Re-Forming the Past
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HE constellation of texts that I define as postmodern slave narratives is, as we have seen, complex and diverse. From the parodic and satirical treatment of slavery in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* to Toni Morrison’s haunting and melancholic treatment in *Beloved*, the African American postmodern slave narrative encompasses a wide range of aesthetic and political responses to the history of American slavery and its continuing legacy. The purpose of my project has been to examine these varying and often conflicted responses while simultaneously theorizing the common foundation these texts share. Rather than an all encompassing, stable genre, the African American postmodern slave narrative, much like “white” postmodern historical fictions, reflects a common need to critique the truth claims of objectivity and authenticity embedded in traditional history and narrative realism. How black writers have responded to this need varies from the inflections of black feminist thought and the implied claims of narrative authority in Butler’s *Kindred* and Morrison’s *Beloved* to the rejection of such claims in Charles Johnson’s metafictional narrative *Oxherding Tale*. Ultimately, African American postmodernism in general, and the postmodern slave narrative more specifically, is a complex discourse united by a commitment to re-forming the past through narrative.

The postmodern slave narrative is transgressive. It blurs the boundaries between genres, crossing them relentlessly and reinvesting popular forms often regarded as escapist or ahistorical with an overtly political dimension. It deconstructs realism as the dominant mode of historical narrative even as (in many instances) it implies that the past history of slavery is a knowable object, retrievable through written form. It merges the conflicting
discourses of postmodernism, black cultural nationalism, and black feminism, complicating each in the process. It conceptualizes black subjectivity and racial identity, in its past and present incarnations, in a complex manner that simultaneously rejects essentialism but acknowledges the need to create communities based on a shared history and culture. In the novels by Gomez and Delany, in particular, the postmodern slave narrative acknowledges the need to forge identities and communities beyond these racial categories in order to achieve liberation in a postmodern context. But, in spite of these transgressive tendencies, or perhaps because of them, writers of the postmodern slave narrative, much like their nineteenth-century counterparts, exhibit a persistent faith in the liberating potential of narrative fiction. For these writers, the act of re-forming the past is an overtly political gesture—a means of critiquing the legacy of slavery in the present by radicalizing our view of the past.

An implicit argument in my reading of the postmodern slave narrative as a transgressive form is that these texts, written in a span of sixteen years (1976–1991), constitute an epoch of sorts within the African American literary response to the history of slavery. Much as Georg Lukacs in The Historical Novel argues that the classical historical novel (as exemplified by the novels of Sir Walter Scott) arose out of a rising class consciousness as a result of the French Revolution, one could argue that the postmodern slave narrative is also the product of a distinct cultural moment in history. With the waning of the promise of both the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the radical politics of black cultural nationalism in the late sixties and early seventies, black writers sought a new literary form that would retain elements of these discourses while also responding to the developing discourse of postmodernism. For Lukacs, the classical historical novel arose out of the developing sense of history as having a direct effect on the life of every individual (as opposed to just the bourgeois or royal classes). As a result, texts produced in Europe during the late eighteenth century, for the first time, brought “the past to life as the prehistory of the present” (Historical 52). Similarly, the African American postmodern slave narrative’s return to the history of slavery reflected a developing sense that the cultural politics of the Reagan-Bush years was an extension of the past. During a time when blacks continued to struggle with poverty, unemployment, and homelessness in increasingly disproportionate numbers, these texts represented the strategic reclamation and articulation of a liberating identity for the postmodern age.

My reference to Lukacs in conjunction with the postmodern slave narrative may seem somewhat ironic given the fact that he viewed realism as
the most effective and potentially liberating mode of historical fiction. For Lukacs, anti-realist movements like Expressionism, Surrealism, and Modernism alienated readers from a sense of history by retreating into a subjective and solipsistic emphasis on the present. He argues: "A campaign against realism, whether conscious or not, and a resultant impoverishment and isolation of literature and art is one of the crucial manifestations of decadence in the realm of art" ("Realism" 1057). And yet, postmodern slave narratives retain many of the goals Lukacs lays out for historical fiction. These novels promote an active engagement with the past as a totality—one that reveals a continuing history of racial oppression and economic exploitation. Where writers of the postmodern slave narrative diverge from Lukacs's formulation is their insistence that realism and its conventions are no longer the most effective means to engage and reclaim that history. In their use of the fantastic and their rejection of realism, writers of the postmodern slave narrative revitalize our engagement with historical reality and force us to contemplate how narrative discourse (both fantastic and realist) shapes our experience of it.

In following Lukacs's example and characterizing the postmodern slave narrative as a distinct epoch in historical fiction, the question arises: Has there been a shift away from the formal choices and ideological implications of the postmodern slave narrative? With the popular and critical success of texts like Edward P. Jones's Pulitzer prize-winning novel *The Known World* (2003) and Steven Barnes's historical romance and alternate history *Lion's Blood* (2002), there is little question that the resonance of slavery in the literary imagination of readers and writers persists. Given the profound impact the legacy of slavery still has on contemporary racial politics, economic conditions, and cultural attitudes, it should come as no surprise that black writers continue to return to this moment in history. Although it would be an oversimplification to suggest that there has been a radical break from the generic innovations of the postmodern slave narrative, I would argue that an examination of these two texts reveal a retreat from the transgressive dimensions of the novels in this study. Although both *The Known World* and *Lion's Blood* bear the traces of influence of the postmodern slave narratives I have discussed, each maintains some distinction between realism and fantasy as narrative modes of representing the past. Rather than blurring the boundaries between genres, Jones complicates the history of slavery within the bounds of realism while Barnes re-examines the past from within the realm of fantastic literature.

In *The Known World*, Edward P. Jones examines a dimension of American slavery often ignored in both historical and fictional accounts:
the communities of free blacks who owned slaves. Much as Morrison tells the stories of the slaves and their interior lives obscured by traditional history in *Beloved*, Jones complicates our understanding of what have become almost archetypal figures in American literature: the enslaver and the slave. Although his transformation of these figures is less radical than what we see in Charles Johnson’s work, Jones forces us to embrace a more complex view of slavery as a social system rather than merely an economic one. By creating characters like Henry Townsend, the black slave owner, and John Skiffington, the conflicted white sheriff who abhors slavery but upholds the slave laws of the South, Jones suggests that a narrow view of the past ultimately leads to a limited conception of race, intraracial relationships, and interracial relationships.

Like several writers of postmodern slave narratives, Jones posits traditional history and the official historical record (characterized in the form of census takers, historians, and pamphleteers) against the more open-ended, oral, and speculative narrative style of the narrator. Anderson Frazier, a minor but recurring character in the novel, is a white Canadian pamphlet writer who interviews Fern Elston, a black slave owner. The narrator consistently points out all the information Fern omits in her interviews with him, thus highlighting the fissures that occur in historical accounts. The narrator also refers to the mistakes census takers made, often out of willful ignorance and racist attitudes, that ultimately undermine the accuracy of the official historical record. In their place, the omniscient narrator brings to bear on the story a vast knowledge drawn from oral accounts, interior monologues, extended dream sequences, and, perhaps most important, a view of time that spans generations. These elements work together to form a tapestry of narrative realism that acknowledges the relationship between past and present. The novel presents the passage of time as a continuum rather than conflating time periods. Although Jones does incorporate some elements of the fantastic and magical realism in his narrative (most notably in dream sequences), the novel does not draw overtly from other genres and non-mimetic forms. Rather, he uses the convention of the omniscient third-person narrator to broaden the scope of historical realism beyond the limitations of the official historical record. As such, *The Known World* revises rather than re-forms our understanding of slavery.

Where Jones expands the parameters of historical realism by manipulating the existing conventions of the genre, Steven Barnes infuses his essentially fantastic narrative with echoes of the real. In *Lion’s Blood*, Barnes creates an alternate history in which America is colonized by
Islamic African nations and white Europeans are enslaved by wealthy African families. The novel begins in an idyllic Irish village that is soon disrupted by tribal merchants who capture men, women, and children and sell them to African enslavers. The Irish slaves must travel across the Atlantic to their bondage in the New World. The two protagonists of the novel, Kai Ali, the son of a wealthy slave owner, and Aiden O’Dere, a young boy enslaved by Kai’s family, share a friendship complicated by the slave system in the new world. Barnes sets up his narrative as a direct parallel history to our own: families are torn apart by slavery, religious customs are derided by the dominant culture (in this case Christianity is the religion of the “other”), and slave owners subject their slaves to varying degrees of physical, psychological, and sexual torture. However, even as Barnes maintains an echo of American slavery in his narrative, the world of the novel and the real history of slavery remain distinct. Barnes presents readers with an alternate timeline rather than a conflation of past and present, one of the primary components of the postmodern slave narrative. As a result, rather than blurring the two histories, Lion’s Blood maintains its status as a fantastic historical romance, depicting a world separate from our own.

Neither The Known World nor Lion’s Blood signal a radical break from texts like Flight to Canada or The Gilda Stories. They do, however, suggest a shift in emphasis. The texts that form the basis of this study deconstruct narrative realism as an aesthetic and an ideological form and critique its impact on the historiography of slavery. In many ways, more recent texts by black writers are the beneficiaries of the expanded palette of historical representation created by the texts that preceded them. Both historical realism and fantastic literature have become viable and revitalized modes of re-examining the history of slavery. The fact that African American writers continue to examine slavery through a diversity of forms and narrative strategies reinforces the basic belief that we can understand our present and anticipate our future only through a thorough interrogation of our past. The lasting effect of postmodern discourse on the black writer is its acknowledgement that reconstructions of the past are always contextual and always serve an ideological end. As different as The Known World and Lion’s Blood are from the more radical genre crossing and deconstructive aspects of the postmodern slave narrative, they continue the tradition started by the original slave narratives themselves. They assert the need to revisit slavery through the narrative act and to destabilize our knowledge of this history.

Perhaps it is best to end by returning to the moment in Flight to Canada when Raven Quickskill asserts that his poem “Flight to Canada” is
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“a reading more than a writing” (5). Every writer of the postmodern slave narrative produces a reading of the culture that produced American slavery and maintained its legacy. What these texts remind us of is that, as readers, we perpetually make a decision as to where we place narrative authority. Reading becomes a form of writing history. In the end, this emphasis on the act of reading and interpretation as an active, ideological choice reinforces the political dimensions of postmodern aesthetics often obscured by its more abstract, theoretical claims. As such, African American approaches to postmodernism, particularly in the form of the postmodern slave narrative, rather than representing a marginalized response to the discourse at large, complicates it from within.