

Indelible Race Memories and Subliminal Epigenetics in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

“Here’s one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can’t. Its scars will never fade. When you saw your mother sold off, your father beaten, your sister abused by some boss or master did you ever think you would sit here today, without chains, without the yoke, among a new family? Everything you ever knew told you that freedom was a trick—yet here you are” (Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*).

Abstract: Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* highlights complexities beyond those related to a tale of time-travel and a painful slave narrative. It allows us to reimagine definitions of “race memory” and “trauma” along the lines of genetic ancestry that is explored through the real and numinous lives of Dana and Kevin from the Maryland of the 1770s to 1976 California. The inescapable web of power, racial and gender disparities disturb Dana and make her undergo the agonizing process of transcending the limits of the present world to enter the past. The legacy of antebellum slavery that Butler records through this repeated transcendence is transhistorical and can be studied as scientific racism. This essay offers ways of reading Dana’s time-travel as the recuperation of biological memories caused due to epigenetics or trauma transmitted transgenerationally. Through several epistemic moments that validate the anguish and abuse endured in the past, this essay opens avenues for lived transhistorical trauma to demand both literary and medical attention.

Keywords: Epigenetics, transgenerational, scientific racism, post-racial trauma, race memories

The notion of freedom as a “trick” or delusion that entices slaves only to lead them to its unattainability dominates Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred*. Butler endows time with the role of a middle passage as Dana and her husband Kevin embark on transhistorical journeys shuttling between freedom and slavery while being caught up in the quagmire of this phantasmagoric experience. The ethos of this novel articulates a complexity that goes beyond the genre of speculative fiction, the poetics of time-travel, and a powerful slave narrative. *Kindred*

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subconsciously grapples with the following questions: 1. Can American literature ever free itself from the association between the black body in pain and deranged pornographic violence? 2. Can the application of epigenetic research to slave narratives free the African American community from the burden of race memories? Through epistemic spaces in Dana's present encounters, as well as in some of her frightening experiences in the pre-Civil War Weylin plantation, Butler demonstrates how epigenetics makes the collective memory of American slavery inseparable from the African American black body. Scientific racism has proved itself to be another way of propagating racism through practical evidence. In fact, anthropometry "by sheer accident, an appalling one in retrospect" has linked together "Negroes and apes" (Jordan 229).¹ Such an assumption entails the idea that black folk are primordially "savage" and need to be controlled through labor and torture, a logic that makes slavery an imperative tool of discipline.² Dana, the young African American female protagonist of the novel, is confronted with this idea on a more intimate level as she meets her ancestors who make her realize that historically black bodies have been contested sites of torture. Through her mystical transportation to an alternate world in the Weylin plantation during the 1800s, she also encounters the truth that her lineage is associated with the antebellum binary of slavery, concubinage, and white oppression. Dana meets Rufus Weylin, the young, white, male inheritor of the Weylin plantation who forces himself on his concubine Alice, who is originally a free black woman. Eventually, Alice gives birth to Hagar, who is Dana's direct ancestor. Dana's lived experiences through episodes marked with rape and merciless slave whipping causes her physical pain from the alternate world to get transmuted to both physical and psychological anguish in her present-day California life.

Dana's mystical transportation to the antebellum Weylin plantation and her encounters with Alice, Rufus, Hagar, and her other ancestors echo the fact that epigenetic trauma has direct

effects on the biological and behavioral ramifications of an offspring exposed to their tortured predecessors. Dana's post-racial phantasmagoria makes her aware of the pseudoscientific idea of racial superiority versus racial inferiority and also makes her susceptible to psychopathology. Epigenetic research has been primarily embedded in Holocaust studies with the theory that individuals whose ancestors were in the extermination camps have something in their genes that makes them react to pain and violence differently from other people. Butler allows her readers to explore her characters' race memories outside of the discourse of trauma studies. In an interview published in *Callaloo*, Butler confesses how it was impossible for her to let Dana return to her present life intact (Randall 495-504). According to Butler, it was imperative to make Dana endure physical maltreatment at the hands of Rufus that causes her to lose her left arm; the whole incident being symbolic of the remorseless effects of antebellum slavery. After its initial publication, Butler chose to classify *Kindred* as a "historical novel" or "fantasy" (McCaffery 65-66) because she felt that there is "no science" in *Kindred* ("An Interview" 495). My reading of *Kindred* directly challenges this view and strongly situates the novel within the scientific study that in real life people of color biologically inherit the detrimental effects of white racism; this process is further complimented by transgenerational racial disparities which can find obvious representations in a person's physiological, hormonal and mental health. While Dana's feeling of incarceration expressed through the words, "I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it-or growing into it" (261) can be explained as a by-product of Butler's fantastical imagination, it can also be verified as the impact of white racism on the "geographical, social... psychological, and biological aspects of human existence" (Sullivan 190). Sullivan's persuasive study of epigenetics demonstrates how "white racism can have durable effects on the biological constitution of human beings that are not limited to the specific person who is the target

of white racism, but instead extend to that person's offspring" (190), something that is extensively explored by Butler in *Kindred*. The novel allows itself to be read like an apartheid archive made up of the lived experiences of African Americans like Hagar, Luke, Nigel, Carrie and also Dana's white husband Kevin, who becomes a direct participant in his wife's sufferings. Kevin Franklin is a progressive man who abhors the reluctance of his racist white sister to accept Dana into the Franklin family. He is deeply in love with Dana and becomes a partner in her transcendental time-travels. However, Kevin's presence in this apartheid archive becomes an anomaly because in spite of being a white man he has trouble normalizing and internalizing the daily violent ruptures in the lives of the slaves in Weylin.

Reading *Kindred* as a sample of postcolonial African American literature is founded on Susan VanZanten Gallagher's argument that postcolonial writing "emerges from people who were colonized by European powers, now have some form of political independence, but continue to live with the negative economic and cultural legacy of colonialism" (4-5). There is a specific arrangement in the way Dana's episodic time-travels begin and end. Every time she transcends to her past, she suffers from dizziness and momentarily loses control over her cognizance. In order to come back to reality, she undergoes some form of extreme physical pain. Dana also becomes more and more aware of the legacy of colonialism as her own behavioral pattern changes upon witnessing scenes of violence at the Weylin plantation. While observing a slave tied to a tree and being flogged by a few white men Dana reminds herself,

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. (36)

This is one of the most vital moments in *Kindred*, where Dana's self-analysis displays the collision between the slavish psyche of Maryland during the 1770s and the far more progressive thinking of California in 1976. The trajectory of Dana's entire process of experiencing dizziness, unclear vision and faint voice hearing is followed by watching a black man dragged and hunted by a number of white men with a pack of semi-feral dogs, the forerunners of the Ku Klux Klan. According to Lisa Blackman's account, epigenetics forms links between "voice hearing, trauma, and abuse" (256). She suggests that these particular experiences are psychosocial processes and could be the ramifications of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations (AVH) (265). Recounting her troubled encounter with voice hearing, Dana admits, "I felt strangely disoriented. For a moment, I thought Rufus was calling me again. Then I realized that I was really dizzy and *only confused*" (115).³ The complex questions involving voice hearing, followed by visions of racial violence haunting the victim's consciousness brings the humanities closer to research in the neurosciences, creating pathways for a more interdisciplinary approach towards the understanding of epigenetics in fact and fiction (Blackman 250).

Dana's personal archive of transhistorical experiences opens avenues to reconsider the ontologies that work with the intersection of processes that are psychological, biological, material, immaterial, historical, and psychic. In the scene where she is reading from a "leather-bound" *Robinson Crusoe* to the young Rufus, her initial apprehension is centered around the "archaic spelling and punctuation" that she is about to encounter, but soon the budding 20th-century writer in her is overcome by the slavish mentality of an 18th-century "castaway" who is just "happy to escape into the fictional world of someone else's trouble" (*Kindred* 87). Thus, understanding

Dana's realization that, "[T]hese people were my relatives, my ancestors. And this place could be my refuge" (37) forces readers to perceive *Kindred* beyond the gamut of a historical novel of slave life or purely as a science fiction narrative. The aforementioned scene contains a moment of exposition of the potential that biological memories of environmental experiences have which "can be embedded in the human genome and even transmitted transgenerationally" (Meloni 389). After being a part of an ambience tainted by blood and the low, gurgling, "gut-wrenching" cry of a bruised man, his wife, and their child Alice, Dana becomes permanently infected with certain race memories that create an everlasting awareness in her; it is a prompting that race is not a "natural biological category that distinguishes groups of people" (Schalge & Rudolph 9). As Dana's understanding of racial inequalities deepens, her acceptance of race as culturally constructed but socially lived becomes more and more fortified.

Dana's individual consciousness of antebellum torture is a strong ramification of the collective historical understanding of slavery as she finds herself not just on the "wrong side of history but trapped and maimed by a history stranger and crueller than they have been taught to imagine" (Yaszek 1053). In a fleeting moment the story of Robinson Crusoe isolated in a deserted island near Trinidad acts as a testimony of white supremacist control, while later in the novel the "compact paperback history of slavery in America" that Dana finds in Kevin's desk becomes a testament of her personal experiences at the plantation (*Kindred* 116). When Rufus finds the book on American history with Dana, it becomes a dangerously symbolic premonition of the impending anti-slavery movements and the subsequent abolition of slavery. The mirror to slavery's impending doom rattles Rufus. He realizes that he is a part of a history that he would not like to read about in the future. Furthermore, Dana proclaims that Rufus was oblivious to the birth of black rebels and revolutionaries like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner and others who would

eventually prove that “history could be changed” (*Kindred* 141). Hence, Rufus commands Dana to burn the book.

An analysis of the material culture of the book on the history of slavery in America, Dana’s canvas bag that looked too good for a slave, the bottle of aspirin tablets, and the clothes that made her look like a man confirms that all of these objects are direct participants in Dana’s time-travel. In fact, the moment she recounts that “the knife had come back” with her, she almost endows the weapon with sentience, and the knife transforms into something more than just an artifact of historical violence (*Kindred* 114). All the objects that travel with Dana are catalysts for making race memories thrive. Butler makes every object a carrier of race memories and an agent of psychopathology which rearranges Dana’s relationship with the Maryland plantation life and gives her quotidian presence in the Weylin household a gradual normalcy. Furthermore, the material culture of the objects associated with Dana’s past and present alter her relationship with her past and present lived experiences in two ways. First, she starts developing a strong intimacy with her trauma begotten from epigenetic inheritance while becoming subconsciously alien to her real 1976 California home surroundings.⁴ In an introspective moment, she reveals, “[H]ome. Bed- without canopy, dresser, closet, electric light, television, radio, electric clock, books. Home. It didn’t have anything to do with where I had been. It was real. It was where I belonged” (*Kindred* 115). Dana’s sense of becoming here is painful and confusing. “It was where I belonged” echoes her predicament of not being able to belong anywhere. Secondly, the material culture in this context proves that social relations are embodied in two sets of objects; one that makes slavery in 1776 real for Dana and the other, a set of modern objects (television, clock, radio, etc.) that embody her alienation from her California life.

In his attempt to create a balance between blackness and American identity, W.E.B. Du Bois describes the term “double consciousness” as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 3). In the wake of understanding the vicious racial gaze, Du Bois proposes ways of looking into one’s black soul which he imagined would allow the black self to find spiritual wholeness. However, Dana undergoes the process of “double consciousness” in an excruciating way. She is abruptly removed from a space where her view of herself as an independent, young writer was wholesome and fulfilling. Her becoming a participant in the institution of slavery by witnessing the vulnerability and the violence, sexual and otherwise, results in the complete loss of her personhood, citizenship, and also leads to her integration into a regressive civilization. Moving beyond the purview of science fiction and the neo-slave narrative and reading the notion of victimhood in the novel through the lens of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is compatible with the previously cited examples of Dana suffering from trauma inherited epigenetically.⁵ Every time Rufus is injured or is in some kind of agony, Dana hears echoes of his voice and is transported back to the Weylin plantation. Strangely, her own physical trauma from bruises caused by flogging does not act as a deterrent to her time-travel. The total negation of black trauma followed by its subsequent silencing has lifelong effects on the victim, in this case Dana. Epigenetic research suggests that these episodic, traumatic recuperations are “attributed to preexisting constitutional problems, and not to the environmental exposure” (Yehuda & McFarlane 1705), thus reconfirming the adverse effects of the myopic theories associated with scientific racism.

It has been pointed out that in his delineation of double consciousness, what W.E.B. Du Bois fails to consider fully are the particular forms of psychological, physical, and sexual threats

confronting black women and their bodies by racist and imperialist practices (Melancon & Braxton vii-xi). In her foreword to *Black Female Sexualities*, Melissa Harris-Perry puts forth this view in lieu of the under-representativeness of black women's double consciousness in works of literature and art, such as in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and in one of Beyoncé's music videos titled, "Pretty Hurts."⁶ While these artists and authors address the visceral pain which makes their readers and audience uncomfortable, the premise of extreme suffering makes a complete understanding of spiritual fulfillment impossible. Hence, characters like Morrison's Pecola Breedlove and Beyoncé's Miss 3rd Ward are led to their sheer corporeal jeopardy. Similarly, the women characters in *Kindred* do not get the opportunity to fully undergo the elaborate process of double consciousness because the moment they are bought and sold by their white slave masters, they lose every iota of their personhood and enter the phase of victimhood. The commodification of free blacks such as Sam, Tess, and Alice ultimately prevent the Du Boisian merger of their "double self into a better truer self" (Du Bois 2).

The relationship between Alice and Rufus complicates the politics of the master-slave dynamics. Alice performs a multimodal role that modifies her status from that of a proud freewoman-turned slave to that a commodity which first has a use-value and later, a sexual fixation value. For Rufus, Alice's use-value surpasses his sexual fetishism for her and the only way he can impose his desires on her is by raping her and leaving her "bloody, filthy, and barely alive" (*Kindred* 146). In Anthony Barthelemy's words, "the marked body is always a sign of disobedience" (Barthelemy). Hence, Alice's tribulation is justified by Rufus when he admits, "I didn't want to drag her off into the bushes... I never wanted it to be like that. But she kept saying no. I could have had her in the bushes years ago if that was all I wanted" (124). Upon hearing about such alarming emotions, Dana sarcastically typifies Rufus' actions as "[R]ape rewarded" to

Alice for disobeying her master (*Kindred* 124). Butler creates a mammoth gap between “[T]here was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one” and Rufus’ confession that, “if I lived in your [Dana’s] time, I would have married her [Alice]” (124). After Issac’s ears are cut off and he is sold in Mississippi, Rufus’ sudden outburst of compassion for Alice and his offering her a place in his bedroom makes his commodity fetishism and his erotic fetishism towards her black female body even more sadomasochistic.

Dana’s continual exposure to physical violence on the Weylin plantation escalates the risk factor of her posttraumatic biological adaptations that form her future responses to events of similar intensity.⁷ This type of cultural witnessing of trauma calls into question the implications of how cultural trauma functions and whether it is possible to generalize its collective experience. As E. Ann Kaplan suggests, this kind of witnessing “involves taking responsibility for injustices in the past” and also “preventing future human-based catastrophe” (54). However, traumatic memory which is often followed by traumatic amnesia does not let Dana forget the unhinged pornographic violence that she experiences after being whipped by Tom Weylin.⁸ She is transported back to her California home with gaping bruises of disobedience on her back. Even a full bottle of aspirin does not allow her to indulge in transitory traumatic amnesia. Dana’s words indicate the grotesqueness of her current manifestation,

My blouse was stuck to my back. It was cut to pieces, really, but the pieces were stuck to me. My back was cut open pretty badly too from what I could feel. I had seen old photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves. I could remember the scars, thick and ugly. Kevin had always told me how smooth my skin was... I leaned forward and cried into the dirty pink water. The skin of my back stretched agonizingly, and the water got pinker. (*Kindred* 113)

At this moment Butler integrates Dana seamlessly into the old photographs of slaves who were lynched. Her memory of what was an old picture is now a part of her existent reality. In an interview, when Butler was asked to explain the gut-wrenching fear involved with Dana being forced back and forth in time, she said that her usage of unadulterated violence was her attempt to expose the modern black woman to the dark realms of American history (*Conversations* 134-141). Butler points out that a lot of young people do not understand the intensity or the transgenerational consequences of such state sponsored violence and that they have no idea what it is like to live during those times as a black person. She highlights the inadequacy of the pornographic violence depicted in *Kindred* and calls it a “clean version of slavery” (*Conversations* 135).

In another conversation about *Kindred*, Butler reveals that “the idea of the book was to make people feel” (*Conversations* 140). The feeling that Butler carefully demarcates here is the frustration of not being able to mobilize freely as an African-American in a highly racialized and sexualized society. Every time Dana is transported from the old world to the new, readers probably believe for a moment that it is a flight from oppression to freedom. However, they are thoroughly disappointed because Butler grants freedom from racism only with a faint temporal arc. The possibility of liberation is short-lived, and Butler rejects narrative realism to exacerbate the pain of not being able to disengage oneself from a past dominated by white historiographic accounts. Toni Morrison writes, “it is difficult to read literature of young America without being struck by how antithetical it is to our modern rendition of the American Dream” (35). The American Dream for Dana was gently taking shape with her marriage with Kevin in Las Vegas, followed by a check from *The Atlantic* upon the publication of one of her stories. The old world of slavery tarnished this pristine dream to remind us that American literature cannot be freed from the century-old negotiations of race and gender done by African-American collective consciousness.

Morrison criticizes knowledge that does not consider the looming presence of race memories in both the American past and present. She emphasizes that conventional knowledge “holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States” (Morrison 5). She rejects the facetious notion that “Americanness” is historically isolated from its Africanist presence. This is the very perception that Butler challenges in *Kindred* as she prevents her readers from forgetting America’s dark, apartheid past through the jarring narrative of unavoidable time-travels, and dropping her female protagonist in the middle of scenes of subjection every time. Recent scholarship in the field of empathy studies suggests that reader identification is critical and “often invites empathy, even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways” (Keen 214). Epigenetic research affords *Kindred* with the possibility of identifying itself with the “experiences of a contemporary character whose reactions to the past predict and mirror their own” (Setka 94). Although *Kindred*, much like Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*, may not completely help readers embody the slave experience, it surely allows them to be “invaded by the painful narrative” (*Conversations* 478).

In Steve McQueen’s adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave*, starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, the unexpected transition of Solomon from being a happy and free man in Saratoga, New York to a helpless slave, scrubbing his own naked body marked with bruises from heavy flogging in a public space in New Orleans makes Northup’s liberation at the end of twelve years a much sought-after happy occasion. McQueen’s use of the montage of daily life with “the menacing droop of a willow, a sea of cotton, a whipping post, a tree of scars” and finally a battered black body hanging from a tree against an idyllic background with children being engaged in their quotidian fun games, makes

Northup's wait for freedom unbearable for the audience (Cunningham). When pitted against Northup's liberation, accepting Dana's last journey to California as the fulfillment of her quest for freedom becomes severely problematic. Unlike Northup, Dana encounters both a geographical and a temporal shift. While *Twelve Years* is a journey from the slavery-stricken American South to the free states of the American North, Dana's quest for independence is stuck in a vicious circle of time. During several instances, Butler presents Dana as an immigrant who is black but speaks the refined language of the whites. She stays with the slaves but does not behave like one. She is educated and, unlike other slaves, can perform Rufus' secretarial tasks successfully.

Dana belongs to a time frame that witnessed two very different approaches to the sociocultural disparities of color. For instance, in 1971, through advertisements like "Buy the world a Coke" campaign, "Coca-Cola offered the American public a utopian vision of racial equality" through the on-screen depiction of well-dressed youngsters from different ethnicities (Rutherford 48). On the one hand, popular culture during Dana's time was making racial equality fashionable, and on the other the 1977 show *Roots*, based on Alex Hayley's novel of the same title was taking the American audience far away from the romanticism of an egalitarian future. In fact, *Roots* insisted on portraying American history with its uncensored tales of the exploitation of black labor. Therefore, Dana's upbringing in an age of conflicting racial idealisms and racial realities makes the following realization more poignant. She echoes that: "A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous, and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once (*Kindred* 260).

In the action-packed scene where Dana is forced to murder Rufus, she is overwhelmed by the idea of Rufus being the perpetrator of her permanent state of bondage. As she frees herself

from Rufus forever to physically return to her present reality, she leaves her arm behind, while “suffering an avalanche of pain” (261). Although Rufus’ death resonates with the death of Dana’s transhistorical journeys, Butler leaves the ending of the novel ambiguous by not reconfirming Dana’s original state of freedom. By leaving readers with this uncertainty, “the novel argues that traumatic history can never be forgotten but is only concealed by a collective, often deliberate amnesia; paradoxically, to forget is to remain wounded” (Setki 115). As I have discussed before, epigenetics makes racial amnesia only temporal, echoing Suleiman’s assertion that “how we view ourselves, and how we represent ourselves to others is indissociable from the stories we tell about our past” (1). This can be further explained through the novel’s *Epilogue*. Dana and Kevin drive back to the Weylin plantation only to find historical newspaper evidence of Rufus being burnt alive in his home, and Dana’s ancestors excluded from the list of slaves that were on sale. As Dana contemplates the future of her ancestors, she instinctively touches the scar on her forehead left by Tom Weylin’s boot and her amputated arm, a painful leftover from her final fight with Rufus. The permanence of her physical scars makes her racial amnesia an impossibility. Reassessing her decision to visit the plantation, she questions herself in front of Kevin, “[W]hy did I even want to come here. You’d think I would have had enough of the past” (*Kindred* 264). Hence, Butler offers no clear possibility of Dana’s return to the normalcy of her California life.

There is a strange sense of continuity in Dana’s return to everyday life with a dismembered arm. By the time she returns to California, she demonstrates a strong sense of communion with her ancestors, Alice and Rufus. The historical narrative of her forbearers becomes a part of her lived reality which cannot ever be concealed through “artificial forgetting” (Suleiman 226). Dana’s periodic, forced adaptation to the Weylin plantation and her persistent desire to learn about her ancestors turns into a subsequent addiction. Her penultimate return to Weylin signifies that

eighteenth-century racial constructs would continue to reconstruct her future identity and be a reminder of the truth of her physical incarnations. In her interview with McCaffery, Butler is quoted saying that, “[F]iction writers can’t be too pedagogical or too polemical” (69), but in *Kindred* she modifies generic conventions to tell a story that addresses critical historical and medical truths that arise out of the lived experiences of African Americans. Although Butler feels that there is “no science”⁹ in *Kindred*, she ends up opening avenues for real-life epigenetic research by carefully drafting the journey of Dana’s transhistorical reimaginings of racial trauma.

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¹ See Winthrop D. Jordan's *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812*. His account reveals early attitudes of Whites towards African Americans when black Americans were likened to beasts, and the established notion was that "the Negro might attain savage nobility only by approximating (as best as could) the appearance of a white man: (28).

² Ibid.

³ Italics mine.

⁴ See Yasmin, "Experts debunk study that found Holocaust trauma is inherited." According to Yasmin, epigenetic inheritance is the idea that "traumatic experiences affect DNA in ways that are passed on to children and grandchildren, kind of like molecular scars."

⁵ See Yehuda & Bierer, "The Relevance of Epigenetics." The authors clarify the connections drawn between epigenetics and trauma and write that, "although there are currently no findings that suggest epigenetic modifications that are specific to PTSD or PTSD risk, many recent observations are compatible with epigenetic explanations" (427).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Same.

⁹ See footnote 3.