also pushes her readers to take up their own historical education by leading through example: Genna herself is very interested in “*really* old things” and enjoys learning about the past by walking through the garden (13), while Judah insists that learning about “African history” is essential to understanding one’s identity as a Black person.

Elliott’s educational intentions are demonstrated once more by the addition of a study guide at the end of each novel. A *Wish After Midnight* contains a list of “Discussion Topics” as well as ideas for “Activities and Research.” Next to creative assignments for engaging with the novel, the latter also contains references to films and documentaries, and concepts and historical events for readers to research. Notably, one of the proposed assignments is to find out more about the term “reparations” and to “[w]rite an argument in favor of or in opposition to reparations for descendants of slaves in the United States.” The topic of reparations does not explicitly come up elsewhere in either of the novels, but its inclusion here suggests that Elliott (or her publisher) does consider it relevant to her work. Moreover, she is seeking to familiarize her readers with the concept, and implicitly urges them to use her novel(s) to think about material reparations. Engaging with history creatively is thus presented a productive way of approaching the reparations debate.

Next to supplying information herself, Elliott also reflects on other sites of historical knowledge. Overall, she is more optimistic about historiography than Butler, who continually questions the ability of (narrative) media to represent history in *Kindred* (see Chapter 2). Elliott directs young readers to any available medium to learn about the past. Genna and Judah rely on information gleaned from history books, pop culture (Judah recognizes Harriet Tubman from “t-shirts, and posters”; *DatC* 141), movies, and television to find their way in the nineteenth century. The difference between Butler and Elliott’s works can be partly ascribed to recent expansions of the archive and the increasing availability and accesibility of marginalized histories. Still, like Butler, Elliott finds contemporary knowledge of slavery to be limited. Rather than questioning particular forms of mediation, though, Elliott primarily critiques institutionalized American history education, insisting throughout her novels that American children are not taught properly about slavery and the histories of minorities; a position that echoes and supports M4BL’s demand for a more critical and inclusive history curriculum (“Reparations”). For example, while being taken south, Judah tries “to remember everything [he] learned about slavery in school—which isn’t much” (*DatC* 35). Genna has never “read about [Weeksville] in any of [her] history books,” despite its unique history as a free Black community (181). Elliott touches upon other marginalized histories as well: Judah finds that he can “barely remember the handful of lessons about American Indians from the social studies classes [he] took a lifetime ago. Nothing in school prepared [him] for the life [he’s] living now” (139). And Peter tells Genna that “[g]ay people have been around forever, not that you’d know it from our history textbooks” (377). Accordingly, when Genna returns to the present, she starts to skip classes, instead spending time at home or at the library to do her own research (43). Elliott’s novels suggest that engaging with the past productively and reparatively is not (just) about recognizing the limits of mediation, but about making a personal and individual effort to uncover or give more attention to histories that have been marginalized or suppressed.

None of this means that Elliott does not recognize the limits of mediation, or that she assumes the past is fully accessible. Rather, she proposes that history is best engaged with creatively. When it comes to her own work, she openly acknowledges that she is “not a trained historian” and that she uses elements of past and present to come up with “a different set of possibilities” (*WAM* “Preface”). In a similar vein, the historiographic knowledge available to her characters is rarely a perfect match for historical reality, but does provide a way of getting closer to the past. The library in particular is an important source of knowledge for Genna. It is there she finds a map of “where Weeksville used to be” (*DatC* 148), leading her to the remnants of the old town where she is able to catch a visual and auditory glimpse of the past “other world” (149). Though it is her physical presence in this particular location that truly brings her into contact with the past, evocative of the localized practice of reenactment, Genna also finds that the “old books and maps” in the library are “as close as [she] can get” to 1863 (156). And yet, Genna acknowledges that “what [she’s] looking for”—a way back to the past—“probably isn’t going to be in any book” (161). Genna’s search for a way to travel through time is literal here, but can also be understood figuratively as a comment on the limits of book knowledge when it comes to understanding the past. Engaging with history, then, is shown to be a necessary but inherently limited process, best approached through a combination of archival, creative, and embodied practices of remembrance.

## Readership and Reception

It appears that the *Genna & Juda* novels have not reached a particularly broad audience. Collectively, they have earned barely five hundred ratings on *Goodreads*, and just over a hundred reviews. At the same time, both novels have received a positive rating of respectively 3.63 and 3.91 out of 5 stars on the same website, suggesting that the seemingly limited readership may well be—as Elliott herself has argued—a result of restricted visibility and accessibility. More importantly, several of the people who have engaged with the novels do seem inspired to reflect on their own positionality and the relevance of the story to contemporary society. One review of *WAM* states in no uncertain terms that “this book challenges us all to explore history and our lives more deeply” (Dixie Keyes). Some reviews also share parts of the readers’ process of self-reflection prompted by the book:

Even though I haven't gone through the exact same experience she [Genna] has of feeling like she is straddling two different identities at school vs home, I have black friends who have experienced commentary about "acting too white" and it's unfortunate that we (as a human race) find it difficult to just let people be themselves and pressure people to fit into boxes. (Michelle (driftingsong))

It hasn’t been until the last few years or so that I’ve now just realized that no, I’ve been raised in a society that’s still pretty racist and that I’m guilty of a lot of notions that have been instilled in me. And I say all of this because this is a book that does lay out in incredibly frank terms that while I might be shocked to find out that my worldview *is* still prejudiced (whether or not I’m consciously aware of it), this is what a lot of people have to deal with on a daily basis—not just back in Civil War-era New York City, or in 2001, or even 2008. (Laura Martinelli)

Both of these responses seem to have been posted by White readers who found that the novel contributed to their awareness of ongoing injustice.

Even if Elliott’s works are not widely read, they do, at least, have the potential to elicit reflection on the part of the reader. However, their limited reach does make it highly questionable whether these works can, in their current marginalized position, make a significant impact on the reparations debate. Indeed, their relevance to the debate appears to be modest, shaping the views of just a few people; and yet, their ability to address “in incredibly frank terms” the structural problems of American society also speaks to a greater potential that has not (yet) been realized. Continuing efforts to diversify both the publishing industry and the American public school system may help push novels like these to the forefront.

## Conclusion

Genna and Judah’s divergent paths, and their respective decisions to return to the present and stay in the past, can be understood as a reflection of the way they have experienced the past. Judah, having acutely felt the effects of slavery, is unable to return to his own time. He has relived historical injustice to the point that he has internalized its original trauma, and now finds that he cannot move beyond it. Genna, on the other hand, has been able to observe historical injustice from a relative distance, and while she is also greatly affected by her experiences, she still recognizes herself as an outsider. Consequently, Genna is able to picture herself not only returning to her own time, but living in between past and present, hopeful that she will someday be able to “turn back time” at will (*DatC* 385). Though she is haunted by the past, her wounds have turned to scars by the time she returns home. Judah’s brand mark, on the other hand, is a wound that cannot heal.

Conversely, Genna and Judah’s time travel can also be read as a metaphor for forms of historical remembrance, with Genna and Judah each representing a way of positioning oneself in relation to history and society. Their experiences in the past might then be considered a result of these preconceived positionalities. From this point of view, Elliott’s novels reinforce the position that *too much* remembering, or remembering without retaining a certain distance from the past, can be harmful. By insisting that Black people are “still … no better off than they were before” (*WAM* 202), Judah victimizes himself and internalizes historical injustice in a way that, as Genna’s alternative vantage point demonstrates, may not be necessary.

Elliott validates both of her protagonists’ ways of dealing with history and trauma, to the extent that she shows both to be logical consequences of the characters’ experiences. She demonstrates that people within victimized groups are affected differently by the past, and consequently, that they require different forms and time frames of commemoration and reparation. However, her preference ultimately lies with Genna and the willingness, as much as the ability, to heal and to connect with others. She stresses that neither reparation nor reconciliation between Black and White Americans is something to be accomplished one-sidedly by an unambiguous White perpetrator. Rather, she conceives of reparation and reconciliation as complementary processes that both require the active involvement of a variety of subjects. Moreover, certain aspects of the reparative process—such as commemorative practices and the sharing of personal testimony—are shown to be better suited to a framework of recovery than reconciliation. Through these considerations, Elliott (re)invests victims—whether of psychological or historical trauma—with agency over their own process of healing. This means at once greater empowerment and greater responsibility, as she demands that victims take an active role in reparative practices and, just as importantly, recognize where they themselves may be implicated in injustice. To those positioned as perpetrators or implicated subjects, meanwhile, Elliott assigns responsibility not (just) to undo the harm that has been done, which is often impossible, but to genuinely listen to those who were affected by injustice and take their stories and stated needs as the starting point for any effort at reconciliation.

# 4. Diana Gabaldon’s *Drums of Autumn* (1997)

*Drums of Autumn* (*DoA*) is a bestselling novel more commonly categorized as popular fiction than ‘serious’ literature. Unlike the case studies discussed previously, Gabaldon’s *Outlander* series (1991—) is not essentially about slavery; though, as I will show in this chapter, race and racism are integral and recurring themes. The novels have already received scholarly attention for their treatment of issues such as gender, genre, and genealogy (Cateridge; Frankel; Fulda). The novels’ depiction of slavery, however, has not yet been addressed. Moreover, the function of the time travel mechanism in *Outlander* has not yet been explored at length, though it has already been connected to memory (Cateridge) and historicity (Fulda).

The central question of this chapter is: How, if at all, can a popular work like *Drums of Autumn* be read reparatively; that is, as a narrative that contributes directly or indirectly to reparation? From the case studies of the previous chapters, there emerges an understanding of reparation as a multi-sided process in which victims, perpetrators, and implicated subjects must come together to find feasible and effective solutions. An important aspect of that process was shown to be, in the work of Elliott, listening to victims and starting from their self-stated needs, rather than making assumptions or generalizations about what healing should look like and imposing a framework of reparation from above. The act of listening, however, does not in itself constitute repair; further work, both theoretical and practical, is required. One part of this is understanding how history is being produced and consumed by the general (White) public, and what notion of reparation and reconciliation this view on history entails. Popular historical fiction is one place where publically accepted narratives of history proliferate—though, as I will show, elements of resistance can be found there also. I take *Drums of Autumn* as an instance of historical reflection by a White author, in which, as I will demonstrate, the time travel dimension serves as an important layer of meta-reflection. As with the other cases, I explore how slavery is depicted in the novel; how the relationship between past and present is conceived; and how the work imagines White implication and responsibility.

Popular historical romance novels are widely read, much more so than the average literary or artistic work, and may influence everyday readers’ understanding of history and historicity (Fulda 240). By extension, some of these novels—the ones, for instance, that depict slavery—likely play a role in shaping their readers’ awareness of and feelings toward historical accountability. To understand contemporary attitudes toward reparation, then, awareness of the narratives presented in popular historical fiction may be essential. After all, it is not just the construction of narratives, but also and especially their reception by society that determines the shape of cultural memory (Fulda 241). The *Outlander* series is one of the most well-known examples of historical fiction currently running. Both the novels and the television adaptation have garnered a massive fan base, with over 25 million copies of the books already sold by the time of the 2014 television premiere (S. Hughes), and the show’s pilot drawing over 3.7 million viewers in the first week (Kondoloji). Within the time travel subgenre, of course, this also makes the *Outlander* series stand out in terms of notoriety.

Gabaldon’s novels tell the story of Claire, a former WWII nurse who is accidentally transported to the eighteenth century while visiting a circle of “standing stones” near Inverness, Scotland. In the past, she is forced to marry a minor nobleman, Jamie Fraser, despite already being married in her own time to historian Frank Randall. As the genre dictates, Claire and Jamie strike up a genuine romance, leaving Claire emotionally caught between her lives in the two time periods. Complicating matters, the pair find themselves at the center of the impending Jacobite uprising, which Claire knows will fail. Pregnant by Jamie, she is forced to return to her own time for safety, while Jamie must go to fight—and presumably die—at the historical battle of Culloden. In the series’ third installment, Claire, now with an adult daughter and spurred to action by the death of her first husband, finds out Jamie survived Culloden, and willingly returns to the past to reunite with him for good. Circumstances drive them to travel to the British colonies, where they arrive at the beginning of *Drums of Autumn*. In that novel, set in the late 1760s, Claire and Jamie decide to stay in North Carolina rather than return to Scotland, and establish a Scottish settlement called Fraser’s Ridge on the edge of British-held territory. Meanwhile, their daughter Brianna—pursued by her boyfriend, Roger—follows Claire into the past to warn her parents of their seemingly impending death.

The fourth *Outlander* novel, *Drums of Autumn*, is the first of the series to be set in America (earlier novels take place primarily in Scotland, England, and France), and thus the first to be able to significantly contemplate the events and politics of that geographic area. The preceding installment, *Voyager*, might also have been selected as a case in this thesis, as it deals briefly with the topic of slavery in the Caribbean; however, this constitutes such a minor part of that novel that I gave precedence to the comparatively more extensive coverage of *DoA*. Moreover, as the focus of this thesis is on the United States, the setting of the pre-revolution American mainland has greater relevance than the Caribbean. Finally, I am assuming that the way *DoA* approaches the themes discussed in this chapter—such as responsibility and temporality—is reflective of the *Outlander* series as a whole. As the series spans more than two decades and is still ongoing, it is possible that more recent installments do take a different stance on some of these issues. Given the sheer volume of the series, I will not take into account the later novels, rather focusing on *DoA* as a work on its own, though supplemented where necessary by material from the earlier installments.

## History and Memory

That the *Outlander* novels are concerned with history and historicity, becomes clear from the start of the first book. Claire’s husband, Frank Randall, is a historian. The couple’s presence in Scotland is the result of his interest in his own family history, specifically the British soldier Jonathan Randall, and Claire initially visits the standing stones—which transport her to the past—so that Frank can secretly observe the performance of a Celtic ritual by local druids who still observe ancient customs. The fact that Claire immediately meets Jonathan “Black Jack” Randall when she arrives in the past links her time travel directly to her husband’s historicist endeavors. The overt theme of historicism is carried over into the later books, as Brianna becomes a history student in homage to her adoptive father, and her boyfriend, Roger, is also a historian.

By focusing on characters who engage in historical research, Gabaldon is able to reflect thoroughly on how history is mediated. Like Butler and Elliott, she finds that historical the historical record does not paint a complete picture. In *Outlander*, Claire, experiencing the past personally, learns things about Jonathan Randall of which Frank, relying on historical documents, is entirely unaware: that he is not Frank’s true ancestor, for one, but also that he is a cruel and sadistic man, rather than the heroic soldier Frank believes him to be. James Cateridge sees a possibility to read the Frank/Jack comparison—facilitated by their physical similarity, particularly in the television series where the same actor plays both characters—as a commentary on colonialism, with Jack Randall being “a rampant embodiment of English imperialism, revealing the bloody truth behind Frank’s 20th century [*sic*] privilege” (77). This interpretation is a valuable one, even if, as Cateridge implies, it may not have been intended by either Gabaldon or the show’s creators. The fact that Jack’s true nature is untraceable through standard historiographic practices in this light becomes not just an illustration of the shortcomings of documented history in general, but specifically a nod to the repression of memories of imperialist violence.

Gabaldon does not discredit historiography altogether. She herself is known for her “extensive research” on the historical background of her novels (Gabaldon interview). As Daniel Fulda has noted, popular historical fiction often draws upon historical realism, supported by “a vast collection of historical material,” to validate its own project and appeal to readers (250). Gabaldon seems to follow this trend, though she openly admits that “The history/historical detail in the books is as accurate as history is—i.e., what people wrote down wasn’t always either complete or accurate” (Donvito [citing Gabaldon]). Regardless of the actual research the author has done, and the resulting accuracy of the novels or lack thereof, the emphasis on research as part of the writing process—the question “What kind of research do you do for your books?” is listed among the FAQ on Gabaldon’s website—lends great status to authenticity. Gabaldon’s response, moreover, describes books, from dictionaries and medicine guides from the relevant time period to contemporary biographies and histories, as the source of this authentic knowledge (“FAQ”). Gabaldon’s characters, too, use textual sources to learn more about the past. Brianna, for instance, seeks to “find her [Claire]—find them. See if she’s all right” through documentary research, even though she recognizes that her mother has already told her “a lot more [about Jamie] than [she]’ll ever find in historical records” (*DoA* 335). The notion that her parents can be ‘found’ in the archive suggests that, to Brianna at least, there is significant value in documentary evidence, despite her awareness of the information that is missing. Indirect forms of remembrance in general are presented as a useful way of connecting with the past, though this is applied primarily to the personal realm. Roger, for example, has “boxes in the garage” of his late mother’s things, and knows that “if [he] ever needed to, [he] could find out more” about his “history” by perusing these items (334).

Objects are shown to be important carriers of (personal) history throughout the novel, especially when it concerns family heirlooms. For example, the pearl necklace Claire receives from Jamie, previously his mother’s, becomes Brianna’s “link” to her father; a link made concrete when she uses the pearls as protection during her time travel, allowing her to visit her parents in the eighteenth century[[4]](#footnote-5) (552). In fact, there is a sense that objects—in combination with stories passed down in a personal, transgenerational context—are more effective at communicating historical experience, or in connecting a contemporary person to (their) history, than written documents. The latter are shown to be lacking, as in the case of Randall. Meanwhile, physical objects, like Brianna’s necklace, provide an emotional, if not necessarily informative, link to the past. In fact, if we understand time travel in the novel as the ideal form of historical remembrance, the novel displays a definitive preference for material rather than written traces: not only does time travel require precious stones (i.e., objects), but, as I discuss further below, the ability to time travel is stored in particular bodies and locations. Additionally, in situating time travel within the oral tradition of Celtic paganism—albeit in highly romanticized form—Gabaldon also stresses the importance of such traditions for retaining a connection to history. Here, too, material or embodied knowledge is preferred over written information, despite Gabaldon’s self-stated reliance on written history for her research.

The *Outlander* novels themselves, as written documents, sit somewhat uncomfortably amid these reflections on mediation. Where in *Kindred*, Butler uses historical realism self-reflexively to comment on the illusion of veracity, Gabaldon’s concern with realism appears more straightforward. This is in line with Fulda’s finding that popular historical fiction, unlike its more literary counterpart, gains “socially accepted value” by including “verified events, places, and practices” as such, rather than *using* these “facts” for critical or artistic purposes (250). Whether it is fair to say that Gabaldon’s novels use realism to make up for a “trivial plot and […] lack of linguistic complexity” (Fulda 50) is arguable—I, at least, hope to show in this chapter that there is something more going on beneath the surface of these works—but it certainly does seem that Gabaldon seeks to portray history more or less ‘as it happened.’

Cultural remembrance as an intentional practice becomes more central in the third and fourth books. In the eighteenth-century storyline, the Jacobite uprising has now failed, and many who fought on the Scottish side are either dead, imprisoned, or exiled. Consequently, historical remembrance in the *Outlander* series is connected primarily to the commemoration of Scottish heritage in a diasporic context. This commemoration unites past and present: In 1969, Brianna and Roger visit a Scottish Festival; a later rendition of the “Gathering” of Highlanders in the American colonies they attend with Jamie and Claire in 1770 at the end of *DoA*. Through this parallel, Gabaldon demonstrates the longevity of cultural trauma, and especially the continuing sense of lost identity that can result from displacement. Though the Scottish Festival no longer holds the political weight of the Gathering, the “calling of the clans” takes a similar form during both meetings, showing the lasting importance of community and identity to these activities. On a personal level, Brianna struggles to situate herself in regard to her paternal lineage, unsure if she should present herself as part of the Fraser clan (84). Her uncertainty is due to her conflicted feelings about her biological and adoptive fathers, but can just as easily be read as a conflict between different aspects of her heritage: her English parents, her Scottish father, and her American upbringing. The family here becomes a focal point of a larger quest for identity tied to biological descent as well as geographical belonging and diasporic displacement.

Time travel is linked to ancestry in the *Outlander* series in a manner reminiscent of, though also significantly different from, *Kindred*. Whereas Butler’s Dana seems to be drawn into the past because of her familial relation to Rufus, Gabaldon’s Claire is not faced with her own, but with her first husband’s ancestors. It is suggested that thinking of a family member or loved one is key to determining how far one will travel in time. When she returns to the present, for example, Claire thinks of Frank to help her pass through the portal. Though it is not confirmed in the novel, her immediate meeting with Jonathan Randall on her initial trip to the past suggests that her involuntary journey may have been directed by her husband’s search for his ancestor, anchoring her to the historical figure most closely related to her that she knows of. Meanwhile, it is suggested later in the series that the ability to time travel is passed on genetically: Claire’s daughter Brianna inherits the skill from her, and Roger is able to pass through the portal thanks to his distant relation to fellow time traveler Geillis Duncan, a self-proclaimed ‘witch’ from the 1960’s whom Claire meets in the past. For *Kindred*’s Dana, her familial relation to Rufus solidified the function of time travel as a way to make her “confront where she came from” (Kenan [citing Butler] 496). To some extent, the same is true for Claire, though it is not (just) her own past she must confront, but that of the man she loves, embodied by the figure of Jack Randall.

Biology is one way in which time travel in the *Outlander* series becomes linked to a search for identity. Cateridge demonstrates that “it is possible to motivate Claire’s time travel with a lack of a genealogical history of her own, and therefore a sense of ‘home’” (73). Other time travelers in the series, including Duncan and Brianna, similarly conduct a search for “authentic national or ethnic identity” (76). If time travel is indeed tied to a quest for genealogical, national, or ethnic identity, then who can *not* time travel in the novel is at least as meaningful as who can. Beside the time travelers themselves, only three contemporary characters in *DoA* know about the working of the standing stones: Frank, who does not believe time travel is truly possible; Fiona, the housekeeper of Roger’s uncle and the newly established leader of the druid group that opens the portal in the first book; and Claire’s close friend, Joe Abernathy. Of these three, only Abernathy, an African-American doctor, expresses any desire to access the portal himself. When Roger wonders whether Brianna has truly gone through the portal to find her parents, considering the danger involved, Abernathy responds confidently that “I would” (555). As Roger outlines what he knows of time travel, Abernathy muses: “So not everybody can go through—but you can.” Roger notes that “[his] voice was filled with curiosity—and what sounded vaguely like envy” (555).

Though each of the protagonists can indeed be said to “lack” connection to their parents in some way, which Cateridge posits is their core motivation to time travel (9), for none of them does this lack mean a complete severance from their genealogy. As Cateridge notes, Claire is an orphan; however, her family history is not truly lost, as she was raised by an uncle—an archeologist, no less—and there is no reason to believe that she is missing information about her parentage. Brianna’s disconnect from her biological father is the result of the convoluted nature of time travel, but her mother has “told [her] a lot” about him (*DoA* 335); Roger, an orphan raised by his uncle in striking parallel to Claire, still has his parents’ effects boxed up in the garage. Time travel in the novel, then, is not so much a recovery of lost history as a way of turning impersonal information—the knowledge gleaned from books and artifacts—into personal experience. In light of the scarcity of archival material on and by enslaved people in America, Abernathy’s “envy” of those who can experience history-first-hand is understandable, especially in a novel so concerned with genealogy. Moreover, his position in the novel as the only character who wants to, but cannot, time travel can be seen as a commentary on, but also a direct result of, this absence of information. On a meta-level, (popular) historical fiction itself requires the translation of bare facts, or the archival remnants of them, into a personal narrative. Abernathy’s inability to time travel, then, can be read as a reflection of the fact that there is not enough material to ‘translate.’

Cateridge suggests that Gabaldon’s exploration of the Scottish diaspora may also appeal to other diasporic audiences. At least one fan’s survey response directly references their own Eastern European diasporic background, “illustrating the emotional power of a narrative structure which uses time travel to return to a point before a national trauma takes place, and to offer the possibility of a different past and therefore present and future” (76). In this light, time travel fiction can be considered ‘reparative’ because it allows one to imagine an alternate timeline in which historical injustice did not happen, and consequently to picture a future in which reparation is unnecessary, the original injury never having taken place. In *Outlander*, the Battle of Culloden forms this original injury; this battle marked the end of the Scottish clan structure and the beginning of the Scottish emigration to America and elsewhere on a major scale (Cateridge 10). To Cateridge, the ability to depict alternate futures partly explains the allure of *Outlander*, suggesting that for some readers, works that use time travel to revisit traumatic events—regardless of whether the event in question is directly connected to the reader’s own trauma—may produce feelings of hope or at least recognition. Following this reasoning, time travel fiction becomes a way of imagining not just reparation, but restoration, wondering what would (or might) have happened had history gone differently. As Maeve McKeown and others have pointed out, restoration as a basis for reparation—the idea that financial reimbursement for Black Americans should be directly based on the wealth their families have missed out on because of slavery, for instance—has been considered problematic, because it is impossible to establish a definitive alternate history; many are opposed to basing calculations for (financial) reparation on a “counterfactual” (778). Cateridge implies, however, that just imagining that hypothetical can be gratifying to people in diaspora, even without any promise of material reparation. *Outlander*’s massive readership, and fan responses like the one in Cateridge’s survey, seem to attest to the possibility of a therapeutic kind of reading of these novels that may be reparative as a form of communal remembrance; in the first place for readers in the Scottish diaspora, but perhaps also for others who relate to the themes of historical trauma and recovery more generally. Whether a Black American would also read them in this light is questionable, however, as—the next section shows—the African Diaspora have a somewhat different place and function in *DoA*.

## Implication and (White) Responsibility

Though *DoA* provides no thorough investigation of the system of slavery, implication in and moral accountability for slavery are central themes in the novel. It is Claire’s concern with (White) responsibility that results in one of *DoA*’s most prominent conflicts. Not long after Claire and Jamie arrive in the colonies, they are presented with two options for setting up a home there. The first is to accept a tract of land from the royal governor of Georgia, William Tryon.[[5]](#footnote-6) The second is to take over River Run, the plantation of Jamie’s aunt, Jocasta; a sizeable estate that produces timber and turpentine through slave labor. Their choice, and the moral dilemma it entails, is at the core of the first half of the novel (the second half focusing primarily on Brianna and Roger). Claire faces a dilemma between her ethical objections to slavery, and her desire to keep her husband safe, led by the (false) belief—based on a gravestone she has seen in the twentieth century—that Jamie will die in Scotland. Should Jamie accept the governor’s offer of land, Claire expects that he will need to return to Scotland to find tenants, thus risking his death. This section analyzes three events *DoA* that help push Claire toward a decision: the lawful execution of an enslaved man; the death of an enslaved woman after a failed abortion; and the assisted escape of another enslaved woman who aided the abortion. I demonstrate that, in each case, Claire is confronted with the inescapable racial inequality produced by colonial law, and forced to recognize her own agency in choosing *how*, rather than whether, to involve herself in slavery. In describing Claire’s thought process, Gabaldon also pushes the reader to consider their own implication in slavery and ongoing forms of injustice.

Claire and Jamie first find themselves directly faced with the prospect of implication, in Rothberg’s terms, when Jamie is called upon to come witness the execution of an enslaved man from his aunt’s estate.[[6]](#footnote-7) The man, Rufus, has attacked his White overseer and, according to colonial law, must be killed without trial (*DoA* 208). Horrified, Claire implores with Jamie: “Don’t go; you can’t be a part of this.” Jamie, however, tells her that he is “already a part of it” due to his family’s involvement (208). Claire later reflects on this statement, wondering: “Part of what, though?” (211). Unsure of how Jamie understands his own implication in the situation, she muses that “he knew damn well what *I* thought of present matters” (212). Indeed, Claire has made clear that she finds the law condemning the enslaved man without further investigation “barbarous” (208). Her decision to accompany Jamie, however, puts her in a similarly uncertain position of responsibility. As she soon realizes, “he [Jamie] didn’t know what he was going to do either” (212). The question “what to do” with her privileged but uncomfortable position as the possible future ruler of River Run haunts her throughout the events that follow.

Significantly, it is Claire’s position as a doctor—literally, a healer; one who seeks to ‘repair’—that defines her actions once she and Jamie arrive on the scene. They find Rufus already badly injured. Claire realizes he is not mortally wounded, and she may in fact be able to save him; she also knows he will not be allowed to live either way. She chooses instead to give him a swift death through poison. The use of her medical skills to kill is significant here; Claire has the power to heal, but the context makes it so that she can only use it to minimize harm. In a very concrete manner, this scene shows that repair demands structural change, not just individual effort; Claire’s healing abilities are made meaningless, even harmful, by the system of racist inequality that surrounds her. Consequently, Claire’s decision is surrounded by moral ambiguity. She muses: “I couldn’t ask if this would be his choice—I had made it for him. And having made it, could not ask for either approval or forgiveness” (216). She recognizes the privilege of her position, and the injustice of Rufus’s lack of agency, but precisely because Rufus cannot consent, she is unable to judge the morality of her own actions

Rufus’s death brings Claire to reflect on implication more directly, leading the reader through a process of increasing self-awareness. Despite her efforts to remain distant from the realities of slavery around the estate, Claire ultimately recognizes that she cannot truly divorce herself from the practice. If Jamie were to take control of River Run, as his aunt demands, she would have no choice but to become a slave owner. “I could not pretend otherwise,” she ponders; “could take no refuge in the notion that I was only a guest, an outsider” (238). Though only subtly, her line of reasoning implies that she *is* pretending even now; the “refuge” of her outsider-status is merely a story she tells herself to satisfy her conscience, and actually becoming a slave owner would shatter that lie for herself and others. In addition, Claire is actually a double outsider: first, in Jamie’s extended family, and second, as a woman out of time. This extends her deliberations from the immediate situation at River Run to a more abstract reflection of her place in the colonial society of the 1800s.

Claire’s self-critical reflection on the urge she feels to ignore her own involvement in slavery can be read as a subtle critique of contemporary attempts—individual and societal—to avoid discussions of accountability for slavery altogether. The novel insists instead that the debate *must* be carried out, and that to avoid it is only to avoid self-awareness, not actual responsibility. At the same time, Gabaldon is empathetic to the desire to avoid the discomfort of recognizing one’s own position as an implicated subject, and has Claire go through a process of reluctant acceptance. While she has made clear that she detests the idea of owning slaves, Claire also admits that she “hadn’t thought about the prospect … because [she] hadn’t wanted to face the choice that was now being laid before [her]” (*DoA* 238). Consequently, even though she has realized on some level that her presumed distance from the goings-on at River Run is only a farce, it takes a long time for her to fully recognize the extent of her implication. Instead, she constitutes herself, and her relation to the enslaved people on the plantation, as unaffected by slavery. Only when she and Jamie happen upon an enslaved woman, Lissa Garver, who is dying from a failed abortion, does Claire come to understand that she is not, as she thought, seen as a friend by the enslaved people on Jocasta’s plantation. Having asked one of Jocasta’s servants to find out who helped the dead woman perform her abortion, she realizes: “Phaedre had helped me to find Pollyanne [the culprit] not because she trusted or liked me—but because I was the master’s wife” (259). Claire is starting to move beyond a victim/perpetrator binary, in which she can believe herself free of responsibility until she is actively involved, toward a framework of implication. As she herself muses: “[T]he web of circumstance that had enmeshed Jamie had touched me, too. I did not stand outside, as I had thought, and could not if I wanted to” (259). Claire, and the reader with her, comes to see now that she was always already implicated, and refusing to consider this only made her ignorant, not innocent.

While understanding White perspectives on history is undeniably important, there are limits to the value of a text like *DoA* for thinking about reparation in new ways, as the novel largely relies on old habits of thought. A tension between exploring White responsibility and avoiding a repetition of past injustices through their narrative reconstruction becomes apparent through a third plot event. After the woman responsible for the failed abortion, Pollyanne, is found, Jamie and his kinsmen contrive to smuggle her to a Tuscarora village to avoid being “hanged or flogged to death” (272). The story here arguably turns into a white savior narrative (see Chapter 3), as the White protagonists form a plan to ‘rescue’ Pollyanne without any input from her. Claire assumes that “[a]s an alternative to certain death, flight into the arms of red savages might be slightly preferable” (277-278), but also recognizes the woman’s fear and confusion, as she does not know where they are going or what is going to happen to her. In fact, Claire is hardly able to communicate with Pollyanne at all, as “she was Africa-born and spoke little English” (278). Making an enslaved character unable to communicate quite literally deprives them of a voice. Pollyanne’s agency is doubly removed: choices are being made for her, and even if she agrees with them, she cannot express consent. This arguably constitutes a repetition of injustice, silencing a voice that has already been structurally silenced. It is possible to perceive a more deliberate reasoning behind Pollyanne’s silence; it is precisely because she cannot communicate easily with Pollyanne that Claire (and the reader) comes closer to understanding the complex interplay between agency, consent, and responsibility. However, this structure still gives precedence to the White protagonist’s learning process over the agency and voice of an enslaved person, replicating a long tradition of White privilege.

The story of Pollyanne’s escape contains many elements of the white savior trope, but Gabaldon also to some extent disrupts that narrative. There is no emotional release after bringing Pollyanne to the border of the colony and to apparent freedom. Unsure if they have truly helped her or only put her in danger once more, Claire and Jamie part ways with Pollyanne with no particular sense of accomplishment or victory. The events are described rather more matter-of-factly as the only option that will not result in Pollyanne’s certain death; the lesser of two evils. Instead, Gabaldon reflects again on Pollyanne’s lack of agency. Claire sees some resemblance between herself and Pollyanne; particularly, their “unknown” futures and mutual need to rely on men for safety (290). However, she ultimately dismisses the comparison in favor of the knowledge that there “was the one great difference …—I had chosen to be there” (290). Once more, the ability to truly help someone is tied directly to that person’s ability to accept or reject help.

Above, I have discussed how Claire’s love for Frank forces her to reconcile a violent past—in the form of Jack Randall—with a privileged present. Through Claire and Jamie’s relationship, Gabaldon now explores both moral relativism and the possibility of implication by association, perhaps even across time. In direct contrast to the lack of agency she perceives on the part of Rufus and Pollyanne, Claire refuses to advise Jamie on whether or not he should take over the plantation, stating that she can’t be his “conscience” (240). She does not take responsibility for Jamie’s beliefs, allowing him—as a “well traveled, well educated … cultured man” (212)—the agency to form his own opinion about the (im)morality of slavery and the proper response to it. Counter to the relativist argument that people in the past cannot be condemned for practicing slavery because they did not perceive it as morally wrong, Claire believes that Jamie—and, by extension, his peers—are capable of recognizing injustice, and of taking action against it if they so choose. Her determination that she cannot make the choice for Jamie can be interpreted as a recognition of the fact that one cannot retroactively change the beliefs held and acts committed by people in the past; to do so would be to deny their agency and to wrongly privilege the present (see LaCroix; Chapter 2). Claire does, however, hold herself accountable for her relation to Jamie: she has the agency to leave him if he becomes master of River Run, and she knows that refusing to do so would mark her as a perpetrator.

It is possible to interpret Claire’s reasoning here as a gesture toward diachronic implication. Part of dealing with history in today’s world is coming to terms with the fact that beloved stories, events, or historical figures are implicated in injustice. Choosing to identify with them is arguably to become implicated also. For Claire, this implication is made concrete and deeply personal through her love for Jamie: if she decides to retain their marital relationship, she makes herself irrevocably “the master’s wife.” Gabaldon presents this option as an unconscionable one, but she also validates Claire’s struggle, and by extension the struggle of any contemporary person who is in a process of reconsidering their own (emotional) ties to history. Gabaldon creates a safe space for acknowledging one’s connection to troubled histories, while maintaining that this connection does entail implication. She pushes (White) readers to recognize their own agency and responsibility in regard to history—that is, to reevaluate the way history is invoked in the present—without irrevocably condemning them for their ties to past violence.

## Authorship and Representation

Despite Roland Barthes famously declaring the death of the author in 1967, since the turn of the millennium, the question ‘who gets to write about what’ has become increasingly prominent. For the relation between literature and reparation, this development is crucial: it demands a reevaluation of what constitutes harm or repair, especially in the context of historical or structural injustice, but it also redefines who is expected—and, in the eyes of society, permitted—to undertake (theoretical and imaginative) reparative work. In the case of Atlantic slavery, it should come as no surprise that literary works by a White or otherwise nonblack author are interpreted differently than those by a Black author; though, as I hope to have made clear, these identities are by no means homogeneous, and the matter is much more complicated than a simple distinction between two positionalities. In the case of *DoA*, addressing authorship particularly means reckoning with the author’s position as an outsider to the victimized groups she is representing and her comparative alignment with the White protagonists.[[7]](#footnote-8)

As Christopher L. Miller points out in his work on literary hoaxes—authors posing as members of an ‘Other’ group, often involving a situation of inequality where a privileged author assumes a minority identity—it has always been acceptable, even expected, for literary authors to write from a perspective that is not their own; to “represent and speak for (or as) things they are not” (7). So long as the reader is aware of the fictitiousness of the work, this disparity between author and character/focalizer has not usually been considered problematic. As Miller puts it: “[T]he power of literature to impersonate is beyond dispute; the question is, How far can an author go?” (7). The answer to this question, Miller finds, has changed considerably in recent decades. Especially young people have become increasingly opposed to, and vocal against, anything that can be seen as “cultural appropriation”; the unrightful use or adaptation of cultures that are not one’s own (9). After a period in which hybridity and “border-crossing” was the norm, it now seems that deconstructing borders is seen not only as offensive, but as actively harmful (9). In the literary domain, this view has serious consequences, placing increasing constraints on what an author, especially when they are (understood to be) in a position of privilege, can write about without encountering cultural backlash.

Gabaldon herself stresses the importance of storytelling for retaining memory and identity in *DoA*, particularly for cultures with oral traditions that are threatened with extinction. One of the few other time travelers Claire learns about is a man named Otter-Tooth, known in the Mohawk village in which he resided before his death only as a member of the Turtle clan (916). Like Geillis Duncan in Scotland, Otter-Tooth traveled to the past with a purpose: he intended to bring the Iroquois to war with the settlers and prevent—or undo—further colonization. He was eventually banished from the village, but his words continued to haunt the Mohawk warriors: “*You will be forgotten …. The Nations of the Iroquois will be no more. No one will tell your stories. Everything you are and have been will be lost*” (920). Sharing stories is presented here as a reparative practice in itself; a way to ensure that the past is not “forgotten,” and therefore that cultural identity is retained. As Tewaktenyohn, a Mohawk elder, tells Claire: “A man is not forgotten, as long as there are two people left under the sky. One to tell the story; the other to hear it” (922). This ascribes an important role to both speaker and listener, but also raises questions about the extent to which the identity of the speaker matters for the potential reparative effect of storytelling. Can Claire, as a White woman, contribute to retaining the memory of Otter-Tooth by telling his story, or would doing so only constitute appropriation? And, more to the point: what does it mean for Gabaldon to tell (or to imagine) stories about nonwhite cultures and frame these as a form of reparative remembering? In the previous chapters, I have explored how creative engagement with the historical archive can function as a form of reparative practice in the context of Black literature. Yet, in light of contemporary concerns about authenticity and cultural appropriation, it is clear that not every form of historical storytelling is (successfully) reparative.

My goal is not to establish whether or not *DoA* is an appropriative or offensive novel, or whether offense always translates into harm. Some readers have certainly found the novel troubling in its depiction of nonwhite people (see the reviews of Fangs for the Fantasy; Sarah; Victoria Vale) while others have not (Joana; Katya). Neither is it my prerogative to tell an author what they can or cannot write. Rather, I propose that *DoA* presents a particularly useful case for thinking about representation, (pejorative) language, and authorial responsibility. The intersection of temporalities in the novel—the late eighteenth century in contrast with the Civil Rights era on the level of content; the 1990s on the level of publication; and the early twenty-first century as the current reading context—provides a multitude of relevant considerations when analyzing the choices Gabaldon has made in regard to the representation of minorities. This includes enslaved people, but also and more prominently the Tuscarora and Mohawk tribes with whom Claire and Jamie strike up semi-friendly relations. Though I do not want to generalize the respective histories of Black and Native American people in the United States, I suggest that the logics of representation are relevant to both, so that any reflection on representation in *DoA* is meaningful to broader questions about authorship and representation.

First of all, the choice of Claire as protagonist and focalizer is an interesting one. With the first novel of the series set in 1945, and *DoA* in the 1960s, Gabaldon creates a distance between the novels’ internal and external ‘presents’ even without considering the time travel element. One poignant example of dissonance between the internal time of the novel and its time of publication is the protagonists’ attitude towards prenatal alcohol consumption. In accordance with the medical knowledge of their time, Claire and Brianna both are shown to drink during their pregnancies (*Dragonfly in Amber*; *DoA*). The average reader in the 1990s might have found this jarring, and a twenty-first century reader even more so. These minor but noticeable moments of disconnect between Claire and the reader discourage total identification with the novel’s protagonist and the other ‘contemporary’ characters. This makes it easier for Gabaldon to express outdated or even counterhegemonic views (from the perspective of her time of writing) without necessarily being perceived to hold these views herself: her characters are, after all, representatives of another time. This allows her to reflect critically on the attitudes held in mid-twentieth century America. More importantly, the reader is subtly discouraged from taking Claire’s viewpoint for granted through experiences of dissonance like the one above, making a critical reading of the novel possible and even desirable. Reading suspiciously, though, it is also possible to see the use of a slightly outdated viewpoint as an excuse for the use of offensive representations, or as an attempt to shield oneself from critique.

The temporal distance between the novel’s publication and the current moment of reading only increases the sense of incongruence. As Miller outlines, opinions about what is offensive or harmful have changed significantly since the time of *DoA*’s publication. This alone makes possible a dual reading of the novel as either a product of its time—thus excusing any elements that are considered offensive now but were not seen that way in 1997—or as an enduring narrative that should be reinterpreted according to present-day ethics; the work is, after all, still being republished, resold, and reread. The use of time travel provides yet another layer, with the novel reflecting at once on the recent and the distant past. In having a (more or less) contemporary character travel back to the colonial era, Gabaldon merges perspectives as well as temporalities to the point that each of them becomes denaturalized, further allowing for critical distance.

One site where tension between temporal contexts and their respective normative viewpoints becomes particularly apparent in the novel is in the use of language, which also provides a clear connection between the levels of content and context. The way language should be used to refer to minorities or people from minority groups has been a point of contention in Western societies for the past few decades, denounced by critics as “political correctness” (see G. Hughes). *DoA* addresses, or at least provides material for thinking about, such language use. The layered focalization that results from the intersecting timeframes—both internal and external to the novel—complicates a straightforward reading of language as ‘offensive,’ leading to a more nuanced understanding of responsible representation.

In one example of layered linguistic representation, Claire muses that “Jamie, horrified beforehand at the thought of savage Red Indians, had seen their rituals—so like his own—and known them at once for fellow hunters—civilized men” (*DoA* 306). At first sight, this use of language (“savage Red Indians”) may simply be seen as historically appropriate, as it is the language that Claire predicts Jamie would use. To this extent, the use of terminology that is now considered pejorative may be legitimate. On a second level, however, the passage presents a contemporary character using this language, where she might have chosen to use her own, less controversial terminology. On top of that, it is also Gabaldon’s decision to use these terms, particularly in this confused temporal setting, where she could have used a different phrasing without disrupting the narrative. This troubles the excuse of historical accuracy. Passages like this facilitate discussion on authorial responsibility, and the degree to which offensive language should be permissible in historical fiction. Of course, the fact that the text makes space for such deliberations does not mean it is not itself potentially offensive or even harmful. Neither does it mean that readers will actually engage with the text on such a meta-level. Indeed, reader responses on the novel’s *Goodreads* page show different opinions and levels of consideration in regard to Gabaldon’s language use. By far the majority of readers makes no comment on the topic at all, suggesting that they find no problem with it, or at least do not find it significant enough to remark upon. However, some readers state that they find the use of words like “savage” unacceptable in a contemporary narrative (e.g., Kirsten); others feel that only the contemporary characters should not have used the term (Fangs for the Fantasy; Victoria Vale), or that Gabaldon should have “corrected and addressed” its use as “wrong and dehumanizing” (Holly). While only a fraction of readers addresses the topic in their reviews of the novel, their responses show that *DoA*’s temporal layering provides the material to think about authorial responsibility in more nuanced terms than merely *should/should not*.

The novel urges its readers to think about moral relativism and representation in more overt ways, too. Claire is no perfect advocate of the Civil Rights Movement, but on occasion, she does make an effort to translate its ideals into her new temporal context. Early in *DoA*, for instance, she tries to shift Jamie’s views on the “wild Indians” (52), reflecting on the future of Native Americans under colonialism. While Jamie argues that it is “good” that many of them will be killed or “taken prisoner,” Claire insists that “that depends a lot of your point of view” (52-53). She asks Jamie to consider that “if a bunch of strangers came round and tried to kill you and shove you off the land you’d always lived on … you’d fight too” (53). While hardly revolutionary, the relevance of such dialogue in popular fiction should not be dismissed. Readers who engage with these texts only as a source of entertainment may not pick up on the more subtle implications of a novel like *DoA*, but such explicit relativizing of the traditional Western viewpoint on colonial settlement is hard to miss. Discussions of reparation for Native Americans in the United States are as of yet unresolved, much like those about slavery reparations (though the kind of reparation that is being asked for often differs in focus—see Rivas and Shakya; Wildcat). Validating the perspective of the historical other may contribute, however minutely, to legitimizing calls for reparation in the mind of the reader. At the same time, it is questionable whether these relatively minor attempts to validate nonwhite perspectives are really effective in light of the privileged position of the White protagonists, and within the largely conservative narrative in which they appear. That is to say, Gabaldon’s explicit message of affirmation may be negated by the implicit—and possibly inadvertent—othering effect of the narrative as a whole.

## Readership and Reception

The question remains whether casual readers actually engage with the moral dilemmas *Drums of Autumn* poses, or whether more conventional interests of the genre such adventure and romance form the only point of interest. *Goodreads* reviews, if taken for indicative of the novel’s general readership, suggest the latter may be the case. Only 67 of the nearly nine thousand reviews mention slavery at all, and many of these only refer to its presence in the book in passing (“Outlander #4”). For instance, one reviewer states that readers “learn a lot about the indigenous cultures of early America, about the way of living of 18th century people and about the less fortunate ones that had to endure slavery” (Joana). The focus here seems to be, not unexpectedly, on accurate depictions of history rather than critical engagement with it.

A few readers do seem to have found food for thought in *DoA*. One reviewer muses, for instance: “What I thought interesting was […] seeing how the characters from the future dealt with things like slavery, and relations with the Native Americans. I am not sure if I like what she did with some of the characters. I will have to see how it plays out” (Ahnya). Another reader goes into more detail, listing elements of the book that made her think about “the whole connection between the 20th and 18th century,” prominently including Otter-Tooth’s attempt to change history through time travel (Katya). The time travel mechanism, then, does seem to inspire reflection on the relation between past and present in some readers. Several reviews also express criticism of the way Gabaldon has depicted nonwhite people and cultures, particularly in light of the novel’s time travel dimension (Fangs for the Fantasy; Victoria Vale). Even though such reflections are the exception rather than the norm, they demonstrate the novel’s potential to inspire discussion. At the same time, the limited number of reviews that refer to slavery at all suggests that *DoA* on its own does not significantly stimulate critical thought about topics like historical injustice and responsibility. In order for the novel to contribute to reparation, then, a deliberate critical mode of reading seems required. This might be stimulated by the setting of a classroom or book club.

## Conclusion

Gabaldon presents a White responsibility based on agency rather than guilt. On the level of story, her characters are forced to make choices that, by their very ability to choose, implicate them in slavery. This sense of inevitable complicity does not translate into passive condemnation, but into action: while Claire gradually recognizes she cannot avoid being implicated in slavery, she also sees that she has some power to determine the form of that implication. By continually searching for the right course of action, even when she remains unsure what that is, Claire demonstrates that self-awareness is not the end point; it is merely a first step in a process of learning about injustice and accountability. Simultaneously, Gabaldon emphasizes that any attempt to help another person recover from injustice can only be unambiguously considered helpful—and one might also read this as ‘reparative’ in the context of the novel, as the imperative to ‘help’ is tied directly to the characters’ (sense of) responsibility for the injustice—if it is condoned beforehand by that person. For this to be possible, the very structure of society must allow some degree of agency to the victim; an agency that is, unsurprisingly, shown to be lacking in the 1700s. From this follows a troubling contradiction in the novel, as that which is essential for repair—the consent of the victim—is made unavailable precisely to prove that it *is* essential. In foregrounding a White character’s moral journey, Gabaldon risks repeating the very injury of repression that her novel seeks to address.

Time is not thematized in *DoA* as much as in the other case studies, which may be a consequence of its place in a longer series; reflection on temporality may take place over the course of the series, rather than in an individual work. Consequently, *DoA* is primarily concerned with synchronic implication, and does not provide a direct translation of Claire’s moral struggles to the present. That is, slavery is largely consigned to the past, with only occasional consideration for its structural aftermath. To this extent, the novel’s ability to elicit self-reflection from the reader is perhaps limited. Because of the time travel trope, however, a connection between past and present is inevitable, even if it remains largely implicit. In setting up an imperfect relation of identification between protagonist and reader—both being contemporary people confronted with the distant past, but themselves separated by a few noticeable decades—Gabaldon establishes a layered temporal situation that allows for an exploration of past/present relationality and responsibility; however, the novel itself only engages with these themes to a limited extent, and most reflective work is left up to the reader.

It would be an overstatement to call *Drums of Autumn* a reparative narrative, but the novel does have potential to elicit and facilitate critical debate about accountability, modes and limits of historical remembrance, the relation between past and present, and the agency and responsibility of White people in regard to injustice both historical and (to a lesser extent) contemporary. Its status as a popular novel is at once a help and a hindrance here: it has a broad audience and thus the ability to reach a large number of people, but it is also enjoyed as escapist fiction, and its deeper implications do not seem to be picked up on by most casual readers. Moreover, Gabaldon undeniably has a White audience in mind, and her work is bound to (though also recognizes) the limits of that perspective. Its project certainly differs from a work like *Kindred*, which is far more explicitly concerned with race and historical injustice. But *DoA* nevertheless, and in fact precisely *because* it is less ‘literary’ and more accessible to a White audience than the other case studies of this thesis, forms a valuable stepping-off point for discussing reparation—so long as its readers are willing to engage in that conversation.

# Conclusion

In the first chapter of this thesis, I defined reparative practices as any acts or processes contributing—if sometimes imperfectly—to the implementation of justice after a period of large-scale (historical) injustice. Though they engage with the history of slavery from different perspectives, the three case studies of this thesis share a number of features that connect to such acts and processes of reparation. First, they all challenge dominant narratives of history, making clear the limits of historiography and suggesting (or performing) ways of supplementing institutional knowledge with other sources of information, such as embodied and imaginative knowledge practices. To varying degrees, the novels also engage self-reflexively with their own textuality and complicity in the formation of historical narratives. Consequently, they confront the reader with the restricted access they have to the past, while also offering ways to engage with that past constructively. In their combination of these elements—the revised narrative of slavery they present, and their refusal of that narrative as the definitive form of history—as well as a drive toward cooperation rather than renewed conflict, these works may themselves be called reparative narratives (Rosello), though I have shown that Butler’s and Elliott’s works are more accurately described in this manner than Gabaldon’s. The literary space emerges as an inherently limited, but essential, domain for contemplating violent histories, due to its (potential) self-consciousness and ability to juxtapose different sources and media.

Secondly, the novels disrupt assumptions of linear and progressive temporality, among other things through the time travel trope. Especially Butler and Elliott’s works, and to a lesser extent Gabaldon’s as well, complicate the often-presumed centrality of the present, rethinking agency and responsibility from a more nuanced model of interplay between past, present, and future. Through this model, they each explore different synchronic and diachronic implicated subject positions, demonstrating how and why responsibility for repair might be extended beyond the direct situation in which injustice is done.

Lastly, while none of the novels offer the final word on reparation, they seem to agree that all efforts at reparation should start by listening genuinely to those affected, so that any further projects can be based upon the particular needs they express. The novels thus suggest—though, again, to different extents—that reparative efforts cannot be brought to fruition by either perpetrators (and implicated subjects) or victims alone. Rather, it requires a degree of deference and humility of the former, and a willingness to accept reparative efforts on the part of the latter. The idea that reparation is not merely a perpetrator-driven process, but requires victims’ active involvement, is meaningful for two reasons. In the first place, it supports existing critiques of the top-down approach of many current reparation efforts, which as a result do not properly take into account the specific contexts and needs of the people with whom they ostensibly seek to reconcile (see Mueller-Hirth and Oyola). In the second place, it also resonates with the concern that (self-)designating people or groups as victims deprives them of agency and discourages them from taking responsibility for their own situation and process of recovery (see Stringer). The novels present reparation as an initially internal process, in the sense that victims need to be able to address and recognize their own needs before they can communicate these to others, and implicated subjects must recognize their own implication before they can productively (i.e., reparatively) engage with victims. Neither party can take a passive role.

What, based on these findings, can be said about the role of literature within ongoing debates about legacies of historical injustice? The novels I have analyzed in this thesis do not provide answers about who should make or receive reparations in specific cases, or what amount of reimbursement should be paid. What they do offer is a safe space to explore the ‘what’s, ‘how’s, and ‘why’s of reparation. What is and what is not reparative? What is the relation between reparation, recovery, and reconciliation? How are efforts to repair best set in motion? Why should reparations be made in the first place? Works of literature like the ones analyzed here can help (White) readers think about abstract concepts like responsibility, agency, and implication in a concrete and accessible way, and push them to reevaluate their own assumptions about the relation between history and the contemporary world. *Kindred* and the *Genna & Judah* novels, in particular, demonstrate the lasting impact of historical injustice on the present, and show that there is much work to be done to dismantle the structures of violence that underpin American society (to address the specific context of these novels) in both the past and the present. Meanwhile, by addressing the historical archive and thematizing the process of creating historical narratives, these works destabilize the hegemony of institutionalized and popular historical narratives, making the reader aware that the history they know is inherently biased and incomplete; a task long associated with historical fiction (Rigney, 2005) but approached here in effective new ways through the time travel device. Finally, the cases of this thesis show how literature can bring marginalized histories to the fore and acknowledge suppressed voices, drawing on imaginative and creative resources beyond the institutional to raise awareness about historical injustice and violence that has thus far been ignored by the general public.

While this thesis sees an important task for literature in informing, activating, and inspiring the reader, it can say little about the degree to which the novels discussed here are actually effective at communicating their message about reparation to their audience or stimulating a productive response to that message. Above, I have discussed the benefits of literature as a safe space, but there are also drawbacks to such a position: literary works explore reparation and related themes from a distanced and privileged place that may not always lend sufficient gravity to the topics they address. That is to say, the safety of the literary space limits the real-life implications of literary representations, even as these representations bring readers into contact with new perspectives that may be inaccessible through other means. Moreover, it is not always clear who is reading a particular work, necessitating further research into the reception side of the work in question. The size of the audience appears to vary greatly between the three cases discussed here, and the identities of their readers may vary as well, both of which could influence the extent as well as the form of the novels’ respective influence on the reparation debate. To significantly impact the reparations debate, it may not be enough to reach a general readership, as these readers may have little impact on already ongoing processes of reparation. On the other hand, it is possible that literary works could inspire new, bottom-up initiatives toward reparation or reconciliation; but this, too, requires further investigation into the works’ reception. Future research might look at reader responses to these and other literary works, in order to find out whether they do indeed have an impact on their readers’ attitude toward reparation and, perhaps, whether they lead to some form of action: is there a correlation between reading certain works of literature and engaging in reparative (for instance, grassroots activist) activities? It would also be worthwhile to take a closer look at the use of literary works—time travel fiction, but also works that engage with history in other ways—in an educational setting.

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1. Goodreads works with a user-controlled tagging system, and works can appear on multiple shelves. Works are listed by number of tags, so that the “Science Fiction Books” shelf does not contain works with fewer than 326 ‘science-fiction’ tags. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Though intersectional feminism would not emerge until ten years after *Kindred*’s publication, this passage—and many others in the novel—can be understood as an illustration of intersectionality. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Reading the novel in the twenty-first century places yet another, unintentional distancing effect upon the experience, made all the more poignant when Dana muses, “[H]ow accepting would I be if I met a man who claimed to be from … two thousand nineteen” (63). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Time travel as depicted in *Outlander* is rooted in Celtic paganism, and precious stones form part of the ritual needed to safely traverse the portal of the standing stones. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. William Tryon (1729-1788) is one of few real historical figures appearing in the *Outlander* series. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. This is not the characters’ first significant encounter with slavery in the series: in the third installment, *Voyager* (1994), Claire becomes the unwilling owner of an enslaved man, whom eventually she releases on Jamaica. As *DoA* makes no major reference to these events, I have elected not to discuss them in more detail here; suffice to say that they entail a similar moral ambiguity and connection to White saviorism as the events of *DoA*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Gabaldon has self-identified only as “American,” adding that her “ancestry is both English and Mexican-American” (“About Diana”). In this thesis—and in light of the subject matter of her books—I approach her as a White author, though I hope my readers will recognize the limits of this (or any other) assigned identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)