

*“I’m a long way from home”:*

Seeking Belonging in the Afterlives of Slavery in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

Seanna Viechweg

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Advisor: Asali Solomon

English Department

Haverford College

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Octavia Butler's 1979 *Kindred* powerfully incorporates the trope of time travel into a neo-slave narrative—where the protagonist, Dana, an African-American woman, time travels between her Los Angeles, California home in 1976 and a pre-Civil War Maryland plantation. Dana is shuttled between the past and present<sup>1</sup> not only to save her white ancestor, Rufus, whenever his life is threatened but also to ensure her very existence and familial lineage. As a free Black woman in the contemporary present, Dana must negotiate the experience of 'becoming' a slave once in the past, as well as how the physical and mental trauma she experiences through slavery alters her sense of being in the present. Dana's experiences with confronting the present after time traveling to the Antebellum South raises the following questions: what does *Kindred* suggest about the relationship between the slave past and the racist present? What does it mean to deal with a legacy of racial trauma that is still a condition but yet manifests itself in new forms?

One theoretical work that engages with the questions above is Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* which highlights how slavery's violence emerge "within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being [...]" (Sharpe 14). Sharpe's theorization of "wake work"—which she defines as "a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing" ways of living in "slavery's afterlives" (18)—complements *Kindred* as a text that theorizes the difficulty for African-Americans to exist in the present while reconciling the looming legacy of slavery. In the context of discussing *Kindred*, my use of the word reconciliation draws upon Sharpe's questions regarding Black being in "the wake," specifically "How does one memorialize chattel slavery and its afterlives, which are unfolding still?" (20), as well as "come to terms with" ongoing and "quotidian atrocity"? I argue that it is

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this essay, Dana's "present" specifically refers to the year 1976.

not possible for Dana, as a contemporary African-American, to return ‘home’ from slavery, or “come to terms” with returning to the present because she encounters a “past that is not past” (13). For Dana, to reconcile the past and present means to fully experience belonging and acceptance in the U.S as a Black woman, which Butler suggests is not possible—even through the genre of science fiction. As Sharpe argues, “Our knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery, is gained from our studies, yes, but also in excess of those studies; it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday” (12). Butler ultimately utilizes time travel as a way to heighten Dana’s knowledge of Black subjectivity not only through slavery but also through her subsequent experiences navigating the quotidian—an example of the knowledge Dana is subject to gain from “the everyday.” *Kindred*, therefore, offers time travel as a vehicle for awakening Dana, as well as readers, to the continuity of Black subjugation and continual Black death in the contemporary present and future.

Readers are first introduced to the vehicle of time travel on Dana’s twenty-sixth birthday, when moving into her new apartment with her white husband, Kevin, in Southern California. Dana begins to feel dizzy and finds herself transported physically to the early 1800s in Maryland where she saves Rufus from drowning in a river—the first of many unexpected trips into the past. Dana’s subsequent trips to the Weylin plantation, which total six episodes, constitutes the structure of the novel where she is either transported alone or with Kevin through physical contact. During her second trip to Maryland, Dana rationalizes that she is pulled into the past when Rufus faces immediate danger and that conversely, she returns to the present when she believes her life is threatened. *Kindred*’s nonlinear structure departs from the linearity often found in conventional slave narratives where plots begin with birth, are followed by slavery’s violence and exploitation, and conclude with eventual freedom (Milatovic 117). Butler’s

disruption of linearity in the conventional slave narrative allows readers a juxtaposition of what it means to be Black in the past and present—a contrast that presents Dana, as a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Black woman, grim parallels. Robert Crossley further explains how time functions during Dana’s trips between the past and present:

Dana’s involuntary trips to the past [...] occupy only a few minutes or hours of her life in 1976, but her stay in the alternative time is stretched as she lives out an imposed remembrance of things past. Because of this dual time level a brief absence from Los Angeles may result in months spent in the nineteenth century, observing and suffering the backbreaking field work, enduring verbal abuse, whippings, and other daily brutalities of enslavement (Crossley 266).

In other words, a brief absence from Los Angeles, spanning only a few minutes or hours, can result in Dana spending months in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. Throughout these extended trips to the past, Dana reasons that she must try to keep Rufus alive until he and a slave, Alice, conceive her great-great-grandmother, Hagar. Dana’s ability to time travel ceases after Rufus’ death—however, she returns psychologically traumatized and without her left arm.

When considering Butler’s intersection of time travel and the slave past, 21<sup>st</sup>-century readers should recognize the literary history *Kindred* follows and precedes, specifically in African-American women’s fiction writing and neo-slave narratives. As a neo-slave narrative, which is defined as “a fictional mutation of the autobiographies of nineteenth-century Americans who lives as slaves” (Crossley 265), Butler’s *Kindred* is published between Gayl Jones’ 1975 *Corregidora* and Toni Morrison’s 1987 *Beloved*—texts that similarly explore themes of kinship, Black womanhood, and trauma in the context of slavery. While *Kindred* might be said to resemble these neo-slave narratives, Butler further develops the genre through the addition of science fiction deploying the theme of time travel. Butler enables the genre of science fiction to reimagine an engagement with slavery that is realistically impossible. As a result, Butler’s hybrid of memoir and science fiction demonstrates the ways in which the genre can allegorically

comment on history—or in the case of *Kindred*, the history of African-Americans in the U.S. For instance, when Dana is unexpectedly pulled into the past, she experiences nausea, a reaction Crossley compares to the sickening conditions of the Middle Passage where slaves were abducted from their home, Africa, and transported to the slave markets of the New World (268). Correspondingly, in the novel, Dana is figuratively and literally abducted from the present to serve Rufus in the past as his subordinate. Scholars point out how fitting science fiction as a genre is for diasporic populations as demonstrated in the following questions: what can be more science-fiction or alien than Africa or its history? What home is available to the diasporic migrants of our world? (Parham 1317, Richard 122, and Yaszek 1063).

In order to parse out what “home is available” for Dana, it is valuable to examine Dana’s present life in bicentennial 1976 where she is married to a white man, works at a temporary agency she refers to as “a slave market,” and resides in California during the Black Power movement. What enables Dana to reevaluate the conditions of her present life as a Black woman is her observation and experience of Black subjugation in the past. The passage below is the first instance in *Kindred* where Dana is confronted with the treatment of slaves in 1960 as a twentieth-century African-American:

I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit. 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. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping (Butler 36).

Scholars have commented on the passage’s suggestion of history being unknowable, particularly in response to Butler’s own assertion that *Kindred* is a “cleaned-up” version of slavery “for there was no entertainment in the real thing” (Long 478). Through vivid language such as “smelled

their sweat or heard them pleading” and “less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me,” critics point out the degree to which Dana has been removed from the realities of slavery (Crossley 277; Parham 1324). They emphasize Dana’s inability to handle the scene before her as someone who has, in her contemporary life, understood slavery largely through commercial culture. Dana’s observation of the scene—with language such as “the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs” and “well-rehearsed screams”—suggest the inadequacy of producers and directors to represent slavery in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, as well as commercial culture’s attempts to revisit the past through fictional mediums. Being that *Kindred* was published in 1979, the only other widely-known televised representation of slavery was the 1977 miniseries *Roots*. Theorizing *Kindred*, therefore, becomes a way to think about other representations of Black life at the time of Butler’s writing. Dana’s referral to the physicality of slavery, which is often centralized in mass culture, highlights her inadequate knowledge of the psychological and emotional nature of Black subjugation as epitomized by the line, “heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves.”

Scholars tend to focus on this scene in their analysis of *Kindred* to emphasize Dana’s difficult transition to the Antebellum South, namely, confronting the reality of a slave being whipped excessively and brutally at the hands of a white patroller. While focusing on Butler’s reinvestigation of the past through science fiction is reasonable, it is just as crucial to consider how Butler’s mediations of the past impact Dana’s present and future. Not only is it powerful that the protagonist of this text is a Black woman, but it is also significant that her final return to Los Angeles is on July 4th, 1976—the bicentennial of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of the United States. Dana must reconcile the traumas enslaved Black women were subject to in the past while returning to a future that celebrates a country that dehumanized

her ancestors. As noted by Butler in an interview, the Black Power Movement was underway in the 1970s in Los Angeles, which suggests that Dana is situated not only in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement but also state violence directed at Black power. Interestingly, Dana does not refer to the Black Power Movement at any point in the novel, which could also translate into readers neither being fully aware of the racial context Dana is surrounded by in the present. Butler simultaneously positions both Dana and readers (that is, readers who are unaware of race relations in the 1970s) to realize just how inundated the present is with the legacy of slavery. Readers become aware of the violent relationship between the past and present when Dana returns to a future that was not only built upon the subjugation of her ancestors but also a future that continues to oppress African-Americans.

It is possible to trace Dana's realization of continual Black oppression through the relationships she forges in the novel, as facilitated by time travel. One of the most ominous and looming truths about the future is, in fact, Dana's familial lineage. During her second trip to the past, Dana acknowledges the traumatic and subsequent events of her family lineage when she says, "[Rufus'] life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar [...] If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (Butler 29). Dana's use of the word "paradox" alludes to the masculinist speculative-fiction term "grandfather paradox"—which refers to one's ability to influence their own birth by "tampering with the past" (Hua 220). Because Dana believes that her existence depends on whether Rufus rapes Alice, which she helps facilitate to ensure her own birth, the trauma she confronts in the past is exacerbated by knowing that her return to the present is contingent on the complicity with others' suffering. Dana's complicity contributes to her difficulty to fully integrate into the present—as explored by Linh U. Hua in her

analysis of Black feminist sentimentality in *Kindred*. Unlike many other scholars, Hua suggests that feminist attachments, rather than patriarchal attachments, facilitates Dana's time travel. As raised by the quotation in the previous paragraph, Dana attributes her time travel to the Antebellum South as a "restoration of history" (Hua 396) which is reinforced when she says "I didn't dare test the paradox." Interestingly, another paradox emerges towards the end of the novel—namely, Dana is still able to time travel even *after* Rufus and Alice conceive Hagar. Dana's final trip to the past leads to her discovery of Alice's suicide, which reifies Hua's suggestion that Dana's time travel is tied to her relationship with Alice, rather than her relationship with Rufus. Dana's inability to recognize that time traveling is tied to her relationship with another Black woman, rather than her white male ancestor, demonstrates her preceding investment in "white patriarchy as the bearer of history and family" (399).

Not only is Dana's relationship with Alice complicated by her familial lineage but also by Dana's reluctance to identify with Alice as a fellow slave. For instance, even though Dana and Alice both occupy the social position of being Black and a woman on the Weylin plantation, Dana disrelates herself from Alice's experiences as demonstrated by Dana's response to Alice's question about whether Dana would allow Rufus to rape her, "Would you go to him?" I glanced at the floor. "We're in different situations. What I'd do doesn't matter" (Butler 168). Dana asserts that she and Alice are "in different situations" because Dana believes that as a Black woman from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, she is shielded from Alice's experiences. Dana's positionality as a Black woman from the 20<sup>th</sup> century influences her complicity because, unlike Alice, Dana *knows* what freedom is like and will, therefore, not risk losing such freedom on behalf of Alice. Rather, Dana is "loyal to the future" in order to ensure her freedom and existence, despite witnessing the psychological implications of rape on Alice's being as shown when she observes, "[Alice] went

to him. She adjusted, became a quieter more subdued person. She didn't kill, but she seemed to die a little" (168). In the relationship Dana forges with Alice, time travel provides Dana a parallel between her future, which is contingent upon Alice's violation, with the history of the U.S — which has not only been dependent on the subjugation of Black people but also "[naturalizes black suffering] as a prerequisite" (Hua 396) for the conditions of contemporary life.

Dana's loyalty to the future is further exemplified by the fact that she never considers the possibility of rescuing Alice or another slave, Nigel, through time travel, similar to the way she moves Kevin, between the past and present. Not only does Dana move Kevin in between the past and present but she actively ensures that Kevin is able to escape to the present with her as indicated in a scene where she is time traveling from the past without Kevin near her, "Suddenly, I realized what was happening and I screamed—I think I screamed. [Kevin] had to reach me. He had to!" (Butler 107). Therefore, Dana recognizes her ability to enable others to time travel with her, as delineated by her instruction to Kevin to "stay close" when on the Weylin plantation (65). Furthermore, Dana's allusion to historical figures such as Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass in the text (140-141) suggests that Dana has the potential to change the realities of slaves like Alice—though, who she ultimately fails. For instance, time travel could provide Dana a medium to help slaves on the Weylin plantation escape slavery similar to the way in which Tubman "cost Eastern Shore plantation owners a huge amount of money by guiding three hundred of their runaway slaves to freedom" (141). We also see a negotiation of Dana's complicity through her observations of slavery through children, as depicted in the following scene when Dana confronts Kevin's lack of frustration at the events around them:

"You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer, I said. "I can understand that because most of the time, I'm still an observer. [...] But now and then, like with the kids' game, I can't maintain the distance. I'm drawn all the way into

eighteen nineteen, and I don't know what to do. I ought to be doing something though. I know that" (Butler 101).

The passage above, specifically from the chapter "The Fall," follows the conversation between Dana and her husband Kevin after witnessing a group of children performing a role-playing game—one where the children imitate a slave auction. Although this passage takes place during Dana's third trip to the past, a point at which she has both undergone and witnessed slavery's violence, this passage further indicates Dana's difficulty in separating herself from the past as a result of her complicity.

As indicated by the passage in the previous paragraph, Dana believes that time travel provides her a sort of shielding that other slaves do not possess the privilege of in their day-to-day experiences. While Dana does possess more privilege than other slaves around her due to her kinship with Rufus, and because of her knowledge from the future, Dana is still subject to the violent treatment of slaves as a result of her Blackness. Readers observe Dana understand the implications of her social position on the Weylin plantation when she juxtaposes her experiences as a Black woman with Kevin's by saying, "You might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer." When Dana says, "go through," or in other words, endure and withstand, she suggests that it is easier for Kevin, as a white man, to not only survive but also cope with the events around them. Although Dana and Kevin are both from the present, this passage indicates a key shift in what it means for the two of them to inhabit the past, in the Antebellum South, as an interracial couple. As a Black woman, Dana has greater difficulty confronting slavery, as well as in reacting to the injustices of slavery. For instance, when she says, "I ought to be doing something though. I know that," Dana demonstrates that she feels obligated to interfere with the violence around her. This feeling of obligation contradicts earlier parts of the text where she vows to not interfere with history nor "test the paradox" inherent in

protecting Rufus' life as his "unconceived descendent" (29)—which already begins to reveal how Dana's consciousness around Black suffering shifts as a result of time travel.

Dana's lack of efforts in helping slaves around her, such as Alice and Nigel, raises the question of how Dana's newly-formed awareness of Black suffering affects her future actions and integration to the present. For instance, how can Dana confront the many ways in which Black people are oppressed in the present, after failing to protect or save various familial lineages outside of her own? Readers might also subsequently wonder, what then is the point of Dana's time travel in the first place? One scholar, in particular, Gregory Hampton, suggests the reason behind Dana's time travel is because she does not fully understand how complex race relations are in America's past and present. Dana's articulation of her Blackness is subtle until she time travels and becomes a slave on the Weylin plantation. Therefore, Hampton's assertion prompts readers to reconsider Butler's intention with time travel as a science-fiction trope in the text, as related to the reason why Butler displaces Dana in the first place. Similar to Hua's investigation of Black feminist sentimentality in *Kindred*, if we focus less on Rufus being the reason Dana visits the past, we can instead consider other justifications for Dana's time travel, namely, reasoning related to her identity as a Black woman who must acknowledge how the traumatic experiences of the past complicate her approach to, and understanding of, race relations in the contemporary U.S.

When Hampton attributes Dana's time travel to her ignorance of race relations in America, he also engages with the assumption that identity provides knowledge—or in other words, the assumption that because Dana is Black, she understands dynamics concerning race and slavery in America. However, throughout the novel, we witness Dana struggle to bridge her experiences in the past with her contemporary relationships—specifically that of her marriage.

As scholars have pointed out, Dana and Kevin's relationship as husband and wife ultimately transforms into master and slave concubine when they time travel to the past (Parham 1327, Milatovic 118, and Long 474). Marisa Parham highlights the trauma inherent in Dana's relationship with Kevin as she writes, "It is in this sense that Butler's time-traveling protagonist has perhaps supplied us with an apt metaphor for the experience not of history, but of trauma after all, for it is the site of a historical damage that Dana travels, the sight of which consolidates and makes speakable the tension between herself and her white husband" (Parham 1326). Parham specifically refers to the omnipresent "tension" that exists between Dana and Kevin as an interracial couple. When Parham argues that the experience of trauma "makes speakable" the tension inherent in Dana and Kevin's relationship, she highlights the fact that it takes Dana and Kevin being transformed into the historical relationship of master and slave concubine to fully discuss the dynamics of their interracial relationship. Dana reflects on the role that she has to perform as Kevin's 'slave' when she says, "I felt almost as though I really was doing something shameful, happily playing whore for my supposed owner. I went away feeling uncomfortable, vaguely ashamed" (Butler 97). It is unclear whether Dana and Kevin's marriage at the end of the novel "heals" or "opens" up (Parham 1328) after the historical roles they "[uncomfortably]" perform in the Antebellum South.

To evaluate the nature of Dana and Kevin's marriage, Butler juxtaposes not only moments in the Antebellum South and contemporary Los Angeles but strategically, also moments including Dana and Kevin's past. For instance, readers gain insight into Dana and Kevin's first meeting, first fight as a couple, as well as their decision to get married. Although readers are immediately cued into their racial difference in their first encounter—noted by Dana when she says, "He was an unusual-looking white man [...]" (54)—Dana and Kevin do not fully

acknowledge the racial dynamics of their relationship until the prospect of marriage emerges after dating for a few months:

“You, uh...don’t have any relatives or anything who’ll give you a hard time about me, do you?” As I spoke, it occurred to me that one of the reasons his proposal surprised me was that we had never talked much about our families, about how his would react to me and mine to him. I hadn’t been aware of us avoiding the subject, but somehow, we’d never gotten around to it. Even now, he looked surprised” (109).

As demonstrated by “relatives [...] who’ll give you a hard time about me,” Dana presumes there is a tension inherent in introducing each other to their respective families as a result of their different races, as illuminated when she describes her uncle’s reaction to her white fiancé, “Now...it’s as though I’ve rejected him. Or at least that’s the way he feels [...] He wants me to marry someone like him—someone who looks like him. A black man” (111). Not only does Dana’s uncle respond negatively to Dana and Kevin’s relationship as an interracial couple but he also feels a sense of betrayal as a Black man—revealing the implications of Dana and Kevin’s relationship on her kinship in the present. Therefore, Dana’s kinship with her uncle and aunt, who become parental figures after her biological parents die, are dismantled, particularly when her uncle threatens to will his property to his church rather than let it “fall into white hands” (112). When further explaining her uncle’s reaction to Kevin, Dana says, “They’re old. Sometimes their ideas don’t have very much to do with what’s going on now” (110). Through this flashback, we learn that Dana is unable to empathize with her uncle’s response and rather, attributes his attitude towards interracial relationships between Black women and white men as being dated. However, the vehicle of time travel provides Dana the history behind her uncle’s reservations concerning her interracial relationship, particularly after encountering the trauma white men inflict on her and fellow enslaved women.

Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* becomes especially relevant to the discussion of Dana's integration into the present, specifically when we consider the ways in which her relationships from the Weylin plantation manifest in the future with Kevin. Gordon introduces the concept of "haunting" which refers to the ways in which abusive systems of power make themselves "known and felt in everyday life." Gordon compares the process of haunting to slavery, which is often thought of as an event that is 'over and done with.' Through an analysis of Morrison's *Beloved*, Gordon refutes the assumption that the consequences of slavery remain in the past for contemporary African-Americans. Rather, Gordon argues that haunting alters one's experience of being in time, of being able to separate the past, present, and future (Gordon xvi). Gordon elaborates on this altered experience of time in her usage of the term haunting, "I used the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view" (ibid). Dana demonstrates the phenomenon of haunting when she returns to Los Angeles and is no longer able to distinguish the past and present. We see Dana struggle with separating the past and present when she time travels from the arms of a white patroller who tries to rape her into the arms of Kevin. The narrator recalls, "I scrambled away, kicking him, clawing the hands that reached out for me, trying to bite, lunging up toward his eyes. I could do it now. I could do anything" (Butler 43). After this interaction, Kevin asks Dana, "Do I look like someone you can come home to from where you may be going?" (51). Kevin's question underscores the ways in which haunting alters the sense of safety Dana feels with Kevin back 'home' after her encounters with white men in slavery.

Dana refers to home repeatedly throughout *Kindred* but often with ambiguity, as we observe in the very first lines of the novel, "I lost an arm on my last trip home." (9). Dana's use

of the word “home” is vague because readers cannot easily conclude what home she is referring to—that of the Weylin plantation in the 1800s or her house in Los Angeles with Kevin in 1976. As Dana’s understanding of home shifts throughout the novel, we might keep in mind Gordon’s assertion of home becoming “unfamiliar” as a result of historical violences that manifest in Dana’s future integration. For instance, Dana may now feel unsafe with Kevin in their intimate life, as Parham outlines, “Every time Kevin and Dana make love, usually after she has returned from the past, he hurts her even as he heals her, chafing her bruises and reopening her cuts, reminders of the scenes of brutal violence she faced at the hands of white men only moments before” (Parham 1329). Not only does Kevin physically hurt Dana by “chafing” her bruises and “reopening” her wounds, but his positionality as a white man also presents a form of haunting that will later manifest after Dana’s experiences with sexual violence in the past.

Joseph Flanagan similarly considers the relationship that exists between African-Americans and haunting, as suggested when he asks the following question, “Can a community “work through” its founding trauma or is it doomed to act it out forever?” (Flanagan 391). By placing Dana in the past through time travel, *Kindred* actively engages with what Sharpe describes as the labor, or attempt, of “[working] through” the founding trauma of slavery. For readers, it is difficult to reconcile whether Dana actually works through slavery’s trauma. Readers are not left feeling relieved when Dana returns to the future considering the end of the novel where the Weylin plantation burns down, the slaves are separated, and Dana loses her sense of safety. The lack of safety Dana feels after her final trip to the Weylin plantation is epitomized in the Prologue when Dana says, “And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone.” (Butler 9). Dana’s loss of “comfort and security” reifies her difficulty integrating to the contemporary U.S. as a Black woman—where

she remains subject to both rape and Black death. Dana attempts to reconcile her memories from the past with her return to the present through the act of writing, though she fails as she reveals, “Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it” (116). Because Dana is a writer, readers could assume that working through her experiences on paper would be preferable, as well as constructive. Dana’s “if it was ever over” also implies the possibility of having to experience slavery indefinitely. As a result, it is difficult to conclude whether Dana actually “[works] through” the violence of slavery and if such attempts are futile. Even Kevin, who is afforded a privileged position as a white man in the Antebellum South, demonstrates the inability to reconcile memories from the past as Dana observes in his return after five years, “He touched a copy as though to take it down, then left it and drifted back to his typewriter [...] Abruptly, he brought his fist down hard on it [...] He pulled away from me and walked out of the room. The expression on his face was like something I’d seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly” (193-94). In this scene, not only does Kevin struggle to similarly write about his experiences in the past, despite the fact that he is also a professional writer, but Kevin also causes Dana discomfort by visibly reminding her of Tom Weylin—the man who whips Dana at various points in the novel. Even though Dana and Kevin both survive their time in the Antebellum South, they now carry remnants of the past that hinders the process of their individual healing, as well as the reconciliation of their interracial relationship.

Butler similarly draws haunting parallels between Kevin and Rufus—a comparison that further complicates Dana’s understanding of her interracial marriage in the present. Not only does Butler draw parallels between the two men’s physical features but also their interactions

with Dana as a Black woman. One example that becomes most prevalent is Kevin and Rufus' demands that Dana scribe/type for them. In the past, Dana handles Rufus' correspondence and bills which is paralleled by Kevin's insistence for Dana to type up his manuscripts. She notes, "He really had asked me to do some typing for him three times. I'd done it the first time, grudgingly, not telling him how much I hated typing, how I did all but the final drafts of my stories in longhand [...] The third time when I refused again, he was angry" (109). Despite the fact that both Dana and Kevin are writers, Kevin places pressure on Dana to perform labor to advance his writing career while failing to support her own. It is important to point out that Dana cannot resist Rufus when scribing for him, particularly considering the power dynamics between them on the Weylin plantation. Although Dana expresses reluctance towards typing up Kevin's manuscripts, she ultimately concedes the first time he asks—begging the question of whether she, as a liberated Black woman, was previously aware of being complicit in domination for her white husband.

Furthermore, the parallels between Kevin and Rufus suggests that for Black women, interracial heterosexual marriage is a form of oppression that should not be detached from the history of slavery. There are various moments in the novel where the line between chattel slavery and marriage is blurred, as suggested when Rufus first meets Kevin and asks, "Does Dana belong to you now?" "In a way," said Kevin. "She's my wife" (60). As demonstrated by Kevin's response, Butler depicts marriage as a form of ownership and possession that reflect "insidious elements of slavery" (Steinberg 468). The line between slavery and marriage is also obscured in the present, particularly when Dana's cousin observes her bruises from a recent whipping:

My cousin was a good friend. She took one look at me and recommended a doctor she knew. She also advised me to send police after Kevin. She assumed that my bruises were his work [...] "I never thought you'd be fool enough to let a man beat you," she said as

she left. She was disappointed in me, I think. “I never thought I would either,” I whispered when she was gone (Butler 116).

Not only does Dana’s cousin attribute her bruises, which are in fact caused by Rufus, to domestic abuse from Kevin, but Dana’s cousin also condemns her for “[being] fool enough to let a man beat [her].” Dana’s “I never thought I would either” suggests that her experiences in the past, where she originally assumed she was not subject to Rufus’ violence, demonstrate the persistence of a white male-dominated hegemony—which she must also contemplate in the present with her white husband. Qualities of ownership in marriage are even perpetuated by Kevin towards the end of the novel when he tells Dana that he would understand “if anything did happen” between her and Rufus, to which she ferociously responds, “You mean you could forgive me for having been raped?” (245). This conversation between Dana and Kevin takes place *after* he is stuck in the past without Dana for five years. Even after his return, similar to the scene where Kevin first meets Rufus, Kevin *still* sees Dana’s body as belonging to him. Dana’s reaction to Kevin’s ignorance regarding her social position—particularly as a slave woman in the past—indicates how time travel prompts Dana to reevaluate her marriage in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century.

Not only is Dana’s understanding of her marriage impacted by time travel, but as is her understanding of time as a linear and progressive construct. One particular scene that demonstrates Dana’s assumption of time as progressive is when Dana describes her aunt’s experience of racial profiling,

“My mother’s car broke down in La Canada once,” I told him. “Three people called the police on her while she was waiting for my uncle to come get her. Suspicious character. Five-three, she was. About a hundred pounds. Real dangerous [...] I don’t know, that was back in nineteen sixty just before my mother died. Things may have improved by now” (Butler 111).

While it is clear that Dana recognizes the social injustice African-Americans experience in the U.S., particularly around policing, her assumption that “things may have improved by now” is

just as significant. Earlier in the text, when explaining what year she is from to Rufus, Dana again alludes to a time period different from her own as depicted when Butler writes, “Nineteen seventy-six,” said the boy slowly. He shook his head and closed his eyes. I wondered why I had bothered to try to convince him. After all, how accepting would I be if I met a man who claimed to be from eighteen nineteen—or two thousand nineteen, for that matter” (63). As a reader from the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, and as an essay written in 2019, it is compelling that Dana considers the far-off future to be “two thousand nineteen.” The passage cited previously exemplifies Dana’s belief that with time, conditions for African-Americans will improve. Ironically, the future that Dana refers to—our present—is filled with the very illustrations of violence she points out to Kevin. Sharpe connects the policing Dana describes in the previous passage with the historical context of slavery as she writes, “The reality and the provenance of policing and stop-and-frisk’s language of “furtive moments” follow a direct line from the overseer and the slave master/slave owner’s and any white persons’ charge of impudence as “one of the commonest and most indefinite in the whole catalogue of offense usually laid to the charge of slaves” (Sharpe 86). The very first time Dana witnesses a Black man whipped, as cited earlier in this essay, results from coming across white patrollers without a “pass” (Butler 35). While slaves were historically required to carry a physical pass, interpreting “movements while Black” as “furtive” suggests that contemporary African-Americans are *still* not allowed to move freely in spaces without being stopped or violated by white figures of authority. Dana’s understanding of time as linear is, therefore, inevitable to change as a result of confronting the parallels that time travel provides between slavery and her eventual return to the present. The grim parallels between the slave past, Dana’s present, and our present-day reveal historically how difficult it has been, and continues to be, for African-Americans to experience safety and belonging in the U.S.—particularly when

such a violent history manifests itself in police brutality, mass incarceration, residential and educational segregation.

The lack of safety and belonging Dana experiences in the U.S., as an African-American, is also uncovered through her associations of 'home' with kinship. Crossley emphasizes how meanings of home for Dana shift, as a result of her experiences time traveling, when he writes, "By the time Dana's time traveling finally stops and she is restored to her Los Angeles home in 1976, the meaning of a homecoming has become impossibly complicated. Her first act, once her arm has sufficiently healed, is to fly to present-day Maryland; both her California house and the Weylin plantation have become inescapably "home" to her" (267). The meaning of home in the American context is often associated with sentiments of affinity and nostalgia which not only is impossible for Dana to experience but also presents a liminal challenge when 'home' has simultaneously become associated with the Weylin plantation—a site of trauma and violence. To understand how Dana can associate the concept of home with a site of slavery, we must examine the relationships Dana forges with other slaves on the Weylin plantation. Ashraf H. Rushdy argues that similar to the concept of home, the concept of kinship is "something we generate out of shared histories and collective memories" (142). Readers witness Dana generate kinship with other slaves through physical gestures—we see both sides of the spectrum, specifically in moments of embrace when greeting other slaves Dana grows close to, like Nigel and Sarah, as well as moments of tragedy when Dana discovers Alice's suicide. There is also an affinity and "[shared history]" Dana feels towards other slaves as a result of navigating her Blackness in the past. She says, "I liked to listen to [slaves] talk sometimes and fight my way through their accents to find out more about how they survived lives of slavery. Without knowing it, they prepared me to survive" (Butler 94). Although there are moments in the text where Dana

detaches herself from the realities of other slaves, as we witness in Dana's comparison of herself to Alice, Dana's "they prepared me to survive" demonstrates the support she inevitably needs, and therefore values, as a fellow slave on the Weylin plantation. As a result, Dana's felt affinity and kinship among other slaves on the Weylin plantation complicate her associations with home, as well as safety moving between the past and present.

As Dana forges affinities with other slaves on the Weylin plantation, she simultaneously disrelates herself from her biological kin, Rufus. Rushdy examines the scene when Dana disrelates herself from Rufus—specifically when Rufus hits her for the first time:

I caught Rufus by the hand and spoke low to him. "Please, Rufe. If you do this, you'll destroy what you mean to preserve. Please don't..." He hit me. It was a first, and so unexpected that I stumbled backward and fell. And it was a mistake. It was the breaking of an unspoken agreement between us—a very basic agreement—and he knew it. I got up slowly, watching him with anger and betrayal (238).

The passage above not only indicates the moment in which "an unspoken agreement" is broken between Rufus and Dana as kindred but also the nature of their relationship previously.

Throughout the novel, and as indicated by this passage, Dana consistently refers to Rufus as "Rufe"—a nickname that signifies the affinity that exists between the two in spite of their respective positions on the Weylin plantation. Dana's liminal position as a Black woman from the present complicates her understanding of her relationship with Rufus, particularly as she believes she is exempt from the treatment she witnesses Rufus direct towards other female slaves such as Alice and Sarah.

There are various moments of the text where Dana even reflects on the relationship between master and slave, as we see in what Dana perceives to be, Sarah's loyalty to Rufus. Scenes where Sarah is genuinely concerned over Rufus, particularly when he falls ill, is also similar to Dana's own complicated relationship with Rufus, as she notes in the later half of the

novel, “Strangely, they seemed to like him, hold him in contempt, and fear him all at the same time. This confused me because I felt just about the same mixture of emotions of hatred and fear for him myself. I had thought my feelings were complicated because he and I had a strange relationship. But then, slavery of any kind fostered strange relationships” (229). As Dana notes, the conditions of slavery foster “strange relationships” which help contextualize her inability to resist caring about Rufus. Dana’s empathy towards Rufus also stem from first meeting him as a child, where she believes that in spite of the historical and social context Rufus is in, she can ultimately change him as she reflects, “And I would try to keep friendship with him, maybe plant a few ideas in his mind that would help both me and the people who would be his slaves in the years to come. I might even be making things easier for Alice” (68). As epitomized by the moment when Rufus first hits Dana, Dana realizes that the historical and social forces around Rufus inescapably make him similar to his father, Mr. Weylin, who is known throughout the novel for his violent and repressive behavior. Not only does Rufus render Dana a slave physically, when he hits her, but he also becomes possessive of her when forcing Dana to burn a map that prevents her from finding Kevin in the years they are separated:

“I took the map from Rufus’s desk and dropped it into the fireplace [...] “I can manage without it, you know,” I said quietly. “No need for you to,” said Rufus. “You’ll be all right here. You’re home” (143).

When Rufus says “You’ll be all right here” it is apparent that he associates Dana’s safety with being in his possession. Although Dana’s relationship with Rufus begins endearingly, considering that he is a child when they begin to establish an affinity with one another, Rufus’ possessive and abusive behavior as he grows older leads to Dana’s discomfort around defining the Weylin plantation as “home.”

From the very beginning of the novel, when moving into a new house with Kevin, readers get a sense of what Dana originally defines home as in the present. She notes, “On the day before, we had moved from our apartment in Los Angeles to a house of our own a few miles away in Altadena” (12). Dana’s “On the day before” refers to the day she first time travels to the Weylin plantation. Therefore, Dana and Kevin have only been in their new house together for two days before she is displaced in the past. While this attention to detail may appear trivial, Dana reminds readers of the short period of time she and Kevin spend in the house together, as shown later in the text when she reflects,

I had been home to 1976, to this house, and it hadn’t felt that homelike. It didn’t now. For one thing, Kevin and I had lived here together for only two days. The fact that I’d had eight extra days here alone didn’t really help. The time, the year, was right, but the house just wasn’t familiar enough. I felt as though I was losing my place here in my own time (191).

Feelings of home, as indicated by “homelike,” are not constructed through physicality but rather through the nature of Dana’s relationship with Kevin. Not only are Dana and Kevin physically and psychologically scarred by events in the past but they also do not spend enough time together in their physical house to enable Dana to feel ‘at home’ or heal—conflicting with the first part of the novel where Dana consistently refers to her house with Kevin in Los Angeles as home (14, 23, 31, 49, 51). However, as reiterated earlier, we also see Dana identify the Weylin plantation as home, as epitomized when Dana ponders: “I was startled to catch myself saying wearily, “Home at last.” I stood still for a moment between the fields and the house and reminded myself that I was in a hostile place” (126-127). Dana’s association of “home” with the Weylin plantation—although startling to her—can be tied to bell hooks theorization of “homeplace” for Black families. hooks defines “homeplace” as a site of resistance and political solidarity for Black families living in a colonized and white supremacist community (hooks 388).

Interestingly, during Dana's third trip to the Antebellum South, she comments on how safe the cookhouse feels, as it is a space where slaves can shortly escape their realities—specifically by eating and talking with each other. It seems possible to define the cookhouse on the Weylin plantation as a “homeplace,” especially considering how political and resistant it becomes when Dana begins to teach Nigel and Carrie, two young slaves, how to read there. Dana's unstable associations with home between her house in Los Angeles with Kevin and spaces like the cookhouse on the Weylin plantation comments on how difficult it is for oppressed groups, like African-Americans, to seek and establish a concrete sense of home.

Similar to hooks, Rahul K. Gairola raises the importance of home for diasporic groups by drawing attention to the liminal space African-Americans are caught between in the U.S. Gairola describes home for the diasporic as the “dialectical relation to *that place* and to an *elsewhere*,” where the familiar and unfamiliar are constantly in friction. It is fitting to label Dana, in Gairola's terms, as “diasporic,” as Dana's ability to forge a community with slaves on the Weylin plantation contributes to the liminal space she is caught between when time traveling. There are many moments in the text where Dana longs for her home in the present with Kevin yet cannot leave behind those she meets in the past. Dana and Kevin's trip to Maryland, at the end of the novel, suggests the impossibility of leaving behind the past, specifically in their effort to find tangible existence of the Weylin plantation. When confronted with the reality that there are no written records of the slaves on the Weylin plantation, Dana says, “Why did I even want to come here. You'd think I would have had enough of the past” (Butler 264). Dana's insistence on “[having] had enough of the past” emphasizes the liminal position she is inevitably fixed in despite her desire to move forward.

Even before time travel, Dana occupies a liminal position as a Black woman in the U.S. considering that African-Americans in the U.S. have been cut off from their African ancestry through slavery, as well “an American heritage” by exclusion from history (Mosley 405). The liminal space African-Americans are caught between historically and currently can be situated in Sharpe’s theorization of “the wake,” specifically when she writes, “I want *In the Wake* to declare that we are Black peoples in the wake with no state or nation to protect us, with no citizenship bound to be respected, and to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there” (Sharpe 22). Defining African-Americans’ contemporary experience of being in the wake, or in other words, living without a “state or nation to protect [them],” mimics the lack of “citizenship” and protection Dana experiences in the past, as well as the surveillance her aunt demonstrates as a reality for contemporary African-Americans. In the last chapter, “The Rope,” readers witness Dana struggle with the liminal space African-Americans occupy, specifically when she is unwilling to celebrate the Fourth of July before her last trip to the past, as depicted when she says, “A couple of Kevin’s friends came over on the Fourth of July and tried to get us to go to the Rose Bowl with them for the fireworks. Kevin wanted to go [...] I told him to go ahead, but he wouldn’t go without me” (Butler 247). Dana’s unwillingness to celebrate the Fourth of July, juxtaposed against Kevin’s desire to go out, bespeaks the difficulty she now feels as a Black woman who has experienced slavery to celebrate a holiday associated with political freedom and patriotism. Towards the end of the novel, we, therefore, see Dana come back to Los Angeles with a truer, but startling, understanding of African-Americans’ history in the U.S. than the versions previously offered to her through commercial culture.

As readers, it can be difficult to feel satisfied with the novel's ending—one where Dana's safety and marriage are scarred by the trauma inherent in slavery, the slaves on the Weylin plantation are separated, and where there is no tangible existence of the histories Dana and Kevin encounter. As Crossley argues, Butler "[sacrifices] the neat closure" time travel could have given the novel: "Butler leaves the reader uneasy and disturbed by the intersection of story and history rather than reassured by a tale that solves all the mysteries" (Crossley 267-268). By paralleling the novel's ending with Dana's wounds, Crossley emphasizes the notion that it is impossible to provide readers a satisfying and fitting ending given the violent history *Kindred* grapples with. Crossley's use of the word "mysteries" alludes to Dana and Kevin's healing after time traveling, the fate of the slaves left behind, as well as Dana's altered understanding of racial relations in her contemporary life. Crossley's assertion, that the vehicle of time travel *should* have provided "neat closure" to the novel, stems from science fiction's tendency as a genre to become a form of escape. Ironically, even though Dana does escape the Weylin plantation, particularly after whippings and the threat of rape by Rufus, the very memories of time traveling instead become a form of confinement for Dana in the present. Dana's first instinct to travel back to Maryland after her trips cease, to "touch solid evidence that those people existed" (Butler 264), highlights the ways in which she is physically and psychologically tied to Maryland despite her residence with Kevin in Los Angeles. While science fiction is usually assumed to provide an escape for *all* readers, it is also a genre that has been overwhelming white for Black audiences. Not only has most of the genre's writers been white but there was also "little for [Black readers] to identify with in [its] content" as Saunders further comments on when he writes, "A literature that offered mainstream readers an escape route into the imagination and, at its best, a window to the future, could not bestow a similar experience for black and other minority readers" (398). Saunders

suggests that it is, and will always be, difficult for Black and other minority readers to imagine a future that is not inundated with the social violence that science fiction should, hypothetically, provide a refuge from. Butler's approach to *Kindred*'s ending reifies the notion that even science-fiction tropes cannot provide a proper engagement, or reconciliation, with Black people's oppressive past.

Not only does Butler conclude *Kindred* on a grim note but she also does not provide readers a sequel. Unlike Butler's other work, *Kindred* is a stand-alone novel. Almost all of Butler's other sci-fi and speculative texts, such as *Parable of the Sower*, *Patternmaster*, and *Xenogenesis*, appear in series; whereas, *Kindred* does not. Butler's inability, or resistance, to provide the subsequent narrative of Dana's life after time travel bespeaks a broader incapacity to confront slavery 'as past' and the manifestations of slavery in the present. Sharpe theorizes what it should mean for African-Americans to confront the past from the present when she writes, "I argue that rather than seeking a resolution to blackness's ongoing and irresolvable abjection, one might approach Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*" (Sharpe 14). Instead of attempting to find a "resolution" to African-Americans' slave past and ongoing "abjection," *Kindred* instead utilizes time travel to advocate Sharpe's understanding of being Black in the wake of slavery as a form of consciousness. Through Dana's relationships with others, as well as with the notion of home, readers witness her become more conscious of what it means for her to be a Black woman in the present considering African-Americans' traumatic history in the U.S.

In further consideration of Butler's previous novels, with the exception of *Wild Seed*, her novels are often situated in a "future, often a damaged future" that focus on the power relationships between "normal" human beings and mutants/aliens (Crossley 268). Butler's *Kindred* instead offers the critique to science fiction's disposition to focus on the power

relationships between “normal” human beings and hypothetical aliens. In her essay, “The Monophonic Response,” she muses,

How strange: in our ongoing eagerness to create aliens, we express our need for them, and we express our deep fear of being alone in a universe that cares no more for us than it does for stones or suns or any other fragments of itself. And yet we are unable to get along with those aliens who are closest to us, those aliens who are of course ourselves (Butler 415).

Butler suggests that instead of creating “aliens,” American sci-fi writers should instead reckon with the racial differences that exist around us. As Butler represents through *Kindred*, the “aliens who are closest to us,” similar to diasporic groups, deserve the attention and expression that is often, ironically, delegated to imaginary and speculative species. Butler’s “we express our deep fear of being alone in a universe that cares no more for us than it does for stones or suns or any other fragments of itself” subtly refers to the ways in which racially different groups are reminded they are not cared for or valued. Sharpe’s description of the “no-citizen” elaborates on the position that racially different groups are often situated in, as she writes, “you “fit the description” of the nonbeing, the being out of place [...] the noncitizen [is] always available to and for death” (Sharpe 86). Often, science fiction has been utilized to explore the relationship between “white men and their green aliens”—even when it becomes more useful to theorize the haunting aspects of racial difference in America. By focusing on “the aliens who are closest to us,” as *Kindred* performs the labor of, can the futures of characters like Dana occupy feelings of belonging and ‘home’ rather than unsafety in the afterlives of U.S. slavery.

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