

# Didactics and Intersections in the Teaching of Genre and Interracial Desire in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

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**Abstract**— Slavery's legacy haunts present-day America, and its enduring trauma is reflected in the writing of "neo-slave narratives," or contemporary novels about slavery. Although neo-slave narratives have received scholarly attention for their use of slave history as a tool for engaging with current sociopolitical concerns, critics have not yet examined the importance of romantic love in this project as a healing strategy for the pathology of enslavement. This project contends that neo-slave narratives attempt to repair the trauma of slavery through romantic love, seeking to undo slavery's destruction of black families, marriages, and other unions through a didactic innovation. While undertaking this intervention, neo-slave narratives risk inscribing traditional gender roles, affirming heterosexuality, and promoting a homogenous vision for black families, communities, and relationships. My central conclusion is that there remains a need for continued scrutiny of the neo-slave narrative's investment in conventional romantic paradigms and how these paradigms are educative. I examine Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and its interracial queer taboos. The historical basis for my research is split into an analysis of rhetoric surrounding the black family in two

Periods, the nineteenth century and the post-civil rights era. Methodologically, this paper utilizes trauma theory, cultural rhetoric on love, and critical race studies with attention to gender, sexuality and interracial issues

**Index Terms**— Slavery, trauma, Traditional gender roles, heterosexuality conventional romantic love, neo slave narratives.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2004, comedian Dave Chappelle dominated American popular culture with his sketch comedy show, tackling topics both lighthearted and deeply political. One particularly memorable skit, "Time Haters," was almost left on the cutting room floor because of its controversial representation of slavery; Chappelle, however, resurrected the bit in his "Greatest Misses" special, attempting to explain why the sketch came "to a screeching halt" and was previously unaired (Chappelle). In the sketch, Chappelle plays Silky Johnson, an urban pimp who uses a time machine in order to "hate" on villains throughout history (for example, in another sketch, Silky confronts Adolf Hitler). After traveling to a slave plantation in the nineteenth century, Silky informs the befuddled slave master, "We've traveled back through time...to call you a cracker" (Chappelle). The master's humiliation is met with the audience's laughter,

which is generated by the fact that a contemporary black man is socially empowered enough to verbally disempower a nineteenth-century white man, saying now what could not be said then. The sketch's verbal play takes an unexpected turn when Silky Johnson pulls out a pistol and kills the slave master, ending the scene. The show then cuts to a shot of Chappelle on-stage laughing while explaining to his audience, "Apparently shooting a slave master isn't funny to anybody but me [...] If I could, I'd do it every episode!" (Chappelle).

This paper begins with Chappelle's "Time Haters" in order to enter a didactic conversation about the trope of time travel in neo-slave narratives. Chappelle's sketch answers hypothetical questions that other neo-slave narratives have attempted to address: if time travel were possible, what would a physical confrontation between slavery and contemporary people look like, and what would come of such contact?

What could the nineteenth century learn from the twenty-first in regards to slavery and vice versa? What is the didactics implication of Bloom Taxonomy? Chappelle imagines that the slave master's authority ceases to matter when met with the threat posed by contemporary black men, who are signified by the stereotype of Silky, the slick urban pimp. The confrontation between the past and the present, while humorous because of the use of stereotype and language, is also imbued with a serious undercurrent: the revisionist desire to avenge slave ancestors through the killing of the slave master. The sketch fulfills the audience's unconscious desire for catharsis and resolution, which is enacted through the scene's startling, uncomfortable conclusion. In both literature and film, time travel has been used as a device for returning to the past to correct future injustices.

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* presents more of a challenge to tradition through both form and content. While Rushdy argues that "the authors of Neo-slave narratives engage in an extended dialogue with their own moment of origins in the late sixties and early seventies" (5), his definition does not account for a text like *Kindred* that simultaneously and overtly represents both historical periods past and present. And while the novel engages with the debates on racial formation and Black Power articulated by Rushdy, it takes a decidedly unpopular position on interracial unions, ultimately undermining black homogeneity through a challenge to the taboo of intermarriage between black women and white men. These differences allow *Kindred* to occupy a unique place within the canon of neo-slave narratives; it is

alike enough to group with other novels that more conventionally fit the confines of the genre, yet dissimilar enough to question these same conventions. *Kindred's* representation of interracial intimacy is anomalous within a genre that seeks to understand such desire as pathological and potentially damaging to the project of recuperating the black family.

This paper will focus on *Kindred's* complicated position within the neo-slave narrative genre, a position that is negotiated through both challenges to narrative form and to conventional content. In the first part of the article, I plan to analyze the novel as a neo-slave narrative didactically, and situating it within the genre of literature attempting to revise the history of slavery. While the novel resembles other neo-slave narratives in its recognition of the history and conventions of the slave narrative, the novel is distinguished from these works by its use of time travel as the device that links the past with the present.

Butler's innovation is worthy of mention because it allows the contemporary world to confront the institution of slavery and its lingering effects upon the twentieth century. Butler's treatment of interracial desire separates her novel from other neo-slave narratives that tend either to ignore or to castigate cross-racial relationships. The second part of the essay will address how *Kindred* refuses these options by problematizing desire, showing the legacy of interracial rape alongside the loving mutuality that can exist between contemporary blacks and whites. Through the forced interracial origins of the protagonist's family and her subsequent interracial marriage, Butler posits that reconciling past racial traumas figures as a critical step in reshaping contemporary race relations between blacks and whites. In addition to this symbolic reading of race relations on a larger scale, the novel has implications for interracial intimacy, calling into question the tragedy that conventionally accompanies interracial love narratives. Consequently, Butler's novel offers two interventions: first, a revision of the conventional neo-slave narrative (which is itself a revision of slavery); and second, a rewriting of the interracial love narrative.

#### A) THE DIDACTICS AND DIALECTICS OF STANDING ON THE FOUNDATION OF TRADITION: *KINDRED* AS NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

Prior to addressing *Kindred's* use of interracial desire, our analysis must first investigate the narrative structure that shapes the text's content. Although Bernard Bell first defined the term "neo-slave narrative" in his 1987 work, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu argues that "Bell does little with the term other than providing this basic operational definition and using it to label novels such as *Jubilee* and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*" (26). Beaulieu's criticism of Bell's terminology can also be extended to almost all other critical investigations of neo-slave narratives, which struggle with pinning down the conventions of the genre beyond the cursory definition "contemporary novels about slavery." While debates over the accuracy and depth of the neo-slave narrative term are alone not worthy of extended analysis, the

application of the term to an already contested novel such as *Kindred* is complicated, especially in terms of critics' attempts to understand the novel's alliances with the conflicting genres of neo-slave narrative and science fiction.

The structural connection between the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative is one obvious place to begin with a study of convention in *Kindred*. Neo-slave narratives grapple with the concerns of the slave narrative through both

attention to the themes of the slave narrative and also through narrative organization. James Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives" recounts the many shared conventions of works within the slave narrative genre. The repetition of these conventions throughout the genre reveals the reading expectations of the nineteenth-century audience, who looked to the slave narrative for two purposes: autobiography and didacticism. While the texts appeal to the reader with the individual experiences of slaves, they also try to convince readers of the need to abolish slavery. This dual purpose addresses the specific historical climate of the slave narrative genre, and complicates the replication of these conventions in changed contemporary contexts.

The use of these conventions within neo-slave narratives is undertaken unevenly, with some authors overtly playing to slave narrative structure (as in Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*), and other authors focusing more on thematic similarity (as in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*). Sandra Y. Govan's essay "Homage to Tradition: Octavia Butler Renovates the Historical Essay" argues that Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is an example of the former, with its obvious attempts to replicate the conventions of its slave narrative predecessors. Govan writes, "In fact, *Kindred*, is so closely related to the experience disclosed in slave narratives that its plot structure follows the classic patterns with only the requisite changes to flesh out character, story and action" (89). This imitation of slave narrative convention is called "faction" in Govan's piece, a "blend of authentic verifiable historical fact and well-rendered fiction," suggesting that the novel functions as a kind of documentary history in which the realities of slavery are replicated for the contemporary audience (Govan 91).

Indeed, *Kindred* does exhibit some of the same conventional patterns also held by slave narratives. Elements of Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives" are present within the novel, beginning with the opening passage that provides a birth date for the narrator, Dana: "The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It was also the day I met Rufus—the day he called me to him for the first time" (Butler, *Kindred* 12). This opening is an inversion of one of Olney's observations about slave narratives, which usually have a "first sentence beginning, 'I was born . . .,'" then specifying a place but not a date of birth" (Olney 152). The inversion is significant in its location of the narrative within a specific time period, a point which has not been lost on critics who have noted the irony of setting the novel within the bicentennial year of American independence (Bettanin). The opening passage also establishes

Dana's connection to slavery, and the fact that she can't remember "the trouble" before June 9<sup>th</sup> suggests that the date marks a rebirth into the horrors of slavery. Almost immediately, Dana witnesses the violence of nineteenth-century slavery, recounting the cruelty of overseers and patrollers and detailing her "first observed whipping" (Olney 152), corresponding with Frederick Douglass's famous passage through "the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery" (Douglass, *Narrative* 18).

Butler further develops this dialectic through attention to each of the other conventions outlined by James Olney, including challenges to slave literacy, Christian hypocrisy amongst slaveholders, a description of the daily lives of slaves, and an account of the separation of slave families. The novel exhibits uncanny attention to detail, recreating the nineteenth century with vibrant accuracy, which is supported by Govan's assessment of the novel's use of history: "Butler treats the recurring themes of casual brutality, forcible separation of families, the quest for knowledge, the desire to escape, the tremendous work loads expected of slaves as effectively as any of the narratives or documentary histories discussing the slavery experience" (91). Govan reads this historical recreation as renovation, arguing: "Octavia Butler's work stands on the foundation of traditional form and proceeds to renovate that form" (82).

Although Govan correctly points to the many ways in which *Kindred* directly addresses traditional form, questions about what the novel *does* with this form are more difficult to answer. Her use of the word "renovation" is curious when put in context with the critical struggles to understand the neo-slave narrative genre. How do neo-slave narratives remake slave narratives? How do they engage in parodic mimicry of the original slave narrative genre? What opportunities for historical intervention exist in this process of renovation, and how does *Kindred* interact politically with both the history of slavery and its own contemporary context?

These questions about renovation speak to larger critical debates about the purposes and uses of the neo-slave narrative genre. Angelyn Mitchell argues that neo-slave narratives have the potential to do more than replicate the conventions of the slave narrative genre. In response to Govan, Mitchell writes, "While Govan is accurate in her observation, it seems to me that Butler does more than signify on the substance and structure of the emancipatory narrative in her revision" (Mitchell, "Not Enough" 52). She posits that *Kindred* goes beyond Henry Louis Gates' term signifyin(g), defined by Mitchell as a form of "textual revision" and narrative play, to make more meaningful thematic interventions: "In what follows, I explain how Butler engages and revises the dominant themes of the nineteenth-century female emancipatory narrative—specifically, female sexuality, motherhood, individualism, and community—as she interrogates the construction and nature of freedom for a contemporary audience" ("Not Enough" 52). Mitchell replaces the term neo-slave narrative with "liberatory narrative," which she

argues holds more potential for understanding the drive and purpose of the neo-slave narrative:

While Bell's term, "neo-slave narrative," has been quite useful to our understanding of contemporary texts that revisit the historical period of slavery, I find the term liberatory narrative more appropriate. The focus, it seems to me, of these narratives by contemporary African American women writers is not on the concept of enslavement, but more importantly on the construct of freedom. ("Not Enough" 72)

The semantic value in using a different term speaks to the challenges of understanding the relationship between old narrative forms and their updated versions, which for Mitchell also involves shifting the focus from slavery to freedom, and the need to deal with slavery's aftermath through interventions in hegemonic versions of history. Although Mitchell's argument focuses specifically on gendered concerns within novels written by African American women, it holds significance for all slave narratives, which are similarly engaged in the process of reconstructing history.

The desire to atone for the horrors of slavery and the legacy of its cultural trauma drives these efforts to reclaim and rewrite history. Thus the neo-slave narrative satisfies a different purpose than the original slave narrative genre; it replaces abolitionist didacticism with engagement in contemporary debates over racial formation and identity. While the neo-slave narrative might look like unconscious mimicry of the slave narrative through its use of shared conventions, it is involved in its own process of recuperating history to suit current anxieties and these conventions take on new meanings when placed within contemporary social contexts. In *Kindred*, the reader is presented with a version of history that is mediated by Butler's role in the process of replication. Although it is useful to examine the use of slave narrative convention within the neo-slave narrative, a more useful question might ask, for what purpose and to what effect is convention used? Through *Kindred's* engagement with traditional form, Butler posits that uncovering slave history and reconciling past traumas figures as a critical step in reshaping contemporary race, gender and class relations.

Butler undertakes this dialectic between the past and present through her representation of Dana's impressions of the nineteenth century, a dialogue that goes beyond conventional narrative strategies and incorporates elements from science fiction, Butler's primary genre. The novel begins with the immediate experience of an unusual force driving Dana's visits to the nineteenth century:

The man, the woman, the boy, the gun all vanished. I was kneeling in the living room of my own house again several feet from where I had fallen minutes before. I was back at home—wet and muddy, but intact. Across the room, Kevin stood frozen staring at the spot where I had been. How long had he been there?

'Kevin?'

He spun around to face me. 'What the hell...how did you get over there?' he whispered. 'I don't know.' (Butler, *Kindred* 14-15)

Time travel is the mechanism that allows Dana to have firsthand access to the past, though Robert Crossley notes in his introduction to the novel that this is not technological time travel in the style of H.G. Wells, but rather travel of an indeterminate physics: "Certainly, Butler did not need to show off a technological marvel of the sort Wells provided to mark his traveler's path through time; the only time machine in *Kindred* is present by implication: it is the vehicle that looms behind every American slave narrative, the grim death-ship of the Middle Passage" (xi).

Dana's inability to articulate what has happened speaks to the validity of Crossley's reading of the implied and indeterminate means of Dana's journey to the nineteenth century. Dana is called back in time by an unexplained physical connection to her ancestors, and the act of going to them is akin to experiencing the Middle Passage, but with a new trauma—the trauma of the contemporary African American reliving slavery.

## II.

### B) THE TEACHING OF MIDDLE PASSAGE AS TIME MACHINE: *KINDRED* AS SCIENCE-FICTION

This passage recounts contemporary institutional slavery, in which no actual threat of violence forces workers to withstand poor conditions. Instead, a pattern of economic disappointment keeps unwanted workers trapped within the system, slowly selling themselves pint by pint of blood in order to survive. Dana describes the process as "mindless work [...] done by mindless people" (53), a phrase with obvious implications for nineteenth-century views on the nature of the work done by slaves and slaves themselves. Even though Dana is aware of her slave-like status as a modern worker, she seems no guiltier of forgetting her past than any other contemporary African American; therefore it is not entirely accurate to say that Dana must travel to the past in order to realize the error of her ways. And although Dana is physically transformed by her experience, losing her arm to Rufus's grip in "an avalanche of pain, red impossible agony" (Butler 261), the "lesson" learned from her experience is not easily understood. This puzzling sense of purpose and consequence within the novel constructs time travel as mysterious above and beyond the initial question of how the travel is made possible.

Critical responses to the text have wrestled with how to read and understand *Kindred*'s science-fiction leanings alongside its neo-slave narrative traits. Attempting to explain the didactic relationship between the two genres in *Kindred*, Sandra Y Govan states, "[Butler] has chosen to link science fiction not only to anthropology and history, via the historical novel, but directly to the Black American slavery experiences via the slave narrative. This as a fundamental departure for science fiction as a genre" (79). This departure from tradition implies that science fiction as a genre cannot account for the inclusion of racial history,

and that to include these elements in a text such as *Kindred* is to innovate and deviate from convention. Indeed, science fiction purists have a hard time placing *Kindred* alongside Butler's other works that more prototypically meet the demands of the science fiction genre. In his critique of Butler's writing titled "Genre to the Rear, Race and Gender to the Fore: The novels of Octavia E. Butler," Burton Raffel argues that *Kindred* is less successful than Butler's other novels because it deals too much with race and slavery: "Butler's one comparative failure, *Kindred* (1979), is a much more predictable, far too consciously wrought attempt at a twentieth-century slave narrative" (Raffel). The accusation that *Kindred* sends "genre to the rear" by privileging race and gender politics represents a conservative critical paradigm within science fiction; however, even Butler resists self-definition in *Kindred*, calling her novel a "grim fantasy" and claiming that it is not science fiction because it has "absolutely no science in it" (Beal 14). Simply put, if there is no technological explanation for Dana's travel, is it appropriate to categorize *Kindred* as science fiction, and can science fiction support the inclusion of political issues surrounding race and gender? These difficulties in negotiating between science fiction and the neo-slave narrative suggest that Butler makes unquantifiable innovations and interventions. Not only does *Kindred* "stand on the foundation" of traditional slave narrative form as Govan argues, but it also proceeds to renovate conventional understandings of science fiction, resulting in dual challenges to narrative form.

Despite these struggles to understand the connections between science fiction and the neo-slave narrative, the dialectic between the opposing narrative forms in *Kindred* is worthy of analysis, especially in terms of the ways that the novel resists, questions, and remakes convention. In support of this observation, Lisa Yaszek's 2003 essay "'A Grim Fantasy': Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" argues that although "scholars always acknowledge Butler's primary allegiance to science fiction, they rarely pursue the impact this might have on her historical fiction. Yet such a discussion seems fruitful" (Yaszek). This impact on historical fiction is further evident in Yaszek's argument for a reading of multiplicity within the novel: "If one of the goals of African-American historical fiction is to interrogate how 'race,' 'gender,' and even 'history' emerge through interlocking sets of representations, then it would seem imperative to examine how authors who work in multiple genres might bring the representational strategies of those genres to bear on individual texts" (Yaszek). As proof of Yaszek's point about the way in which a multiplicity of genres bears upon a novel, *Kindred*'s thematic content is enabled through this negotiation between narrative forms. Marc Steinberg explains this relationship through his argument that "content and form intersect in the novel" (Steinberg, "Inverting" 467). According to his essay "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative," this contact between form and content is created through postmodern literary techniques that blur the boundaries of genre:

By zigzagging the time frame of the novel from past to present, Butler points to ways in which past and present become interchangeable. She also writes of plausible historical actions and relationships, "filling in" possible gaps that may be evident in classic slave narratives. Butler assumes a non-Western conceptualization of history--one in which history is cyclical, not linear--in order to demonstrate ways in which certain forms of race and gender oppression continue late into the twentieth century and beyond. She incorporates postmodern fiction literary techniques to critique the notion that historical and psychological slavery can be overcome. (467)

Steinberg's description of the ways in which Butler "fills in possible gaps" has particular relevance for understanding how Butler's use of narrative form intersects with the content of the novel. Although *Kindred* is a predecessor to other neo-slave narratives published in the 1980s and beyond, its ability to question structure and to take on difficult content distinguishes it as a revolutionary text.

### III.

#### C) CONTENT INTERSECTING FORM: *KINDRED* AND INTERRACIAL DESIRE

In *Kindred*, a precursor to "Bloodchild," Butler merges science fiction with the historical novel in order to further explore slavery and interracial desire. Despite the overwhelming presence of interracial contact within the novel, most critical texts either resist it or leave it altogether untouched out of a desire to see *Kindred* as a pro-black feminist fantasy<sup>21</sup>. For example, Marc Steinberg writes: "Butler suggests that, for black women, interracial heterosexual marriage too might be a form of oppression not unlike chattel slavery" ("Inverting" 468). He describes this realization as the primary history lesson of the novel, and analyzes examples of doubling within the text that pair Kevin, Dana's white husband, with white slaveholders from the nineteenth century: "In the past the patroller had collapsed across Dana's body; in the present Dana finds herself beneath her white husband Kevin (43). In this way, Butler connects two oppressors' bodies; both men are powerful white figures [...] In her disconcerted state, Dana confuses her husband with her historical oppressor, and scratches Kevin's eye" (468). Following Steinberg's argument, this unconscious lashing out at Kevin stems from the fact that interracial unions are still socially taboo, perhaps necessarily so in order to prevent unconscious victimization: "While Kevin appears to be a loving and giving husband, their interracial marriage still is not fully sanctioned in a large, progressive, and cosmopolitan city in late twentieth-century America" (468). Sandra Y. Govan makes similar rhetorical connections in her reading of the doubled past and present in the text: "Ironically, in 1976, while their marriage must withstand some subtle societal disapproval, it is at least legally recognized. In 1819 Maryland, Dana and Kevin dare not admit their marital bond because such a relationship is illegal, unimaginable, and dangerous" (92).

These analyses fail to see *Kindred* as anything but a cautionary tale about repeating the traumas of the past through interracial desire. What looks like rape in the nineteenth century is similarly stigmatized in the twentieth century because it is predicated upon a history of black female violation at the hands of white oppressors.

Through creative narrative tactics that enable a confrontation between the past

and the present, *Kindred* questions whether stigmatized desire is the only possibility. Steinberg and Govan are correct in pointing to the text's use of doubling as a point of inquiry, but rather than view doubling as complete replication, it is more productive to think about contextual issues that change the reading of the doubling: repetition with a difference. In his recent article, Guy Mark Foster analyzes repetition in the novel through the lens of surrogacy and substitution, arguing that *Kindred* conceals "the subversive nature of what initially appears to be a genuinely loving, healthy interracial relationship" through masking behind the expected narrative of black female victimization (143). He suggests that this process of mirroring "destabilizes and undermines key assumptions" about interracial desire, namely that it is always pathological in nature (144). He astutely observes that *Kindred* is unconventional both within neo-slave narratives and the larger genre of African American literature "because the couple's mutual love for one another is not depicted, at least on the surface, as psychologically unhealthy" (143), an argument that can be proven through an analysis of pairing within the novel. Contrasting twentieth-century characters with their nineteenth-century doubles ultimately reveals the ways in which the narrative of interracial contact is more complicated than conventional portrayals of victimization that linger even in contemporary writing.

Within the novel, Dana and her slave ancestor Alice share remarkable physical resemblance, bodily doubling the two women for one another: "Tall and slender and dark, she was. A little like me. Maybe a lot like me" (Butler, *Kindred* 119). Although the women are described as looking alike, their mannerisms and personalities are very different. Dana is prized within the Weylin household for her intelligence and literacy, while Alice is desired as a bedmate: "He likes me in bed, and you out of bed, and you and I look alike if you can believe what people say [...] We're two halves of the same woman—at least in his crazy head" (229). The two women's identities, while literally related and circumstantially connected, are falsely collapsed in Rufus's mind: "'Behold the woman,' he said. And looked from one of to the other of us. 'You really are only one woman. Did you know that?'" (Butler 228). While Dana and Alice appear to be the same woman through textual doubling, contextual differences prevent the flattening of their identities. These differences result in opposite outcomes for each of them in keeping with the opportunities for black women offered by their respective time periods: Alice escapes her sexual enslavement only by committing suicide, while Dana's encounter with slavery leaves her alive but physically and psychically wounded.

Similar doubling with a difference occurs in the connection between Rufus, Dana's white ancestor, and Kevin, her white husband. Rufus's desire for Alice, his slave,

appears to be in keeping with the prevalence of rape during slavery. Alice is his for the taking, though curiously Rufus desires something else that he can barely understand, suggesting that in Dana's time period, he would even think of marrying

Alice: "I was beginning to realize that he loved the woman—to her misfortune. There was no shame in raping a black woman, but there could be shame in loving one" (Butler, *Kindred* 124). Rufus's love for Alice in the nineteenth century conventionally looks like rape, because Alice is not in a position to refuse his demands. The text positions Rufus against Kevin, who shares a relationship with Dana that is founded upon romance and mutual desire, questioning the lingering presence of oppression and sexual violation. After his extended journey into the past, Kevin is described as subtly taking on the traits of his nineteenth-century predecessors: "He had a slight accent, I realized. Nothing really noticeable, but he did sound a little like Rufus and Tom Weylin. Just a little. I shook my head and tried to put the comparison out of my mind" (190). Dana collapses the two men, Rufus and Kevin, into one another, and must immediately push the undesirable comparison aside in order to not see herself in a replication of an oppressive relationship.

However, the realization and rejection of this similarity offers a deviation from the doubling. While the symmetry between the two men must be dealt with and cannot be ignored, the text posits that the present is not necessarily doomed to repeat the traumas of the past. After all, Kevin is just as wounded psychically and physically by his experience, suggesting that white Americans must share the burden of the past and determine how to move forward: "There was a jagged scar across his forehead—the remnant of what must have been a bad wound. This place, this time, hadn't been any kinder to him than it had been to me. But what had it made of him? What might he be willing to do now that he would not have done before" (184).

The contaminating influence of history continually threatens Dana's relationship with Kevin out of a fear that racism is always lurking beneath the surface of their interactions. This fear is realized once Dana determines how easy it is to slip into nineteenth-century patterns of domesticity within a slaveholding household: "Time passed. Kevin and I became more a part of the household, familiar, accepted, accepting. That disturbed me too when I thought about it. How easily we seemed to acclimatize. Not that I wanted us to have trouble, but it seemed as though we should have had a harder time adjusting to this particular segment of history—adjusting to our places in the household of a slaveholder" (Butler, *Kindred* 97). It is worth noting that Dana describes herself as bothered by this ease, and her discomfort suggests her rejection of a nineteenth-century alternate reality for her marriage. Once the couple returns to the twentieth century, their home is compared to the Weylin plantation house, an impression that must also be interrogated and eventually rejected: "Both our offices were ex-bedroom in the solidly build old frame house we had bought.

They were big comfortable rooms that reminded me a little of the rooms in the Weylin house. No. I shook my head, denying the impression. This house was nothing like the Weylin house" (193). The realization of the ways in which the nineteenth century is layered upon the twentieth century does not necessarily make the present a recreation of the past, but it does force Dana and Kevin to confront the historical implications of their relationship.

This is not intended to suggest that Dana and Kevin have no racial consciousness before they are violently swept into the nineteenth century through time travel. In fact, awareness of difference marks their initial encounter with one another both in how they regard each other and in how society regards them. Their coworker Buz leers at them and calls their relationship "chocolate and vanilla porn" (Butler, *Kindred* 56), emphasizing the sexual anxieties that pervade their interracial union. Other coworkers gawk at Dana and Kevin like sideshow freaks, calling them "the weirdest-looking couple" that they've ever seen (57). The couple also must confront the disapproval of both of their families, reinforcing that an interracial union is undesirable from many angles including the perspective of the white bigot and the perspective of the betrayed black family. Although society's consciousness of racial difference is marked explicitly, Dana and Kevin's awareness is more complicated and incomplete. Dana's initial description of Kevin emphasizes his whiteness: his hair is "completely gray and his eyes so pale as to be almost colorless" (54), while no racialized description of Dana from Kevin's perspective is ever provided. Kevin's consciousness of racial difference is questioned in when he asks Dana to type his work for him, not realizing the gendered, racial implications of his request. Dana refuses and leaves, only to return the next day and be asked again to type; she again refuses: "I stood waiting for him to either shut the door or let me in. He let me in" (109). This victory demonstrates Dana's unwillingness to succumb to Kevin's white, masculine privilege, and it also illustrates his subsequent willingness to be a fair and loving partner, despite his occasional missteps. Kevin's commitment to anti-racism is further ultimately revealed through his work helping slaves escape, giving him an active role in the fight against white oppression.

Even with liberal anti-racist practices, unintentional racism is a common complaint amongst interracial couples, as explained by Heather Dalmage in her book *Tripping the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World*: "Whites do not necessarily need to exercise individual effort to protect their racial privilege; the system takes care of it. Most of them (barring those involved in white supremacist groups) do not give race much conscious thought. When race arises as a factor, they often push it into the background without examining it" (Dalmage 38). An illustration of Dalmage's theory occurs when Dana sees slave children playing "auction" and charges that even the games children play prepare them for a life of enslavement. Kevin responds, "Dana, you're reading too much into a kids' game," and Dana retorts, "And you're reading too little into it" (Butler, *Kindred* 100). Psychologist Kyle D. Killian places this

exchange within the “discourse of hypersensitivity of persons of color” in his study “Dominant and Marginalized Discourses in Interracial Couples’ Narratives: Implications for Family Therapists.” He explains: “A dominant discourse in our society is that persons of color are ‘paranoid’ and ‘see racism everywhere they look.’ The suggestion that persons of color are victims of their own ‘baggage’ is a favorite backlash discourse of persons who believe that race relations are no longer an issue in the United States” (608). Within his study, Killian observes that in order to avoid unpleasant conflicts, many couples resort to “an overarching discourse of ‘no race talk’”: “Society’s normative discourse that certain subjects such as race ‘aren’t discussed’ (critically, at least) in mixed company, or in some cases, under any circumstances, gained currency in half of the couples interviewed” (614). Killian cautions that this response can be counterproductive to the therapeutic process, and charges that conversation must be facilitated if social change is to occur. Dana and Kevin represent the actors in this dialogue, and their necessary discussion of racism and oppression has larger significance for the recuperation of interracial love within the neo-slave narrative.

#### I- CONCLUSION

The novel concludes with final journey to Maryland and a confrontation between Dana, Kevin, and the ghosts of the nineteenth century, an appropriate ending suggesting continued commitment despite the hardships of their experience. Angelyn Mitchell concurs, “That Dana and Kevin, both enlightened by their individual and shared experiences, are still together at the narrative’s end suggests Butler’s resolution of this complex issue. Their interracial relationship can be read as a metaphor for how America may be healed” (“Not Enough” 70). Mitchell’s wording in this statement posits a revolutionary interpretation of the novel, which she must immediately qualify in order to avoid undercutting her political investment in black feminism: “I am not suggesting that Butler offers miscegenation as a solution to race relations, but, rather, that she emphasizes the necessity of integrated collective engagement and coalition building across the color line as a way of solving some of our contemporary race problems” (71).

Despite the addition of this qualifier and her subsequent desire to back away from the political messiness of intermarriage, Mitchell unearths a radically different approach to *Kindred*. The novel offers a new process for interrogating hegemonic versions of history and slavery. While other neo-slave narratives enact this revision by asserting the importance of black homogeneity and strong black families, *Kindred* breaks apart these conventions by showing the ways in which interracial confrontation and conversation must also have a place. The outcome of this project is not entirely optimistic, but to see it as a guaranteed solution is to obscure the unpleasantness of historical fact with a false promise for the future. This project is a work in process; a therapeutic practice that involves honesty and willingness to work through historical injustices. The title of

the novel at first glance stems from the protagonist’s ancestral ties to the past, her connections with her *kin*; however, the word is also used to describe Dana’s relationship with Kevin: “He was like me—a kindred spirit crazy enough to keep on trying” (Butler, *Kindred* 57). Octavia Butler’s work seems to suggest that it is the uncovering of this kinship—forgotten, long abandoned ties between whites and blacks forged in the slavery system—that will establish new communities and alliances. The novel’s courage to tackle interracial issues corresponds with the novel’s challenges to narrative structure; by resisting convention, the novel questions conservative impulses within the neo-slave narrative and makes way for new interventions.

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