

Sarah Naomi Rapatz

(RE-)IMAGINING TIME

Time Conceptions in Afrofuturist Positions

Bachelor Thesis

Cross-Disciplinary Strategies, Institute of Arts and Society, University of Applied Arts
Vienna

Summer Term 2025

Contact: srapatz@gmail.com

Student Number: 01447358

Supervisor: Dr. Lisa Stuckey

Abstract

In this thesis, I examine how Afrofuturist positions negotiate time and re-imagine it as a form of resistance and critical engagement with the past. For this, I explore how Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* and Gystere's music video *WOMXN: Time Machine*, employ the trope of time travel to challenge linear, Eurocentric conceptions of temporality that depict the past as concluded. As a theoretical background I draw on interdisciplinary fields, including Black studies, literature studies, philosophy, and media studies, focusing on concepts such as Black hauntology, "rememory," and on the temporal concepts Sasa and Zamani and Sankofa. Methodologically, I combine my theoretical insights with media analysis to investigate how the trope of time travel functions as a means of confronting the persistent legacies of slavery, colonialism, and racial violence. I discuss how Afrofuturist approaches to time are characterized by a nonlinear, recursive, and political negotiation of time that positions memory, mourning, and speculative fiction as central practices of resistance.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Conceptual Framework: Afrofuturist Time	4
2.1. Black Hauntology	6
2.1.1 In the Wake	7
2.1.2. The Afterlife of Slavery.....	8
2.2. Temporal Frameworks Relating to the Past	8
2.2.1 Sasa and Zamani.....	9
2.2.2. Sankofa.....	10
2.2.3 Rememory	10
3. Comparative Case Analysis: “WOMXN: Time Machine” and “Kindred”	11
3.1. “Kindred”	11
3.2. “WOMXN: Time Machine”	13
3.3. Comparative Analysis.....	14
4. Conclusion	16
Sources	18
<i>Bibliography</i>	18
<i>Video works</i>	19
Author’s Declaration	20

1. Introduction

In this thesis I seek to critically reflect upon the construction of linear time and explore how alternative temporalities resist this dominance. By examining Afrofuturist positions, I will explore how these challenge dominant temporal structures in a political and cultural act of resistance.

The thesis is situated at the intersections of Western and African philosophy, cultural studies, media studies, and Black and African-American literature studies. I am going to discuss Afrofuturist engagements with nonlinear time, drawing upon writings by theorists Kodwo Eshun and Ytasha Womack, who are recognized as prominent figures in the field of Afrofuturism. Subsequently, I will investigate nonlinear time conceptions based on philosophical approaches that have emerged from Black studies and an extension of Jacques Derrida's (2012) notion of "hauntology." These approaches are further developed in contemporary critical race theory, as advanced by Saidiya Hartman (2008), Christina Sharpe (2016), Kashif Jerome Powell (2016), and Viviane Saleh-Hanna (2015). This will be complemented by an examination of the temporal frameworks Sasa and Zamani, Sankofa, and "rememory" relating to the past that challenge linear time.

Using this theoretical foundation, I aim to explore the following research questions: Firstly, how is time negotiated in Afrofuturist positions? Secondly, how can time or time travel form a means of resistance in Afrofuturist positions? In order to assess these questions, I will use my insights in Afrofuturist engagements with nonlinear time and analyze two Afrofuturist art works that both employ the concept of time travel in their respective works, albeit in different manners: the novel *Kindred* (1979) and the music video *WOMXN: Time Machine* (2022). Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is a seminal work that has been widely discussed. *WOMXN: Time Machine*, by contrast, is a more recent and comparatively less well-known production by Adrien Gystère Peskine and Anthony Peskine.

2. Conceptual Framework: Afrofuturist Time

Time is not objective. In Western thought, time is largely conceptualized as linear, progressive, disciplined, and directed towards the future (cf. Hutchings 2008, 155; cf. Hunfeld 2022, 106). This framework is closely tied to early capitalism and colonialism. One may notice this in the way time is addressed when it is "spent." This idea of time is constructed, and as Thabolwethu Tema Maphosa (2025, 2) demonstrates, has been and continues to be used as a "tool of dominance that creates the 'other.'" This is done by positioning Indigenous and African peoples within a backward historical narrative in order to legitimize domination, and by depriving and violently suppressing historical and traditional art, culture, and beliefs, and neglecting other temporalities. Through capitalism time is further abstracted by its rendering as a scarce resource, its commodification, and its deep embedding in the structuring and organization of life and work. Maphosa refers to this Western conception of time

as “colonial temporality” (ibid.). In light of this, Afrofuturist thought proposes a reimagining of temporality. In Afrofuturism the engagement with time is used as a method of remembering, imagining, and resisting. By drawing upon African cosmologies, ancestral memory, and speculative futures, Afrofuturism destabilizes the linear time narrative and offers alternative ways (cf. Womack 2013, 153–161).

In an interview with Mark Dery (1994, 215) for the book *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, in which the term “Africanfuturism” was coined, Tricia Rose, an American sociologist and professor of Africana Studies, asserted: “If you’re going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you’ve come from; ancestor worship in black cultures is a way of countering a historical erasure.” In another interview from the same book, Samuel R. Delany, an American science fiction author, points out that the systematic erasure of African pasts is a foundation of slavery and the reason for a lack of future-oriented imagery (cf. ibid., 190–191). The deliberate destruction of records, the enforced separation of individuals from the same region or family and the prohibition of indigenous languages are all examples of measures employed to systematically deprive enslaved Africans of their cultural memory.

The British-Ghanaian theorist and artist Kodwo Eshun (cf. 2003, 301), characterizes Afrofuturism as a recovery project, that seeks to reclaim suppressed or neglected histories and speculative futures imagined by the African diaspora. Afrofuturism functions as a space for developing conceptual and cultural tools to translate historical memory into speculative futures and actively intervene in the present political landscape (ibid.). By drawing from considerations by Eshun, I will show how Afrofuturism is a tool of resistance, where imagining new futures is a way of refusing the colonial grip of the past, the present, and the future. As Eshun writes in his 2003 article “Further Considerations on Africanfuturism”:

“[I]nquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial. The field of Africanfuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of counter-memory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.” (ibid., 289)

Kodwo Eshun argues that Africanfuturism is not only about imagining Black people in the future, but about actively shaping that future in a manner that address the erasures and violences of the past. However, this dedication to the past and memory is not purely retrospective. Africanfuturism extends counter-memories to the future as well, crafting what Eshun calls “counter-futures” that align the “Black Atlantic temporality” with both the proleptic and the retrospective (cf. ibid.). Building upon that, I argue that Africanfuturism aims not only to imagine alternate realities but also to critique the temporal structures of the present. Africanfuturism’s nonlinear time challenges the hegemony of Western temporality by insisting that time is not universal, neutral, or apolitical. It asserts that time is shaped

by power determining who is privileged to remember what, who is allowed to imagine the future, and who gets to survive.

This chapter outlines the conceptual foundations of Afrofuturist time to provide a basis for the analyses that follow. The following two sections (2.1. and 2.2.) introduce two key theoretical strands, which inform and shape Afrofuturism and its negotiation of time. The first section explores how Black hauntology forms a critical basis for understanding Afrofuturist's nonlinear engagements with time and how the past is immanent to the present and the future. Drawing on thinkers like Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Viviane Saleh-Hanna, and Kashif Jerome Powell, the chapter focuses on how history, spectrality, and the afterlife of slavery disrupt notions of historical distance and linearity. This chapter outlines the conceptual foundations of Afrofuturist time to provide a basis for the analyses that follow. Here, I will also provide a more detailed discussion of the key terms "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016) and "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2008). The second section discusses different temporal frameworks that provide alternative ways of relating to past, present, and future and challenging prevailing Western chronologies. In these frameworks, time is reconfigured as relational and nonlinear.

2.1. Black Hauntology

Black Hauntology* refers to a critical framework that examines how the aftermaths of slavery, colonialism, and racial violence persist in the present. The term is closely associated with the work of Saidiya Hartman, a highly regarded theorist and writer in contemporary critical race theory. In particular, her book *Lose Your Mother* (2007), which engages with the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermaths in the United States and Africa. Another important figure related to Black hauntology is Christina Sharpe, a prominent scholar in the field of Black Studies. Her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) further deepens the hauntological framework by introducing the metaphor of "the wake," which I will discuss in more detail later. Avery Gordon, sociologist and author of *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997), contributes to this discourse by analyzing how haunting is a social reality that reveals hidden power structures. Kara Keeling, professor of Cinema, Media Studies and American Studies, has also worked within this frame, investigating how Black spectrality operates across media, memory, and aesthetics.

Black hauntology forms a critical foundation for understanding Afrofuturist engagements with time. As Saidiya Hartman (cf. 2008, 6) has stated, Black life is haunted by the "afterlife of slavery," the repercussions of colonialism, slavery, and segregation. Although slavery has allegedly "ended", its structural and ontological violence continues to manifest itself in the present day. As Avery Gordon (2008, 13) writes, "something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples

* In December 2025 the study *Black Hauntologies: Slavery, Modernity and Spectral Re-Vision, Volume II* (forthcoming 2025) will be published, in which Kimberly W. Benston explores how the legacy of slavery continues to influence African-American literature and identity.

reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the contradictory formation we call New World modernity.”

The concept of “hauntology” was initially theorized by Jacques Derrida, a French-Algerian philosopher of deconstruction, in the book *Specters of Marx* (2012 [1993]). “Hauntology” challenges the traditional ontological study of being by asserting that being is never pure presence but always already haunted by the absence of the past, the dead, and the possibilities that never came to be (cf. Derrida 2012, xviii).

Black hauntology engages with and extends Derrida’s notion of hauntology by proposing that Black being is similarly not only constituted by presence but by the spectral forces of absence. As Kashif Jerome Powell (cf. 2014, 7), explains, the hauntology of Blackness emerges from the understanding that “the epistemological and ontological configurations of the institution of slavery transformed blackness from a phenotypical signifier to an inescapable marker of death; blackness signified a body politically and socially devoid of lineage, and lacking the ontological capacity for life.” In this perspective, a Black being is thus always and already constructed through an ontology of absence and negation and is haunted by the specters of an as yet unacknowledged past.

Haunting disrupts the Western conception of time and questions the conventional distinctions between past, present, and future. As Gordon (2008, xvi) asserts, “haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.” I argue that by attending to and engaging with the ghosts of the past, the amnesia that is fostered by capitalist time conceptions is rejected. As Saleh-Hanna rightly asserts, the process of colonizing and being colonized, creates different approaches to history. Warren Cariou (2006, 730), a professor in the Department of English, Theatre, Film and Media, uses the term “willed forgetfulness” in this context. As Saleh-Hanna (2015, 8) explains this term “to envision and articulate the overbearing silence – reimagined as enforced or willed forgetfulness surrounding colonial violence and its racializing ways.” Black hauntology is a concept that recognizes the structures that kill and attends to “those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death” (cf. Sharpe 2016, 34). As Walter R. Jacobs suggests, “if we deliberately investigate these ghosts [...] we can learn to take control over troubling memories; we may turn destructive haunting into something more enabling” (Jacobs 2007, 7, cited after Saleh-Hanna 2015, 8).

2.1.1 In the Wake

“In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.” (Sharpe 2016, 15) Haunting signifies unresolved historical violence. Hauntology describes a temporal disjunction in which the present is constantly interrupted and shaped by spectral traces of the past. Christina Sharpe is a prominent scholar in the field of Black Studies. Her theorization of “living in the wake” defines the condition of Black existence as one of surviving through the aftermaths of slavery, structured by the

“continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (ibid., 18). Black existence is structured by a time that does not heal but accumulates, as Ian Baucom (cf. 2001, 80) explains in *Specters of the Atlantic*. This is to say that slavery constitutes an ongoing ontology that structures Black life in the present, in the past, and in the future.

2.1.2. The Afterlife of Slavery

In this haunted temporality, Blackness is both the site and the archive of violence. Saidiya Hartman (2007, 6) names the “afterlife of slavery” as the reality where “black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago.” Black life is haunted by “the no longer” and “the not yet,” between the unresolved brutality of the past and the anticipated violence of the future. As Viviane Saleh-Hanna (2015, 3), who works on the concept of a “Black Feminist Hauntology,” writes, “the criminal justice system and chattel slavery are flip sides of Western democracy’s coin of capital.” The plantation morphs into the prison, the overseer into the police officer, the auction block into the courtroom. This is also reflected in Christina Sharpe’s (2016, 72) work, stating that “we are living in the afterlives of that brutality that is not in the past.” It persists in “the weather,” an atmosphere that shifts from slave law to lynch law to Jim and Jane Crow and into today’s structures of racial capitalism (cf. ibid., 76). In her analysis of “the weather,” Sharpe identifies antiblackness and white supremacy as a pervasive climate; “[...] it registers and produces the conventions of antiblackness in the present and into the future.” (Ibid., 22)

Black hauntology insists on a temporality that reflects the constant presence of historical violence. One of my focal points in this thesis is the question of whether reimagining time can be a means of resistance. By refusing the erasure of the past and imagining futures that emerge from unresolved histories, I argue that Black hauntology reclaims agency over temporal narratives and thereby renders the past as active in shaping present realities and future possibilities. This is in line with Afrofuturists’ objectives to recover and recollect memories of the past in order to develop future narratives.

2.2. Temporal Frameworks Relating to the Past

As mentioned above, the Western perception of time as linear, progressive, and finite has served as a framework for colonialism and capitalism. This model of time assumes a linear progression from the past through the present to the future. The past is gone, the present is the point of control, and the future needs to be optimized and planned for. This underscores notions of progress and development and legitimizes extractive systems that prioritize speed, productivity and future profits. In contrast, I will now examine three different temporal frameworks that offer a layered and nonlinear understanding of time, and thereby stand in contrast to Western narratives. These are Sasa and Zamani, a temporal framework stemming from East and Central African thought, signifying remembrance and

the collective experience of time. Sankofa, a concept that is closely related to the Afrofuturist tracing of histories; and the term “rememory” coined by Toni Morrison (cf. 2004, 36), are used to describe a bodily and physical dimension of memory.

2.2.1 Sasa and Zamani

Sasa (or Sasha) and Zamani are two ontological aspects of time. Sasa and Zamani describe a multi-layered and interwoven understanding of time. In this concept, time is a process of actualization, remembrance, and collective becoming and thereby resisting capitalist logics (cf. Aliyu 2023).

Sasa is defined by John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* (cf. 1970, 27–31) as “micro time,” which encompasses to the present, the recent past, and the near future. It is the space of the living and of the dead who are still remembered. Accordingly, Sasa includes the present moment and those phenomena that are still within living memory. It is where events are experienced, felt, and spoken about and where memory lives (cf. *Ibid.*, 28). Zamani, on the other hand, is the “macro time” that represents the deep past, the ancestral, and the infinite. It begins where Sasa ends, yet concurrently there is no distinct boundary between Sasa and Zamani, they overlap and cannot be distinguished. “Sasa feeds or disappears into Zamani.” (Mbiti 1970, 29) Only once events have passed through Sasa, when they have been lived and remembered, they become part of Zamani. “It is the final storehouse for all phenomena and events, the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before.” (*Ibid.*) Sasa and Zamani also express a deeply communal understanding of time. The term “Sasa” is used to describe both the living and the recently deceased who are still remembered by the living. The truly dead only pass into Zamani when no one of the living remembers them personally, but as long as someone recalls a story, a name or a gesture, they remain part of Sasa. “The older a person is, the longer is his Sasa period. The community also has its own Sasa, which is greater than that of the individual.” (*Ibid.*, 28) Through this time concept the act of collective remembering takes on a much greater significance.

I argue that in this concept the past is not something to overcome, but rather something to re-enter, to reactivate, and live alongside, which is closely related to what I have discussed above in terms of Black hauntology. Black hauntological approaches to time also refuse to overcome the past and emphasize on recursive presence through memory and resistance. In this framework, the past is immanent in the present, similarly to the Sasa/Zamani model. It surrounds and informs the present, but the “present” is fluid, and constantly interconnected with the future and the past. This understanding is also reflected in Afrofuturist time conceptions, in which historical time is deconstructed and ancestors are brought into speculative futures.

2.2.2. Sankofa

Sankofa is an Adinkra symbol originating from the Nzema people of Southwest Ghana. The Sankofa symbol, is often depicted as a bird looking back and carrying the egg of the future on its wings. The bird symbolizes the act of returning to the past to retrieve what is essential for moving forward. The term “Sankofa” means “go back and gather” in Twi (cf. Preston 2025, 2). Sankofa does not romanticize the past but critically engages with it by acknowledging both historical pain and cultural resilience (cf. Ibid.). In the context of Afrofuturist thought, this symbol is an inspiration for speculative work that reconnects with ancestral knowledge, cultural heritage, and history and simultaneously draws the Black experience into imagined futures (cf. Ibid., 16). This reflects Afrofuturism’s commitment to the temporal entanglement of memory and futurity. It is a call to go back and gather knowledge from the past, roots, and stolen history in order to move forward. Through this double movement—backward and forward, no longer and not yet—Afrofuturism reclaims the past, the present, and the future as a space of possibility, resistance, and restoration.

2.2.3 Rememory

In the novel *Beloved* (2004 [1987]) Toni Morrison (cf. 2004, 36) formulates the neologism “rememory” as a new term beyond the classic notion of memory. It refers to the active and often painful re-living of past events, especially those that have been repressed or forgotten. “Rememory” is therefore a phenomenon in which spaces and bodies retain the trauma of past violence. As Toni Morrison writes:

“I was talking about time. It’s so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.” (Morrison 2004, 35–36)

“Rememory” is a collective and spatial persistence of the past in the present. As interpreted by Powell (cf. 2016, 259), “rememory” suggests that the past does not stay confined in linear time but instead resurfaces through the embodied presence of individuals. It is felt and re-lived through body and mind. Saleh-Hanna (cf. 2015, 7) further defines “rememory” as “structural remembrance transcending individual or time-segregated acts of remembrance,” emphasizing its collective and political dimensions. “Rememory” expands memory beyond the realm of individual experience, framing it as something that persists in social structures and institutional practices, operating through the physical and institutional bodies of both the oppressed and their oppressors (ibid. 8).

3. Comparative Case Analysis: “WOMXN: Time Machine” and “Kindred”

Having established the theoretical and conceptual foundations above, this section applies them to my case studies. For the comparative analysis, I chose two works that specifically engage with the concept of time travel. In her seminal work *Kindred*, Octavia Butler employs the literary trope of time travel as a means of relocating the atrocities of the Antebellum South in the year 1976, thus proposing a neo-slave narrative (cf. Parham 2009, 7). *Kindred* follows Dana, a twenty-six-year-old black woman living in Los Angeles, as she repeatedly and involuntarily travels through time. As the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the protagonist is being drawn to the 19th-century Southern United States, where she encounters her ancestors, a free Black woman and the white son of a plantation owner, and must navigate the brutal realities of slavery. Octavia Butler (1947–2006) was a renowned American science fiction writer. She integrated African-American spiritualism, themes, and concerns into speculative fiction and was therefore associated with Afrofuturism and Black science fiction.

The second piece of work I discuss also concerns the subject of time travel, albeit implemented in a different manner. The act of time travelling or rather the endeavor to travel back in time is used as a means to prevent the murder of a friend. The music video, co-directed by Adriene Gystere Peskine and Anthony Peskine, follows the protagonist Wominasa WOMXN Nzumbi, a young Black woman navigating her existence in a world characterized by the legacies of colonialism and anti-Black violence. Gystere, short for Adriene Gystere Peskine, is a Paris-based multi-instrumentalist, singer-songwriter, visual artist, and producer, whose work fuses funk, R&B, rap, jazz, and progressive rock with Afro-Brazilian accents. Gystere has been described as a fusion of “subtle groove, multi-layer writing and exaggerated psychedelia, under and afro-futuristic theme that refers to the voodoo jazz funk of the 70s as much as to the anti-racist activism of our time” (Spotify 2025). The music video includes the two songs *WOMXN* and *Time Machine*, which were released as singles in 2019 and became part of Gystere’s debut album released in 2020. The music video was uploaded to YouTube on 28th of September 2022 and has received a total of 17,388 views.

Both positions, *Kindred* and *WOMXN: Time Machine*, can be productively analyzed through the lens of my conceptual framework, as I will show in the following.

3.1. “Kindred”

Octavia Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred* is regarded as a foundational text in Afrofuturist literature. *Kindred* rethinks the concept of time travel as a confrontation with historical trauma. The novel is set in Altadena, California, in the year 1976, and follows the protagonist Dana, a Black woman. Right at the beginning of the narrative it becomes apparent that Dana possesses the ability to travel through space

and time, as she is repeatedly brought back in time to the antebellum South. There she finds herself in various scenarios that demand her intervention to preserve the life of Rufus Weylin, her white ancestor, a son of a slave holder and later slave holder himself. In this way, *Kindred* compels the audience to engage directly with the brutal legacy of slavery, by depicting it not as a distant past but as a persistent presence. These involuntary journeys through time reflect the entanglement of history and identity, revealing how the past continues to shape the present and the future. *Kindred* negotiates time not as a linear progression but as an active and looping force, as Mark Fisher puts it, as the “looped time of Afrofuturist trauma” (Fisher 2013, 51). Dana’s repeated displacement into the past reflects how the violent legacy of slavery continually re-emerges and unfolds in the present. This is closely related to Christina Sharpe’s (cf. 2016) conception of Black life living “in the wake,” in which Black existence is haunted by the unresolved trauma of slavery. Dana also becomes a literal and figurative ghost in the narrative: “‘Disappeared? You mean like smoke?’ ... ‘Like a ghost?’” (Butler 2006, 24)

Dana’s movement between temporal zones emphasizes the continuity of violence across centuries. This form of haunting reflects one of the core functions of neoslave narratives: not to represent history as static, but to bring “the historical past into the present tense,” in order to show survival, resistance, and the transition from victim to survivor (cf. Parham 2009, 7). Same as Sankofa, Butler does not romanticize the past, but critically engages with it by acknowledging historical pain and cultural resilience. Butler does not simply depict historical atrocities but reactivates them, forcing Dana and the reader to confront the intimate bodily realities of slavery, without a safe historical distance. In this context time travel is employed as a tool to initiate an ethical reckoning. The mechanism of the time travel remains unexplained. Dana is not a scientist or explorer who builds a time machine. She is pulled through time by her genetic connection to Rufus. Butler herself noted that *Kindred* is not technically science fiction because there is no invented technology, only the history that pulls its descendants back into its grip (cf. Womack 2013, 158).

From *Kindred*, I can also see a connection to Eshun’s text “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism”: By compelling Dana into proximity with her ancestors and their history, *Kindred* may exemplify what Eshun (cf. 2003, 301) describes as Afrofuturism’s capacity to recover “histories of counter-futures” and to produce “tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation.” As the novel looks backwards to address the erasures and violence of the past and recover lost black futures, it insists that survival requires an engagement with how the past constructs the present. Dana’s final physical injury, the loss of her arm during the time travel process, might illustrate the costs of this historical memory, or as Butler put it, “You don’t leave a place like that without becoming part of it” (Butler, 1987 cited after Preston 2025,18). Preston (2025, 17) accurately notes that *Kindred* demonstrates “Afrofuturism’s call to confront history while seeking liberation from its constraints.”

In *Kindred*, time is not negotiated as neutral. It is rather shaped by power, trauma, and ancestry. Butler reinterprets time travel as a means of historical engagement that interrogates the legacies of slavery

and empowers the present to act. In this manner, time travel is used as a metaphor for critical memory work. Butler employs the trope of time travel to expose the ongoing violence and entanglements of colonial history with the present and the future. Thus, *Kindred* demonstrates how Afrofuturist literature can utilize time itself, or specifically time travel, as a means of resistance. Despite the cruelty *Kindred* depicts, it does contain an empowering dimension. Dana's survival is an active resistance, such as her literacy, her refusal to submit, and her ultimate decision to sever ties with Rufus, these are all acts of agency. As Womack notes, Butler's speculative worlds allow Black women to become "vulnerable in their victories and valiant in their risky charge to enlighten humanity." (Womack 2013, 110)

3.2. "WOMXN: Time Machine"

Gystere's *WOMXN: Time Machine* is another example of Afrofuturist media that employs the trope of time travel to address ongoing state violence and historical trauma in regards to structural racism. The video centers on Wominasa, played by Virginie Ehonian, who is killed by the same police officer who had murdered her father in 1993. This recurring violence reflects the structural nature of anti-Black policing and relates directly to the concept of Black hauntology and what Christina Sharpe (2016, 18) refers to as "the wake." The ongoing and systemic violence is directed against the Black body in the "afterlife of slavery," where the legacy of racial domination persists and is perpetuated through contemporary institutions, such as the police and the prison system. This perspective aligns with Saleh-Hanna's (cf. 2015, 20) argument that colonial slavery and modern criminal justice systems are inextricably linked and part of an unbroken lineage, in which policing, incarceration, and surveillance carry forward the logic of enslavement. Saleh-Hanna states that "the relationships between colonial slavery and criminal justice violence are inevitable and unavoidable" (ibid.). The police do not function as a "neutral" institution, but rather as an inheritor of the plantation's disciplinary structures. The connection between today's structures and the colonial past is also reflected in the name of the restaurant at which Wominasa is employed, *Au Temps Béni*. It is a reference to the song *Le Temps Des Colonies* (1976) by Michel Sardou, which has been criticized for its glorification of France's colonial past. The restaurant's mascot is a colonial master who, like the police, is depicted with the white nationalist Celtic Cross, a symbol associated with white supremacists. Similarly, Saleh-Hanna describes the continuation of colonialism in institutions: "from slave ships into plantations into penitentiaries, shifting from ship captain to plantation owner to prison warder and police officer" (Saleh-Hanna 2015, 6).

I argue that the use of the time machine built in the second half of the video and the employment of the trope of time travel in this work can be connected to the concept of "rememory." A term, as I explained above, drawn from Toni Morrison and further theorized by Powell (cf. 2014, 60): "Re/memory" refers to a deep and embodied form of remembering. It is an unresolved presence that shapes how the present is lived and experienced. In Powell's (ibid., 62) terms: The experience of Black

mourning and memory cannot be disentangled from the body. It is lived, felt, and continually reanimated through acts of “re/membering.” As Powell (cf. *ibid.*) contends, the Black body becomes the “materialization of failed mourning, a specter of blackness that, through the act of re/membering, performs the double move of ontologizing and localizing the affective moments of collapse [...]” within the body’s lived reality. This process marks the affective interplay between death and life and situates grief and violence as phenomena that remain unresolved and inscribed onto the body itself. In this way, the Black body becomes a witness to absences that cannot be fully located or healed. Powell describes how the “re/membering” of Blackness activates an affective relation to loss, one that is heightened precisely because the sites of violence are often erased or no longer exist. Thus, the body emerges as a haunting site, carrying histories of violence and ungrievable losses. This phenomenon is reflected in political slogans, chants, and performative re-enactments. The *Black Lives Matter* movement’s practices of repetition, through chants such as “I can’t breathe,” “Say Their Names,” and “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” with the hands-up pose as well as T-shirts that read “I Am Mike Brown” reflects a deliberate act of mourning. This act of grief acknowledges the realities of systemic racism and brings these matters into presence by using their bodies’ visibility. Through embodied performances such as raised hands or protest chants protesters transform their own bodies into sites of resistance and remembrance, where the dead are kept present through collective re/memory and spectral continuity. Connecting to this, I would interpret the time machine in the music video *WOMXN: Time Machine* as a speculative intervention that challenges the prevailing linear concepts of time, which often foster forgetting. In this context the time machine symbolizes a demand for justice and a refusal to forget. This procedure is akin to the practices by the *Black Lives Matter* movement and practices of mourning. In the video, the friends desire to travel back in time, which can be interpreted as a refusal to allow Wominasa’s death, and that of her father, to remain unaddressed. The video concludes with the words “In memory of all ancestors, sisters and brothers killed, oppressed and marginalized by the system” (Gystere 2022, 10:45). This links the speculative narrative with the real world.

3.3. Comparative Analysis

“So what does one do in the meantime? What are the stories one tells in dark times? How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future.” (Hartman 2008,14)

Michel de Certeau, as cited by Saidiya Hartman in *Venus in Two Acts* (cf. 2008,14), outlines two historiographical approaches that “make a place for the living”: one draws on the past in service of the present, helping us to understand “who we are in relation to who we have been”; the other interrogates the production of historical knowledge itself (cf. *ibid.*). *Kindred* can be seen as enacting both operations. It brings the past into the present through Dana’s time travels, while also challenging linear historical narratives by highlighting the unresolved violent foundation of Black life. While structurally different, *WOMXN: Time Machine* similarly engages with these questions by using time travel to expose the

haunting effects of racialized violence. Both *Kindred* and *WOMXN: Time Machine* utilize time travel as a central device to examine and challenge the impact of Black historical trauma. Butler and Gystere employ a different medium—Butler a novel and Gystere a music video—but both converge in their understanding of time as nonlinear, haunted, and political. In their works the trope of time travelling is employed to highlight the enduring influence of slavery and colonialism on the present.

In *Kindred*, Dana's involuntary time travel between the 1970s and the antebellum South calls into question the assumption of a temporal distance between slavery and the present. As previously outlined, Fisher (2013, 51) describes this as the "looped time of Afrofuturist trauma," underscoring that racial and colonial violence is not a relic of the past, but persists in the present. "[T]he past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present." (Sharpe 2016, 15) The novel negotiates time as intricately interwoven with ancestry, trauma, and power. *WOMXN: Time Machine* depicts time as a linear progression, but as a recursive structure in which violence is repeated. The murder of Wominasa by the same policemen who killed her father decades earlier exemplifies how racist police violence is perpetuated and how it is linked to Black existence "in the wake" and in the "afterlife of slavery": This violence functions as a continuation of the disciplinary regimes of slavery. As reflected in Saleh-Hanna's (cf. 2015, 6, 20) argument that the police, like the prison system, are institutions genealogically linked to the plantation and the slave ship. In both works, the critical engagement with time serves to expose these continuities.

Yet the works diverge in how they imagine the intervention. In the literary work *Kindred*, time travel is something that happens to Dana. She is pulled back by forces beyond her control, linked through blood and genealogy. The mechanism of time travel is symbolic, reflecting how Black identity is shaped by history and violence. Butler employs this to critique the idea of historical distance: the past is not past; rather it marks and violates the present, as seen in Dana's literal loss of her arm. "[T]he past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present." (Sharpe 2016, 15) Here, time becomes embodied. In contrast, the concept of time travel in *WOMXN: Time Machine* is characterized as a collective, constructed, and deliberate act. The time machine is collectively built by Wominasa's friends. In this context, I see the notion of time travel more in relation to the concept of "rememory" as theorized by Powell. In the video, the speculative act of time travel becomes a form of mourning and political intervention, grounded in grief and communal resistance. The closing message reads: "In memory of all ancestors, sisters and brothers killed, oppresses and marginalized by the system." (Gystere 2022, 10:45) Together with the T-shirt worn by Wominasa, which commemorates Adama Traoré, a black French man who was killed in police custody, the message links the speculative with real-world incidents and protests.

Returning to my research questions, I argue that both *Kindred* and *WOMXN: Time Machine* demonstrate how Afrofuturist narratives challenge conventional linear temporalities that focus on progress and regard the past as a definitive and finished state. Both works negotiate the past, the

present, and the future as inextricably intertwined. As Tricia Rose, Samuel R. Delany, and Kodwo Eshun rightly asserted, the act of regathering and reclaiming a stolen history is essential for envisioning a future. Just as the Sankofa bird, retrieving from the past what is essential for the future. Acknowledging and confronting the ongoing presence of slavery and colonialism and how their legacies continue to structure the present, is also crucial for Afrofuturist practices. The metaphor of time travel in these works functions as a means of countering historical amnesia and asserting the continuity between past and present injustices.

In this paper I examined Afrofuturist examples that specifically engaged with the concept of time and time travel. Therefore, it was not possible to address the question of how Afrofuturist positions negotiate time in general. However, the paper demonstrated that the Afrofuturist approach to time is nonlinear, acknowledging and reclaiming stolen histories to engage with them in the present and to create a future that is informed by these histories.

4. Conclusion

The paper has explored how time is negotiated in Afrofuturist positions and how time or time travel can function as a form of resistance. Through an analysis of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Gystere's *WOMXN:Time Machine*, and theoretical and temporal frameworks, it becomes clear that Afrofuturist narratives challenge dominant notions of time. In particular, they reject the linear, Eurocentric conception of temporality, which treats progress as inevitable and the past as fully concluded (cf. Hunfeld 2022, 106). Instead, these works determine time as recursive and structurally haunted. Past, present, and future are not clearly demarcated from one another, but are intertwined. It has shown that Afrofuturism can be a means of reclaiming historical agency and reconfiguring temporality to center Black survival and history. Afrofuturist positions negotiate time as a medium through which historical violence is re-engaged and acknowledged and stolen histories are reclaimed. Dana's involuntary time travel in *Kindred* as well as the attempt of constructing a time machine in *WOMXN:Time Machine* both operate as mechanisms of return. Either a return to unacknowledged violence and historical atrocities or a return to memory and grief. As Powell (cf. 2014, 62) and Saleh-Hanna (cf. 2015, 7–8) point out, the past structurally persists through memory and reappears in bodies, institutions, and mourning practices. In both case studies, remembering becomes a refusal of "willed forgetfulness." Both works insist on the necessity of remaining with the unfinished.

The concepts of Sasa and Zamani further expand this thesis and nonlinear temporal logics. Sasa challenges the notion of the past as a static and closed entity by proposing an alternative framework in which the recently deceased and their histories remain actively present and imprinted (cf. Mbit 1970, 28). Zamani, in turn, encompasses the deeper ancestral past, representing a living repository (cf. *ibid.*, 29). These frameworks disrupt Western time conceptions by emphasizing communal and cyclical

structures of remembrance, in which the dead remain in social and moral consciousness. This is significant for both case studies, insofar as both of them negotiate mourning as a form of presence.

Black hauntology further informs this understanding of nonlinear time by asserting that the unresolved violence of slavery and colonialism continues to structure the present (cf. Saleh-Hanna 2015, 8–9). Drawing from the work of Hartman, Sharpe, Saleh-Hanna, and Powell, this framework demonstrates how Black life is shaped by what remains unrieved and institutionally denied. The concept of Black hauntology emphasizes that history does not disappear, but rather metamorphoses into a spectral form, manifesting in tangible and intangible dimensions.

Moreover, the symbol of Sankofa underscores the principle that looking back is essential for moving forward. This idea is central to Afrofuturist temporality, namely that futures are not imagined in isolation from the past, but through deliberate and critical engagements with it. In this manner, Afrofuturist negotiation of time emerges as a means of reexamining historical knowledge, criticizing the present, and imagining alternative futures. The act of reimagining time asserts that the past is not behind us, and the future is not unattainable, but rather, that both must be negotiated through the urgencies of the present.

Sources

Bibliography

Benston, Kimberly W. Forthcoming 2025. *Black Hauntologies: Slavery, Modernity and Spectral Re-Vision, Volume II*. London: Anthem Press.

Butler, Octavia E. 2006. *Kindred*. 25th anniversary ed. Bluestreak. Boston: Beacon Press.

Cariou, Warren. 2006. "Haunted Prairie: Aboriginal 'Ghosts' and the Specters of Settlement." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (Spring): 727–734.

Derrida, Jacques. 2012. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Dery, Mark, ed. 1994. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822396765>.

Eshun, Kodwo. 2003. 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism'. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2): 287–302.

Fisher, Mark. 2013. 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology'. *Dancecult* 5 (2): 42–55. <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.03>.

Gordon, Avery F. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. New University of Minnesota Press ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hartman, Saidiya. 2007. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Hartman, Saidiya. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, no. 26 (June): 1–14.

Hunfeld, Katharina. 'The Coloniality of Time in the Global Justice Debate: De-Centring Western Linear Temporality'. *Journal of Global Ethics* 18, no. 1 (2 January 2022): 100–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2022.2052151>.

Jacobs, W. R. 2007. *Ghostbox: A Memoir*. New York: iUniverse.

Keeling, Kara. 2019. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. New York: New York University Press.

Maphosa, Thabolwethu Tema, and Refiloe Makama. 2025. 'From Colonial Time to Decolonial Temporalities'. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64 (2): e12817. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12817>.

Mbiti, John S. 1970. *African Religions & Philosophy*. 1. edition. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books.

Morrison, Toni. 2004. *Beloved*. First Vintage International Edition. London: Vintage Books.

Parham, Marisa. 2009. 'Saying "Yes": Textual Traumas in Octavia Butler's "Kindred"'. *Callaloo* 32 (4): 1315–31.

Powell, Kashif. 2014. 'Specters and Spooks: Developing A Hauntology of The Black Body'. <https://doi.org/10.17615/3AYX-FW87>.

Powell, Kashif Jerome. n.d. 'Making #BlackLivesMatter: Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and the Specters of Black Life', no. Vol. 16(3), 253–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616634770>.

Preston, Adisa. 2025. 'Sankofa in Action: Reclaiming Our Future'. *Tapestries: Interwoven Voices of Local and Global Identities*, Our Disciplines of Hope: A New Era of Resilience, 14 (1).

Saleh-Hanna, Viviane. 2015. 'Black Feminist Hauntology: Rememory the Ghosts of Abolition?' *Champ Pénal* Vol. XII. <https://doi.org/10.4000/champpenal.9168>.

Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Spotify. 2025. "Gystere." Spotify. Accessed May 15, 2025. <https://open.spotify.com/intl-de/artist/0kt9PWvpoQ1dGqAA72LfPK>.

Womack, Ytasha. 2013. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. First edition. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.

Video works

Gystere, WOMXN: Time Machine, YouTube video, 6:00, posted by GYSTERE, September 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jdt4gBMybkw>.

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author and composer of my thesis and that no other sources or learning aids, other than those listed, have been used. Furthermore, I declare that I have acknowledged the work of others by providing detailed references of said work. I also hereby declare that my thesis has not been prepared for another examination or assignment, either in its entirety or excerpts thereof.


Sarah Rapatz

Vienna, June 9, 2025