

1-1-2016

Who Speaks for the Enslaved? Authorship and Reclamation in Octavia Butler's Kindred

Antoinette Daineyell Hayden

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Hayden, Antoinette Daineyell, "Who Speaks for the Enslaved? Authorship and Reclamation in Octavia Butler's Kindred" (2016). *Theses and Dissertations*. 5016.
<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td/5016>

This Graduate Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

Who speaks for the enslaved? Authorship and reclamation
in Octavia Butler's Kindred

By

Antoinette Daineyell Hayden

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2016

Copyright by
Antoinette Daineyell Hayden
2016

Who speaks for the enslaved? Authorship and reclamation
in Octavia Butler's Kindred

By

Antoinette Daineyell Hayden

Approved:

Donald M. Shaffer
(Committee Chair)

Shirley A. Hanshaw
(Committee Member)

Theodore B. Atkinson
(Committee Member)

Lara A. Dodds
(Graduate Coordinator)

Rick Travis
Dean
College of Arts & Sciences

Name: Antoinette Daineyell Hayden

Date of Degree: August 12, 2016

Institution: Mississippi State University

Major Field: English

Committee Chair: Dr. Donald M. Shaffer

Title of Study: Who speaks for the enslaved? Authorship and reclamation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

Pages in Study: 68

Candidate for Degree of Master of Arts

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is often looked at as a historical science fiction novel. While there are critics who have discussed the slave narrative aspects of the novel, the way Butler tackles authorship and what it means to re-write history has been overlooked. By examining the way Butler uses authorship to question authorial authority, one can see the way Butler uses her protagonist to revise history and reclaim historical figures. This process of reclamation and revision enables Butler to examine the historical gaps that have been created and the way enslaved blacks have been caricatured and further dehumanized. Through her protagonist, Butler is able to endow these historical figures with complex identities and emotions and challenges what it means to be a viable authorial voice.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my grandmother, Dorthy Hayden. She instilled in me a love for book, blues, and history. If I didn't have a deep love of all these things, this thesis would have never been written.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank my entire committee, Dr. Hanshaw, Dr. Shaffer, and Dr. Atkinson. The thoughtful comments, advice, and lessons I learned from you all helped make this entire thesis possible. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Lara Dodds and Ann Spurlock for all of their help during this process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. WHO SPEAKS FOR THE SLAVE?: AUTHORIAL VOICES IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S <i>KINDRED</i>	8
III. RECLAIMING “MAMMY”: THE REVISION OF FOLK IMAGES IN OCTAVIA BUTLER’S <i>KINDRED</i>	35
IV. CONCLUSION	61
REFERENCES	67

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

According to Robert F. Reid-Pharr, “There is perhaps no strong impetus within the study of Black American literature and culture than the will to return, the desire to name the original, the source, the root, that seminal moment at which the many-tongued diversity of ancient West Africa gave way to the monolingualism of black North America” (135). Often this journey happens in black literature. Since the Emancipation Proclamation, former slaves, and occasionally non-slave abolitionists, have written or orated their accounts of living under America’s “peculiar institution.” These accounts were christened Slave Narratives and soon became a genre within themselves. In *The Handbook of African American Literature* Hazel Arnett Ervin defines the slave narrative as “A subgenre of the African American autobiography, written by former slaves, starting as early as 1760. Major themes are the inhumanity of the slave system—as experienced by the authors of the narratives—and antislavery activism” (124). Phillip Gould states in his article “The Economies of the Slave Narrative”: “Early black writers were sensitive to the terms of contemporary proslavery and antislavery debates. While lacking the rhetorical sophistication of later writers like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, this early writing nevertheless skillfully deploys basic Enlightenment ideas about the nature of rights and individual identity” (93). Gould states that these early writings show that black writers “were capable of challenging the identification of the human subject with

material possession” and notes that the “antebellum slave narrative addresses this ethical dissonance by resorting to rhetorical techniques that heighten the absurdity of equating a person with property” (93-94). Then, after the height of the Civil Rights movement, there was a quest for America to be open about its sinister past. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy writes in his book *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, “there occurred a distinct shift in both the current social movements and in the intellectual trends in the American historical profession, signaled by the emergence of the Black Power movement and the rise of the New Left social history” (4). Rushdy relates this shift back to literature by discussing William Styron’s novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* and relates the reasons why many found it to problematic:

Black Power intellectuals challenged Styron’s novel on a series of issues: its representation of a nonheroic slave rebel, its presumption of assuming the voice of a slave, its uninformed appropriation of African American culture, its deep, almost conservative allegiance to the traditional historiographical portrait of slavery, and its troubling political message in a time of emergent black empowerment. (4)

As a result, he states that “the dialogue over Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner* [constitutes] the moment of origin for the Neo-slave narrative” (5).

Writers like Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler, among others, began to write novels about enslaved people in an attempt to, as Rushdy puts it, “engage in an extended dialogue with their own moment of origins in the late sixties and early seventies” (5). When Butler enters this genre, she complicates it by adding in fantastical elements that often causes people to categorize it as science fiction. *Kindred* utilizes time

travel as a way to take the protagonist, Dana, back to antebellum Maryland to save her white ancestor, Rufus. Because Butler does use time travel in the novel, many critics choose to relegate it to science fiction rather than treating it as a genre fluid, or multi-generic, text. Nadine Fligel notes: “While generic conventions in *Kindred* sometimes overlap, more often it is precisely the terms of one genre that allow Butler to interrupt and interrogate the assumptions and expectations held by the other” (217). When Octavia Butler published her novel *Kindred*, the consensus among critics was that Butler complicates the genre by blending it with science fiction. Critics such as Benjamin Robertson have discussed Butler’s choice to write a narrative about slavery from the point of view of a woman from the modern times who is somehow able to time travel back to early nineteenth-century Maryland. Robertson notes that Butler’s novels engage with American literature and history and claims that the science fiction aspects of the novel work to show the way that power works to control the body. In his article, rather than going into depth about how the novel utilizes the traditional Slave Narrative and the Neo-slave Narrative genres, he prefers to focus on the science fiction genre and connects it with biopolitics and the female body. He explains that “Foucault . . . claims this power [has] two poles of development. The first ‘centered on the body as a machine The second pole ‘focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality. . . .’” (367). Robertson applies the concept of the body as a machine to *Kindred* by explaining how Dana’s body is “the vehicle through which slavery and its history can be understood” (368). In a similar argument, Alys Eve Weinbaum takes up this conversation of the body and argues that “fiction by Octavia Butler . . . [suggests] that a

dystopian literature that deeply and critically engages contemporary reproductive cultures and politics already exists” and “Butler’s engagement with the dystopian genre lies in its refusal of clear-cut divisions between old and new dystopias past and present” (50).

Unlike Robertson, Weinbaum focuses on Dana’s relationship with Alice, and she takes a more cynical view of Dana describing her as Alice’s “pimp” who “shares [Rufus’s] investment in Alice’s sexual and reproductive subjection” (55). While these readings go into depth about the science fiction aspects and the functions of the female body in American history, neither discuss the slave narrative aspects of the novel or the psychological trauma that Dana endures throughout her journey.

The readings of the novel that focus primarily on one genre or the other are valid in that they both discuss how history informs each aspect of the genre. But, there is one glaring issue with these readings: Butler explicitly states in an interview that *Kindred* is not science fiction, it is fantasy. She tells Randall Kenan that “*Kindred* is fantasy. I mean literally, it is fantasy. There’s no science in *Kindred*” (28). However, I argue that the overlapping genres in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* are necessary to create a narrative that explores the way the past informs the present. My reading takes the trauma that Dana, and at times her white husband, Kevin, endures and shows how Dana’s literal reliving of history is meant as a metaphor for the mental process that occurs when Black Americans who were previously ignorant of their history are transformed when they regain the knowledge that has been lost as time has moved forward. This gained knowledge allows black historical revisionists to become viable authorial voices because of their ability to navigate between their dual identities as both a black and an American. This fuller knowledge of the past allows black Americans to reclaim historical black figures such as

the “mammys” and give a voice to their complicated narratives of survival. While traditional American narratives depict these characters as people who embrace slavery and uphold the institution, contemporary authorial agents who are well versed in historical narratives will be able to engage in historical revisionism that contains more veracity. Prior to now, critics have not discussed the way Butler’s novel makes a case for who is capable of being a viable authorial voice. But, since Dana’s first person narration of her experience dominates the novel rather than both Dana and Kevin’s voices sharing their experiences, it is not a factor that can continue to be overlooked. As Dana narrates the history that unfolds in front of her, she becomes a solid authority on history and uses this authority to reclaim hijacked historical figures.

In contrast with Robertson and Weinbaum, authors such as Gregory Hampton and Anne Donadey recognize the slave narrative as a dominant genre in the novel. Both articles note that the novel’s discussion of slavery often shows how intertwined the past and the present are. Gregory Hampton notes in his essay, “*Kindred*: History Revision, and (Re)memory of Bodies,” that “Butler’s fabulous fiction allows one to imagine the way the past fits into the present, beyond abstract thoughts, so that past and present become almost synonymous. In this way Dana’s method of time and space travel becomes a device that opens a space for re-figuring the ‘then’ and ‘now’ of memory” (109). Likewise, Anne Donadey notes that “*Kindred* is about the centrality of slavery in American history and its contemporary consequences . . . in other words, its main concern is the influence of the past on the present” (67). While these articles go into great depth about the importance of history and how it affects the present day, the concepts of agency and regaining lost memories are absent from both arguments. Also,

these arguments prefer to focus primarily on the Slave Narrative aspects of the novel, rather than the importance of the blending of the fantasy and neo-slave narrative genres.

Moving forward, my argument will focus on the way Butler uses magical realism in her neo-slave narrative to take Dana and the reader on a journey. Through this journey, the reader learns why it is important to be connected with the past if one plans to narrate it. Chapter one will explore the importance of Dana becoming intimately knowledgeable about the past and the people who existed during that time period. Using trauma theory, I will navigate how the physical and emotional pain that Dana endures causes her to become less disconnected and changes her mentality about the past, which enables her to become more connected with her ancestors. This connection is key because without it she would be unable to narrate the novel on behalf of her ancestors without it being colored by her own twentieth century prejudices. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the importance of who has the chance to become an ideal authorial voice. I explore the way that Kevin is unable to narrate on behalf of black slaves because of his inability to believe narratives that he has not and cannot experience because of the distance he has from the dehumanization of slavery due to his whiteness. Also, I discuss the way his inability to traverse the color line would make it more difficult for him to craft a narrative on behalf of black slaves. His inability to witness and/or experience the full scope of slavery helps to further highlight the importance of Dana's experience. Butler draws attention to the significance of Dana's experience and the way this gained knowledge and this direct experience enables her to write a narrative that showcases the complexities of the slave system and the people who were a part of it.

Chapter two will investigate the problematic nature of the “mammy” figure as it has been represented in American culture. By noting the ways that Dana, a woman from the twentieth, century, parallels Sarah, a black woman in the nineteenth century, as they are both performing duties that they do not want to perform in order to survive make them similar, it is possible to see how women like Sarah have been corrupted by history and caricatured in order to further the agenda to keep blacks in a subservient role. It is through the characters Sarah and Carrie that Dana eventually learns that survival had to be subversive, and these stereotypical characters that have been passed down through folk tales are perversions of the truth that Dana quickly begins to realize is inaccurate, and Butler, through Dana, uses the narrative to re-humanize and reclaim these folk figures as complex beings with some amount of will and agency.

CHAPTER II

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE SLAVE?: AUTHORIAL VOICES IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *KINDRED*

Ashraf Rushdy notes that the Neo-slave narrative genre as a whole began to come about as a response to William Styron's book *Confessions of Nat Turner*. This novel sparks the conversation regarding who should be able to retell these histories, and Rushdy notes one of the most precarious aspects of Styron's novel: "its presumption of assuming the voice of a slave, its uninformed appropriation of African American culture, its deep, almost conservative allegiance to the traditional historiographical portrait of slavery" (4). Madhu Dubey also notes that the genre "was preceded by a heightened public attention to slavery during the late 1960's. . . . Conflicts over how slavery should be represented in the realms of historiography, literature, and popular visual culture were clearly inflected by the militant black politics of the 1960'" (333). This conflict is intensified by the "question of how best to recover the perspective of the enslaved Concerns about who can and should speak for the slave surfaced in response to the spate of movies and television shows that were released during this period" (333). While much of the criticism on *Kindred* focuses on the body and how the body tells history, often these arguments gloss over or flagrantly ignore the way physical trauma cultivates both visceral, experiential knowledge about the past, which enables Dana to gain authorial agency. Butler figures both Dana and Kevin as writers, thereby providing a tacit meta-

commentary on the act of writing itself. Though both Kevin and Dana spend extended periods of time in the 1800's, the novel is told completely from Dana's point of view, and the reader gets very little information about Kevin's experience. Not only does Kevin's perspective of the past get silenced, initially Dana is not a viable candidate to voice this narrative either. This issue of being a viable authorial voice speaks to the conversation happening during the late 1960s and 1970s about who "can and should speak for the slave." By silencing Kevin's narrative and using time travel as a vehicle through which Dana is forced to learn the lost aspects of her personal history and the complicated black figures who reside there, Butler shows the reader that the people who can best articulate the narratives of slaves are those who have an unambiguous connection with their pain and retrieve lost knowledge about an already fragmented past. This chapter explores the importance of viable authorial figures in depth as I argue that Butler blends the Neo-slave narrative and Fantasy genres to demonstrate that being black is not the sole criterion for being a viable authorial voice. Rather, the most important criterion is to become less disconnected with the past and gain intimate knowledge about slavery.

In Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain*, she discusses the effects of pain and torture on the human body and how language is destroyed as a result of trauma. The example that she provides as a comparison is a person getting her teeth drilled. She states: "It is commonplace that at the moment when a dentist's drill hits and holds an exposed nerve, a person sees stars. What is meant by 'seeing stars' is that the contents of consciousness are, during those moments, obliterated, that the name of one's child, the memory of a friend's face, are all absent" (30). According to Scarry, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion

to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Therefore, since physical pain cannot be shared, people “attempt to invent linguistic structures” that will enable them to share their experience (6). However, this argument becomes complicated when discussing mass traumatic events such as slavery. Because the descendants of slaves did not directly encounter the experience of slavery and do not have access to the site of trauma, articulating their pain becomes more problematic. While the descendants do not feel the physical pain that their ancestors experienced, former slaves were able to retell their experiences either by passing down the knowledge verbally or by writing their own slave narratives. In addition to these narratives being passed on through the generations, institutionalized slavery continued to leave a lasting mark on subsequent generations as institutional racism continued to keep later generations oppressed. After slavery was abolished, free blacks were immediately confronted with various injustices, including the enactment of black codes and Jim Crow laws. Effectively articulating this pain becomes increasingly important, especially as the dehumanization that black people experienced because of these institutions become minimalized through conservative revisionism.

Because there is so much at stake when creating a language for pain, who is able to be a part of the process of telling these stories is just as important as how these stories are told. Scarry informs us that “A great deal . . . is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language; the human attempt to reverse the de-objectifying work of pain by forcing *pain itself* into avenues of objectification is a project laden with practical and ethical consequence” (6). She argues that because pain obliterates language and thought,

the language people attempt to create to express the experience is often inadequate. But, genres such as the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative problematize Scarry's arguments by pointing to the fact that a usable language can be created from pain, and often this language takes form in the shape of metaphors, similes, and analogies. Though Scarry argues that language does not effectively articulate pain, slave narratives have done a remarkable job of articulating the experience of enslaved black people. Authors such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Ann Jacobs, who have written slave narratives, not only effectively created the language they needed to articulate their experiences, but they show how in their most intense moments of pain, knowledge can be born. For example, Frederick Douglass discusses how he was beaten daily under the care of one of his overseers, Covey. During these beatings, thought was not obliterated; instead, Douglass was able to establish a new epistemology about slavery. This pain created a clear knowledge of how violence and brutal workloads were used to break a human and make a willing and "mindless" slave, and he was to convey this knowledge later in his own slave narrative.

Because Douglass wrote his own narrative, he was in control over the language used to articulate his experience. However, many blacks who shared their narratives did so through an amanuensis. Joycelyn Moody notes that this was not just because many enslaved blacks were illiterate, but also because "Americans, even those who opposed slavery, did not necessarily accept women of African descent as reliable narrators, either literally or figuratively speaking" (111). Moody states that although black people and blackness were "sources of fascination, titillation, and entertainment" for many white Americans, black women authors "knew that auto/biographies by or about blacks were

more likely than not to be read with distrust and disbelief—in their authenticity and authority, in their verity and veracity” (111). Due to this distrust of the black authorial voice, even when if it was filtered through an amanuensis, black authors “had to construct serious, earnest texts that would engage curious Other readers and . . . construct those Others as trusting rather than resisting readers” (111). As a result, slave narratives often times became “imbued with self-conscious strategies, as well as . . . self-consciousness *about* their rhetorical strategies, as well as . . . tempered assertions of details that those who had not experienced slavery could find both difficult to read and difficult to accept” (111). Because of this distrust, black authors and their amanuenses of slave narratives had to “triumph over both the obstructions of adversity and the inadequacies of language” (110). Even though black people were the ideal authorial voices because they personally lived through these issues, they still had to tailor their narratives to fit a still prejudiced audience.

This issue of authorial voice becomes an issue again in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this time it is on reversed. This time black intellectuals questioned and were skeptical of a white man writing a slave narrative. In modern times, while there is less at stake when writing narratives on behalf of enslaved people, writers still have to be conscientious of the language used to tell these stories. Butler even states in an interview with Randal Kenan that

one of the things [she] realized when [she] was reading the slave narrative—[she] think [she] had gotten to one by a man who was explaining how he had been sold to a doctor who used him for medical experiments—was that [she] was not going to be able to come anywhere

near presenting slavery as it was. [She] was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery, or no one would be willing to read it. [She] think that's what most fiction writers do. They almost have to. (*Conversations* 29)

Butler also seems to comment on this issue of authorship in her novel through her portrayal of Kevin, Dana's white husband who is also a writer. Eventually Kevin gets stuck in the past for five years, but the story is never told from his point of view, nor does the reader get the full, intimate details about his life as a white man in antebellum America. In fact, the majority of Kevin's five-year stint that spans from 1819-1824 is relegated to three pages in the novel. In order to attempt to become a viable authorial voice, the author must be able to connect with history, understand the complex systems, avoid minimizing perspectives, and avoid harmful personal biases. These criteria are important to avoid creating more skewed narratives. Moody notes that

Furthermore, enslaved and ex-slave women's narratives published through collaboration with literate amanuenses could interrupt, and contest, accounts of slaves' experiences as recorded by persons who had not known bondage; they could correct erroneous details of second-hand (or fabricated) reports of slavery. (113-114)

When contemporary authors write narratives on behalf of enslaved people, they should continue this work of correcting flawed narratives and incorrect details. But, in order to write these third party narratives, these authors must expand their knowledge about the institution of slavery and enslaved people. While the quest *ideal* authorial voice is something many black historical revisionist may strive for, this journey will remain

incomplete. Even well-versed authors like Butler cannot fully touch on the experience of being enslaved because she, like Dana, only know a fraction of the experience. Therefore, their research and journeys make them, at best, viable authorial voices. Being a viable authorial voice means that their tales will hold more veracity and reliability because of their ability to connect with history and narrate these stories without extreme bias.

Indeed, the novel undercuts Kevin as an authorial voice for the black experience because of his rank skepticism and his often skewed perception. Kevin's inability to believe Dana's narrative becomes an issue nearly immediately. Though Kevin watches her disappear and reappear on the other side of the room, he does not believe what his own eyes have witnessed. When Dana does reappear, he immediately demands she tell him what happened and "how [she] got wet" (15). She tells him the entire story of her trip to a wooded area and how she had to save a young boy from drowning. Dana says, "I looked at Kevin, saw that he held his expression carefully neutral. He waited," and once she was done, his first comment is: "this stuff had to come from somewhere" (16). When she asks him if he believes her, Kevin's only response is to ask her how long she was gone. While from Dana's point of view it was a few minutes, Kevin responds "A few seconds. There were no more than ten or fifteen seconds between the time you went and the time you called my name" (16). From Kevin's point of view, there was no way that Dana could have been gone for minutes when he only witnessed seconds. He tells Dana, "You vanished You were here until my hand was just a couple of inches from you. Then, suddenly, you were gone. I couldn't believe it. I just stood there. Then you were back again and on the other side of the room ... It happened. I saw it. You vanished and you reappeared. Facts" (16). On the other hand, Dana's experience is more elaborate,

spanning a longer time period so she responds: “And I know what I saw, and what I did—my facts. They’re no crazier than yours” (16). From the beginning, the two cannot match their experiences, and Kevin continues to dismiss Dana’s experience as “a dream” or “a hallucination,” and encourages her to “pull away from it” rather than accepting her experience and helping her deal with her trauma (17). This shows the problem of being too distant from the experience. His inability to accept narratives told to him would make him ineligible to convey them to others. Much like many of the people during and before the antebellum period, Kevin is distrustful of narratives he cannot identify with and has not experienced. Because he did not experience what Dana did, he doubts her narrative of events. Therefore, even though Dana is not yet a viable authorial voice, her narrative is privileged over his. When Kevin relates his version of events, Dana does not doubt him, even though her perspective of these events is different from his. This conflict between the two main characters epitomizes one of the most important criterion require when speaking on behalf of others: the ability to empathize and believe someone else’s pain.

During her second trip, which happens the same night as the first one, Dana is gone for a few hours. But, again, from Kevin’s point of view, this time she is gone for a “few minutes” (46). Again, Dana retells her entire experience and tells him that what she’s experiencing is getting “more and more believable,” while Kevin’s response is “Maybe” (46). Rather than believing Dana’s story, he attempts to rationalize it saying: “But the fact is, you had already seen the Bible. You knew about those people—knew their names, knew they were Marylanders, knew ...” (46). Kevin’s attempts to delegitimize Dana’s experience early in the narrative highlights why he would not be a viable authorial voice. In order to be a viable authorial voice, Kevin would have to be

open to what they were saying and be able to see their experiences as legitimate.

However, even with his own wife, he is skeptical and attempts to revise what she has experienced so that he can believe it and digest it. These problems—his inability to believe and his skewed point of view—continue to be trends throughout the novel.

On Dana's third trip, Kevin is transported back to antebellum Maryland with her. However, while believability is not a problem because he experiences it directly with her, his perception of that experience is completely different from Dana's because he is a white male during this time period. While Laurence Thomas advises that

the privileged classes commit to bearing witness. To bear witness is not to dialogue or narrate but to listen to the stories of the Other There can be no bearing witness . . . to the moral pain of another without having heard his story and having heard it well. (qtd. in Willett 3-4).

However, bearing witness requires the privileged class to consciously be open to empathizing with the other's experience. Even though Kevin gets a close look at what enslaved blacks experience, the emotional distance and lack of experiential experience prevent him from becoming a viable authorial voice. After being there a few days, Kevin tells Dana: "This could be a great time to live in . . . I keep thinking what an experience it would be to stay in it—go West and watch the building of the country, see how much of the Old West mythology is true," and she responds, "West. . . . That's where they're doing it to the Indians instead of the blacks!" (98). Dana's and Kevin's point of views on the past are colored by their individual experiences. Kevin is shielded from most of the beatings, drudgery, and dehumanization that Dana has to experience first-hand. As a white man in antebellum Maryland, Kevin is not as deeply affected by what is happening

around him because he does not identify with the people who are enduring it and he is not experiencing any of it himself. This disconnect is clearly seen in Dana and Kevin's reactions to the children playing the game "Auction" where they pretend to sell each other off. Dana is shaken by the game, but Kevin tells her that she's "reading too much into a kids' game," to which Dana responds that he's "reading too little into it" (100). Kevin admits that he cannot "understand how [she] feels about this because maybe that's something [he] can't understand," and he reminds the reader that he is more of an outsider to the slaves' lives than Dana when he says, "It's surprising to me that there's so little to see. Weylin doesn't seem to pay much attention to what his people do, but the work gets done" (100). Dana is aware that Kevin is not seeing the whole picture and tells him that he "[thinks] he doesn't pay attention" because "Nobody calls [him] out to see the whippings" (100). Even with this information, Kevin continues to minimize the pain that the people experience because "this place isn't what [he] would have imagined. No overseer. No more work than people can manage..." but Dana has to fill in the blanks for him:

no decent housing.... Dirt floors to sleep on, food so inadequate they'd all be sick if they didn't keep gardens in what's supposed to be their leisure time and steal from the cookhouse when Sarah lets them. And no rights and the possibility of being mistreated or sold away from their families for any reason—or no reason....you don't have to beat people to treat them brutally. (100)

Therefore, as an educated white man in antebellum south, Kevin would not have had to see or experience these conditions. In fact, he received better lodging in the house,

getting the opportunity to sleep in a bed while Dana had to live in the attic quarters and sleep on a pallet on the floor. Kevin's physical and emotional distance from the dehumanizing conditions black people were forced to endure would have created large gaps that he would have had to fill with his own imagination. As a result, his narrative could have "minimized the wrong that's being done," even if that was not his intention (100).

Butler highlights the problem that many black intellectuals were discussing at this time: the whitewashing of American history. While Kevin is not intentionally minimizing the problem of slavery, his whiteness is a position that blinds him from that history, even when he is transported into it. As a result, he revises the history that unfolds in front of him. This is the issue many critics had with William Styron's novel. Because both men are outsiders to the plight of black slaves, their narratives become inaccurate appropriations. While Kevin is witnessing history happen, he is not connecting with it. Kevin's disconnection with his surroundings is evident in the language that he uses to describe his surroundings. While he believes that the slaves have "decent housing," because he never fully witnesses how they sleep, Dana knows that they have to sleep on the ground rather than a bed. While being black would not completely solve the problem of Kevin's skewed perspective, it would allow him fuller access to the pain behind the history.

Though it would seem that once Kevin experienced part of what Dana experiences living in the nineteenth century thereby making him would be more open to accepting her narrative, he the remains unable to accept her narrative. This time, rather than disbelieving that Dana is traveling back in time, Kevin has trouble believing Dana

when she tells him she was not raped. When Rufus sells one of the field hands because he showed too much interest in Dana, she slits her wrists in order to put her life in enough danger that she would immediately transport back home. When she gets back, Kevin gets a friend to patch her wrists, and they have nearly two weeks together in their own time period. After a while, Kevin starts to believe that it's over, but Dana continues to carry her bag around with her. Kevin accuses her of being "eager to go back to Maryland," and remembers Rufus's determination to keep her in antebellum Maryland (244). Eventually, he outright asks her if he's done to Dana what he did to Alice: he wants to know if Dana was raped. Dana tells him that Rufus "sent [her] to the field, had [her] beaten, made [her] spend nearly eight months sleeping on the floor of his mother's room, sold people ... [He'd] done plenty, but the worst of it was to other people" (245). She ends her speech saying, "He hasn't raped me He understands, though you don't seem to, that for him that would be a form of suicide" (245). Though Dana gives him details on all of the horrors she endured at Rufus's hands, Kevin continues not to believe her saying, "if anything did happen, [he] could understand it" because he knows "what it was like back then" (245). It is not until Dana explains to him that she refuses to mentally accept slavery, become enslaved, and endure her body being violated, regardless of her love for Kevin that he finally relents in his disbelief. The problem with this scene is that Dana must convince Kevin of the validity of her tale in the first place. Unlike Dana, who never questions what she went through, Kevin questions Dana every step of the way. He is unable to believe what she is experiencing until he experiences it himself, and even then he cannot fully understand what she endures because he is an outsider to the world that blacks had to, and still have to, live in.

Though Kevin is incapable of being a viable authorial voice, initially Dana is not a viable authorial agent, either. Dana informs the reader that she met Kevin while she was working at a “casual labor agency” (52). She notes that the “regulars called it a slave market,” but “Actually, it was just the opposite of slavery. The people who ran it couldn’t have cared less whether or not you showed up to do the work they offered” (52). While Dana knows that the temp agency is nothing like real slave markets, she still seems to be flippant in referring to it as one. Dana’s carelessness when it comes to naming spaces shows that there is a gap between Dana and her history. Slave markets involved the buying and selling of people against their will to the highest bidder so the slave can work from sun up to sundown in someone’s home or field; whereas a temp agency does not care whether people show up to work or not.

So, while Kevin is disconnected from the history and lived experience of black people because of his racial identity, Dana is disconnected from her history because of her historical perspective as a contemporary black woman. Dana’s temporal distance from the site of trauma creates a struggle to empathize or sympathize with her ancestors. In order to bridge the temporal gap, Butler introduces the use of magical realism to transport Dana between the two time periods. In the book *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*, Christopher Warnes admits that defining what magical realism is has been very difficult for critics. Warnes notes that

There is a growing corpus of literary works that draws upon the conventions of both realism and fantasy or folktale, yet does so in such ways that neither of these two realms is able to assert a greater claim to truth than the other. This capacity to resolve the tension between the two

discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive must constitute the starting point for any inquiry into magical realism. (2)

Finally, Warnes' states that a "basic definition of magical realism, then, sees it as a mode of narration that naturalises [sic] or normalizes the supernatural; that is to say, a mode in which real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence. On the level of the text neither has a greater claim to truth or referentiality" (3). In *Kindred*, Butler makes time travel a natural aspect of the novel. She does not attempt to explain how it happens. While the character's briefly question why it happens, eventually they accept it as a natural occurrence that is inevitable until Dana's mission is complete. Though it is not explained, it becomes the tool through which Dana is able to lessen the temporal distance between the past and the present. Warnes notes that "postcolonial response to colonialism's often brutal enforcing of selectively-conceived modernity, magical realism . . . seeks to reclaim what has been lost: knowledge, values, traditions, ways of seeing, beliefs. In this model the horizons of the casual paradigm are extended to include events and possibilities that would ordinarily be circumscribed" (12). As Butler's novel aims to achieve the reclamation of what has been lost, magical realism is a necessary tool to help Dana bridge the gaps and reclaim the lost aspects of American culture.

In addition to her flippancy towards brutal events like slave markets, Dana's second encounter with the past shows how disconnected she is with the history of her people. The second time Dana is pulled back into the 1800s, the knowledge she gains becomes imperative to her ability to articulate history on behalf of her ancestors. This part of the chapter is at the crux of the problem of authorship. When asking "who can or

should be the author,” especially when it pertains to slave narratives, it is important for the author to be knowledgeable about what is being written. Before Dana can write about her journey, she has to absorb all of the knowledge that has been lost about American history and her family’s history. Also, she has to become more engaged with this past, rather than remaining disconnected from it all and treating it like a “dream” or as “Horror stories” (75). After she helps Rufus put out the fire that he started in his bedroom, Dana tries to figure out if he is the child that she saved from drowning during her previous trip. During their conversation, Dana learns that he is the child that she saved and that her travel is not just traversing space, but time as well. Once she gains this awareness, she starts to suspect that Rufus is “the focus of [her] travels—perhaps the cause of them” (24). While she is thinking about this, Rufus informs her that his mother was reminded of the Bible when Dana was saving him and in the midst of Dana telling the story, he starts to make her aware of how far in time she has travelled when he states, “Mama said what you did after you got me out of the water was like Second Book of Kings Where Elisha breathed into the dead boy’s mouth, and the boy came back to life. Mama said she tried to stop you when she saw you doing that to me because you were just some nigger she had never seen before” (24).

The casual use of the word “nigger” by a young white child is part of what begins to bring her to the realization that she is not in a modern time period. Initially, Rufus’s statement that his mother only calls black people “niggers” when she does not have company does not cause Dana to question the time period. The mother’s attempt to hide her prejudices would be normal during modern time periods. But when Rufus informs Dana that his father beats him with the same whip that he “whips niggers and horses

with,” Dana asks Rufus where they were and what year it is, and Rufus informs her that it is 1815 Maryland. Immediately, Dana becomes aware of the danger of this time period, and she notes that “This could turn out to be such a deadly place for [her] if [she] had to stay in it much longer” (27). Before she has a chance to fully process that she is on a plantation, she gets sidetracked by the family’s name, Weylin. Once Rufus tells her that his father’s name is Tom Weylin, she asks him if there is “a black girl, maybe a slave girl, named Alice living around here somewhere,” and Rufus tells her that there is and she’s his “friend” and “[s]he’s no slave, either She’s free, born free like her mother” (28). The moment Dana gets this information, she begins to remember her family bible and thinks to herself that “maybe he was my several times great grandfather, it still vaguely alive in the memory of my family because his daughter had bought a large Bible in an ornately carved, wooden chest and had begun keeping family records in it. My uncle still had it” (28). Although she is able to put those pieces together, there is one large question that still remains unanswered throughout the novel: “why hadn’t someone in [her] family mentioned that Rufus Weylin was white?” (28). But, she attempts to answer that question herself saying, “If they knew. Probably, they didn’t. Hagar Weylin Blake had died in 1880, long before the time of any member of my family that I had known. No doubt the most information about her life had died with her. At least it had before it filtered down to me. There was only the Bible left” (28). This scene highlights another issue that modern blacks must confront when attempting to speak on behalf of slaves: lost histories. Butler emphasizes the way knowledge is lost or erased through the passage of time. Without this knowledge, the narrative would not be able to move forward. This can also be examined through the scope of modern black history. Without

this missing information about the past, black Americans cannot progress because they would be moving without guidance. Family histories function as a site of knowledge. From this site, identity formation grows.

Not only is Dana's disconnection from history seen in her lack of familial knowledge, but also it is also seen in her reactions to the violence of the era. The first time Dana witnesses extreme violence towards black people is when she travels to Alice's home believing that it would be her "refuge" (37). During her journey to Alice's mother's home, Dana begins to know a new type of a fear, a fear that she didn't acquire during her first trip: the fear of white people. Dana knows that during this time period the last thing she wants to encounter at night while she is alone is a white person. When she gets near Alice's mother's cabin, she has to watch the patrollers beat Alice's father for being off the plantation without a pass. Dana narrates what she witnessed stating:

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet....

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their back and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn't lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. (36)

In this scene, while Dana has lived through the Civil Rights movement and knows the history, she is still unprepared for the raw violence that she witnesses. Dana's flawed knowledge of the past and the violence of her own time do not prepare her for the violence of the antebellum south. In an interview with Randal Kenan, Butler states that "The strange thing is with television and movies . . . they've made violence so cartoonishly acceptable" (*Conversations* 29). The visceral knowledge that she gains about the violence becomes some of the most important knowledge that she gains throughout the novel, as she is able to depict this period's violence without trivializing it. The brutal descriptions of the beatings force the readers to confront its ugliness and empathize with the subjects who endure them. This depiction is important to the narrative as it calls more attention to the brutality of this type of violence.

As the narrative progresses, Butler ensures that Dana is not able to remain disconnected from the past and the horrors that her ancestors and their community endured during this time period. After Dana and Kevin argue about the children and the games, Dana notes how much it bothers her that they were able to blend right in as though it were natural. When Dana resumes watching the children play their game, she tells Kevin, "The ease seemed so frightening Now I see why I never realized how easily people could be trained to accept slavery" (101). However, despite this realization, Dana is aware that while she is still pretending to be a slave, she is still deeply affected by the environment in which she lives. Dana notes that Kevin "might be able to go through this whole experience as an observer," and she states that she can understand that "most of the time" because she is "still an observer. It's protection. It's nineteen seventy-six shielding and cushioning eighteen nineteen for [her]. But now and

then, like 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" (101). Dana continues to be drawn into 1819 as she gains more first-hand experience of what it means to be a slave.

Dana's third trip comes to a violent end as she learns her first lesson about what it means to be whipped for disobeying the mandate that black people cannot be taught to read. Though she thinks that the kitchen is a safe place for her to teach Luke's son, Nigel, and Sarah's daughter, Carrie, to read, she learns the hard way that there is not a "safe place" for conscientious black folk when living on a plantation. When Weylin catches her with a book in the kitchen, he drags her out to give her the first, but not the last, whipping she would undergo during these trips. As Dana recollects the beating in the narrative, she recalls the pain of the whip: "It came—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin I screamed, convulsed. Weylin struck again and again, until I couldn't have gotten up at gun point" (107). Dana recalls the pain causing her to vomit, and she was so convinced that she would die, that she is transported back to her own time period, without Kevin. She also learns that there are not any benevolent owners in plantation south. Though Dana saves Rufus's life, she is not any safer than the other enslaved blacks on the Weylin plantation because the relationships will always be fraught with unequal power dynamics.

The amount of information that Dana learns about her ancestors while she is in the past supports the argument being black does not necessarily mean one has the knowledge or qualifications to speak on behalf of slaves. At this point, Dana is only half way through her journey, and she attempts to write about what she experienced, but she made "about six attempts before [she] gave up and threw them all away" (116). Here,

Butler is indicating that it is impossible to write about an experience that is incomplete because the author in question does not have the necessary knowledge of the events. In order to make Dana a viable authorial voice, she has to go through an in depth journey into the past. Her frequent and sporadic trips to the historic site of pain and trauma for black people causes Dana's journey to read as a pointed commentary on the desire for engaging with material history. As she progresses, her journey is very fragmented with chunks of time that are missing and irretrievable. However, the experiential knowledge she attains creates a narrative that sheds light on some of the most problematic aspects of slavery: the whitewashing and erasure of black trauma. This erasure causes history to portray blacks as willing participants in their dehumanization and mistreatment, which in turn affects the way some modern blacks understand and relate to their ancestors.

Other than her own family history, which includes information that she has white ancestors, Dana's journey engages with one of the most important questions about slavery, "How did this system manage to keep the people subjugated for so long?" In his own narrative, Frederick Douglass sheds light on this question by giving intimate details about his beating at the hands of Covey that he says stripped him of his humanity, turning him into a mindless beast¹. Dana's tale returns to this conversation and discusses it from a modern point of view, thereby allowing her to deconstruct her own judgments pertaining to black people during this time period. However, in order for Dana's preconceived judgments to change, Butler must ensure that Dana is not able to remain partial to the

¹ In his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave*, Douglass recounts how Covey worked and whipped him until he was "broken in body, soul, and spirit" (63). Douglass remembers that "Sunday was [his] only leisure time" and he "spent this in a sort of beastlike stupor, between sleep and wake" (63). Dana recalls a similar moment in the novel when Kevin asks her why she "go around looking like a zombie all the time" (53).

violence and trauma that the slaves endure. Dana becoming more empathetic to the past is imperative for the novel as Dana cannot tell the story of slaves without understanding how slaves are made. One of the first lessons that the Dana learns about life as an enslaved black is how violence is used as a control mechanism. Each trip back to Maryland teaches Dana more about the function of violence as a mechanism of social control in the institution of slavery.

After Dana learns how violence is used to control a slave's actions on the plantation, the other type of violence she must learn about is linked with attempts to run away. In the previous chapter, it was noted that Dana's character was based on a black radical that Butler knew in college. The man was angry towards his ancestors because "he felt that the older generation should have rebelled" (21). Butler addresses this mentality by making it a point to mention Denmark Vesey twice in the novel. The mention Vesey's failed rebellion serves to remind the reader that rebellion was no easy feat, but neither was running away. There are not any known successful runaway attempts in the novel. The mention of running away was brought up when Dana realizes that Luke is no longer on the plantation. After Tom Weylin sold Luke for thinking he was white, Nigel attempted to run away. Rufus tells Dana that "Patrollers brought him back ... hungry and sick. They had whipped him, and Daddy whipped him some more. Then Aunt Sarah doctored him and I talked Daddy into letting me keep him" (139). The story of Nigel's failed runaway attempt precedes Isaac's and Alice's failed attempt. Four days after Rufus tells Dana this story, Isaac and Alice are captured during their run away attempt. While Isaac is sold south, Rufus buys the half-dead Alice, whose freedom is revoked for helping a slave run away. Alice's failed run away attempt is then followed by

Dana's own. It is in Dana's failure to run away that she finally begins to fully understand the difficulties of being a slave. Once Dana learns that Rufus has lied to her and has never sent her letters to Kevin telling him to come back to Maryland, Dana begins to plot her own runaway attempt. However, she is quickly caught and beaten again for the attempt. Dana's attempt is significant not only because of all the information that she has about the Underground Railroad and Harriet Tubman's successful trips, but also because of the way that she gets caught. Dana learns that another slave woman, Liza, caught her leaving and told Tom Weylin that she was attempting to run away. This is the first time in the novel that the reader witnesses one slave selling out another enslaved black. This knowledge is meant to teach Dana why so many of the slaves, like Sarah, are so cautious about who they trust and what they say in the open. While none of the enslaved black people enjoyed their stations in life, there are those who were jealous of the "favored" and were willing to do what was necessary to gain favor to alleviate their own plights. While these people were not unknown in Dana's era, Dana is still unprepared to deal with the reality of this fact, which leads to her failure. Once Dana's beating is over, Alice and Carrie promise to take care of her while she heals. Alice's promise that she and Carrie will "take care of [her] as good as she took care of [Alice]" strikes Dana and causes her to begin to cry silently (176-177). Dana notes that she and Alice "were both failures" and that they both "run and been brought back, she in days, [her] in only hours" (177). Dana laments the fact that despite her knowledge, she was not able to last a fraction of the time Alice did, and the thought that she tries to run from surfaces in her mind: "See how easily slaves are made" (177).

After this episode, Dana does not attempt to run away again, and she even becomes more like Sarah and cautious Alice against trying to run, but still aides her because she wants to have hope. Dana's actions become more cautions, and she is less likely to take risks. This lesson teaches Dana the importance of not looking down on slaves who do not attempt to run away. While Dana clings to the stories about Sojourner Truth, she becomes blind to the examples of failed runaway attempts happening around her. Though there were slave narratives written by successful escapes, Butler's novel shows that slaves who manage to get to freedom are the exception, not the rule. Each escape attempt is foiled, and the captured people are beaten. This part of the narrative further demolishes the preconceptions that modern day blacks may have because it chooses to focus on the many slaves who did attempt to escape bondage, but were unable to because of lack of resources, sabotage, or ignorance of the land. Novels like Butler's highlight the fact that successful runaway attempts were exceptions to the rule, not the norm. Through Dana, Butler is able to give an account of history that does remind people that successful attempts were rare. Noting how rare it was for enslaved people to escape to freedom is especially important because it explains why so many enslaved people equated death with freedom. With so many of them witnessing their fellow captives get dragged back into slave mere days, or hours, after running, death began to be the only freedom that many of them knew.

Dana's failed escape attempt also highlights another problematic aspect of this time period: relationships between blacks and whites. Even though Dana had saved Rufus's life multiple times, neither Tom nor Rufus Weylin hesitates to punish her for

attempting to escape. Dana recalls what Alice told her about Rufus's behavior after her beating:

I was not aware of Rufus untying me, carrying me out of the barn and into Carrie's and Nigel's cabin. I was not aware of him directing Alice and Carrie to wash me and care for me as I had cared for Alice. That, Alice told me about later—how he demanded that everything used on me be clean, how he insisted on the deep ugly wound in my side—the scratch—being carefully cleaned and bandaged. (176)

In Rufus's mind, making sure Dana was taken care of after the beating made up for the fact that she had to endure it. Later, when Dana asks him why he lied to her, he responds, "I wanted to keep you here . . . Kevin hates this place. He would have taken you up North" (179). Rufus's confession makes Dana realize that "it was that destructive single-minded love of his. He loved [her]. Not the way he loved Alice . . . He didn't seem to want to sleep with [her]. But he wanted [her] around—someone to talk to, someone who would listen to him and care what he said, care about him" (180). Rufus's love for Dana and the relationship that he wants to have with her is tainted because of the differences in the social statuses during this time period. Because Rufus is the owner of enslaved people, this relationship with them inevitably becomes complicated. While he does care about Dana in his own way, his inability to fully see her as a human being causes him to resort to violence when he feels that his love is not being returned in the way he want. Similarly, while Tom Weylin knows that he needs Dana to keep his son alive. But, he still "couldn't let a runaway go without some punishment. If he did there'd be ten more taking off tomorrow" (180). Tom's need to keep the illusion of having absolute authority

overshadows any gratitude he feels towards Dana for taking care of his son for so long. While Dana hoped that Rufus would not grow up to be like his father and that her presence in his life would have a more positive influence, the southern lifestyle and that institution of slavery created conditions that made Rufus's a man of his time. As a result, their relationship continues to be troubled because of the power dynamics. Dana's and Rufus's relationship is indicative of the time. While black and whites who lived on a plantation had such close proximity to each other, they did not have healthy, balanced relationships. Trust was nonexistent because the power dynamic and monetary gain would surpass any personal relationships.

Due to everything that Dana experiences during these trips, whenever she returns to her own time, she attempts to do more research on slavery and is confronted with the problem of missing information. When she realizes that she will have to go back again, she begins through books to find out what free papers looked like, but she is unable to find any. These incomplete records point to the issue of modern historical records and their incomplete nature. Butler is highlighting the fact that historians have not recorded enough information to give modern blacks a full picture of slavery. This makes authorial authority that much more important as it shows that there are still gaps that need to be filled in history, and these gaps must be filled by reliable narrators. Through Dana, Butler is able to both fill in some of the blank spaces with the research she has done and indicate where more research and uncovering needs to happen. In addition to these gaps, Butler also confronts the problem of skewed narratives directly in the scene where Dana is attempting to do research for her next trip back. While Dana is home after the third trip, which resulted in Kevin being left in the past, Dana reads every book about slavery in her

home. Dana tells us that she “read books about slavery, fiction, and nonfiction read everything [she] had in the house that was even distantly related to the subject” (116). While Dana is still in ways judgmental about the slaves, especially Sarah, who she refers to as a “Mammy,” her experience causes her to reject novels such as *Gone with the Wind* because, as she states, “its version of happy darkies in tender loving bondage was more than “she could stand” (116). As she conducts this research, Dana begins to see the problem with the way black history is portrayed in literature and history. Not only is much of the knowledge that she needs to survive missing, but many of the narratives that she encounters give false descriptions of slaves and their lives, bringing to the forefront of the novel the importance of Dana’s own narrative.

Once her journey is over and she finally kills Rufus for trying to rape her, she continues to do research. In the epilogue of the novel, Dana travels to Maryland in 1976, and looks for records of the people who lived on the Weylin Plantation during her visits. While something has remained the same, such as the “red-brick Georgian Colonials,” Dana notes that “Rufus’s house was gone” (262). Dana even attempts to find Rufus’s grave, but the farmer she asks “knew nothing—or at least, said nothing. The only clue [they] found—more than a clue really—was an old newspaper article—a notice that Mr. Rufus Weylin had been killed when his home caught fire and was partially destroyed” (262). Although Dana and Kevin are able to find some information about what happened to the people they knew, such as who was sold and who was not, much of the information she wanted to know was unrecorded. In the end, Dana questions why she even felt the need to go to Maryland, and Kevin responds “To try to understand. To touch solid evidence that those people existed. To reassure yourself that you’re sane” (264). While

much of Dana's attempt to concretize her experience is futile, her quest to continue to track down information about the history she witnessed is symbolic of the need to see her journey through. While her physical journeys to the past may be over now that Alice and Rufus are dead, her journey to learn as much about the past will be a continuous endeavor as she continues to try to fill in the gaps that history left.

CHAPTER III
RECLAIMING “MAMMY”: THE REVISION OF FOLK IMAGES IN OCTAVIA
BUTLER’S *KINDRED*

Two of the most resonating scenes in *Kindred* speak to one of the most discussed theories in African American literature: W.E.B Du Bois’ concept of the “Double Consciousness.” In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states that “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (9). According to Du Bois, Black Americans always feel their “two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (9). He notes that one of the problems that Black American struggle with is the “longing to attain self-conscious ... to merge [the] double self into a better and truer self” without sacrificing either part of the self. While it could be assumed that once Blacks accomplished the goals of integration and finally were allowed the right to vote sans “literacy tests,” the wounds that were keeping the selves partitioned would begin to heal. However, the violence that ensued during the Civil Rights era and the lingering resentments on both sides seemed to cause

the bifurcation to hemorrhage and widen for many as the trauma of America's past and "peculiar institution" continued to reside in and affect the present. Ron Eyerman states that though slavery was abolished, the trauma of it remains "as [a] collective memory" (1). Eyerman argues that "slavery was traumatic in retrospect, and formed a "primal scene" which could, potentially, unite all 'African American' in the United States, whether or not they had themselves been slaves or had any knowledge of or feeling for Africa" (1). Furthermore, Eyerman nuances the concept of what it means to "remember" slavery stating that "memory is located not inside the heads of individual actors, but rather 'within the discourse of people talking together about the past'" (6). Thus, slavery begins to inform part of what it means to be "Black," and, according to Eyerman, because the trauma of slavery is not regulated to those who experienced it, it continues to effect identity formation. As a result, I argue that *Kindred* can be read as an allegory for this experience, as the main character, Dana, navigates her own bifurcated identity. Through the blending of the fantasy genre and the neo-slave narrative genre, Butler utilizes magical realism and uses time travel as a symbol for the way blacks navigate through the temporal dissonance of past and present as bifurcated beings. Because Dana is both black and American, she has the ability to see the different faucets of the past and present. This ability allows her to witness history and its residents through a clearer gaze. This gaze allows Dana to deconstruct the folk figure of the mammy and re-present her as a whole and complex individual rather than a caricature. This journey to understand and reclaim the mammy allows Dana to develop as well. As she recognizes the strength it takes to be in Sarah's position, she learns that she has a similar strength within herself.

In Ron Eyerman's book, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the formation of the African American Identity*, he discusses how trauma is a reflective process" and that it "links past to present through representation and imagination. In psychological accounts, this can lead to a distorted identity formation where certain subject positions may become especially prominent or even overwhelming, for example those of victim or perpetrator ... wherein one is possessed by the past and tends to repeat it compulsively. (3)

Not only is the past repeated, but many of the mentalities that shape it survive it. Therefore, as Eyerman notes, cultural trauma, like that created by the violent institution of slavery, is not regulated to "direct experience," but is also "mediated, through newspapers, radio, or television ... which involves a spatial as well as temporal distance between the event and it's experience" (3).

In her book *Crossing Borders Through Folklore*, Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown notes that border crossing trope found in Black American women's writing. Brown claims:

The journey across geopolitical, cultural, and ideological borders constitutes one of the most frequent crossings in black women's fiction. Interpreted at one point as the movement from "victimization to consciousness" and from "division to wholeness," the journey was perceived to be as much personal as psychological as political and social. (15)

The purpose of crossing these borders is to "change and correct not only the view held by others, but also the view that African Americans, as marginalized people, held of themselves" (26). This border crossing is seen in Butler's *Kindred* as the protagonist, Dana, travels through time and space and lands in the early 1800s to save her white male ancestor, Rufus. Throughout this journey, Dana is seen struggling with her identity, as she is often told that she seems more "white" than "black." This struggle is compounded as Dana interacts with enslaved blacks in this time period. She struggles to relate to them, and she cannot understand why they would "choose" servitude rather than revolting or running to freedom. While she is in the 1800s, Dana struggles the most to understand Sarah, the cook and "mammy" figure in the novel. Characters such as Sarah have historically been represented as "Aunt Jemima" or "mammy" figures, became a derogatory image of black women, and the black community mourned the fact that they were not able to control how her image was presented. Brown notes that "Because black Americans historically had to struggle in defense of an identity and virtues that not only had their functional values questioned, but also were used to impose feelings of shame, the loss of control over definitions, images, and symbols pertaining to identity was perceived during the 1960's to having been perhaps the most damaging in the experience of displacement" (25). While many critics look at Dana as a double for Alice, it is significant to see how she also functions as a double for Sarah. Sarah and Dana hold many of the same functions in both their own societies and in the 1800s together. Through her frequent travels back to antebellum Maryland, Dana is able to revisit the "mammy" folk figure, and (re)present her in the narrative as a complex and subversive subject. This chapter will explore how Butler uses the fantasy and neo-slave narrative

genres to interrogate and deconstruct the image of the "mammy" in order to reconstruct her in the narrative as a subversive, powerful agent, thereby rewriting the folk tale that depicts them as holding up the slave structure and embracing their positions as low caste servants.² Therefore, not only does time travel allow Dana to regain lost knowledge, but it allows her to use this gained knowledge to reclaim and re-present historical figures with more veracity. By taking control over the representation of this historical figure, Dana is able to take control over her own identity as well.

Orlando Patterson discusses the power dynamics of slavery and notes that the power balance between slaves and their owners is a tenuous one. He argues that there are multiple forms of slavery:

There is a wide range of possibilities. At one end is what may be called purely *functional domination*. Here slavery is what it appears to be: the slave is used to serve the master's ends. The master has independent bases of power, the support of third parties, and is secure in his domination. Most slavery falls at or near this end of the continuum. But a significant minority of relationships fall at the other extreme of the range, frequently including the relationship between absolutist master and chief personal slave. It is difficult to dominate another person when that other person is either the main basis of one's power, or, more frequently, the sole means of communication with the basis of one's power. Isolation is vulnerability; the control of communication is power. Sublation of the relationship immediately becomes a possibility. (333)

² See pages 20-21 for the definition of Magical Realism.

In the case of antebellum America, it was not only the outside structures that enabled the slave system to flourish but also the issue of slaves being displaced from their native lands, in addition to being outnumbered and outgunned by their white counterparts. This displacement made revolts and running away more complicated as the slaves did not know the land and were not allowed access to maps or taught to read. While many did escape to freedom by using the North Star and the Underground Railroad, many more either died or were caught, beaten and returned to their masters.

After the Civil War, while the slaves were freed, they still had little control over their lives and even less control over their historical representations. Eyerman argues that cultural trauma and collective (or cultural) memory, like that created by the violent institution of slavery, is not relegated to “direct experience,” but is also “mediated, through newspapers, radio, or television ... which involves a spatial as well as temporal distance between the event and its experience” (3). Therefore, because history—even revised history that has been diluted so that is more palatable for future generations—is constantly dispersed, especially among the population that is most directly affected by it and the trauma that occurred in the past continues to affect identity formation in the present. Jeffery Alexander remarks on this phenomenon stating:

Mass-mediated experience always involves selective construction and representation, since what is seen is the result of the actions and decisions of professionals as to what is significant and how it should be presented. Thus, national or cultural trauma always engages a ‘meaning struggle,’ a grappling with an event that involves identifying the ‘nature of the pain, the nature of the victim and the attribution of responsibility’ . . . this is the

‘trauma process,’ when the collective experience of massive disruption, and social crises, becomes a crisis of meaning and identity. (3)

For Black Americans, this crises of meaning becomes a multifaceted dilemma because not only does this trauma affect their formations of self as Americans but also as *Black* Americans. This dilemma means they have the added problem of reconciling the institutionalized racism that continues to promote derogatory depictions of blacks, while simultaneously attempting to understand their own communal and personal concepts of blackness. This understanding becomes increasingly more difficult as the images of blackness that are perpetuated become problematic to the community they represent.

One such problematic image is the mammy figure. Donald Bogle describes the mammy figure as “distinguished” from the other black stereotypes because of her “sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (9). Bogle traces her “debut” back to 1914 when “audiences were treated to a blackface version of *Lysistrata*” (9). What Bogle describes as a “comedy” called the *Coon Town Suffragettes*, “dealt with a group of bossy mammy washerwomen who organize a militant movement to keep their good-for-nothing husbands at home” (9). Bogle claims that the “militancy of the washerwomen served as a primer for the mammy roles Hattie McDaniel was too perfect in the 1930s” (9). Another version of the mammy that came around later was the Aunt Jemima figure. Bogle states that “Often aunt jemimas are toms blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture. Generally they are sweet, jolly, and good-tempered—a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong” (9). Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown also discusses this folk figure saying: “Aunt Jemima,” one of the most notorious mammy figures, and notes that she was seen

as the "quintessential mammy, the overweight, heavy-busted, strong, and religious black woman who cooks, cleans, and nurtures" (25). Brown goes on to note that Aunt Jemima became

the representation of the white-identified, black female servant. Good-natured, loyal, and trust-worthy, the Jemima image was first popularized at the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago to market self-rising flour. From the success of that endeavor, the image proliferated and served a specific twofold function. The first was to valorize and reinforce the quality of submission. The second was to displace the fearsome, physical aspects of being female—those relating to domesticity and nurturing, especially breast-feeding—onto the black woman. (25)

Furthermore, Brown relates this depiction back to how blacks perceived her by saying Aunt Jemima was "like Topsey, Uncle Remus, and Sambo, was a folk type transformed into a derogatory stereotype," which "[imposed] definitions of inferiority and inducing self-loathing" (25). Therefore, Brown reports that it became a high priority on the black Nationalist agenda to "[repudiate] ... the stereotypical and negative images created by cultural outsiders and the re-production of identity from the inside" (25). Butler seems to take this stance literally as she sends Dana back in time to live with these figures and to learn their histories. Thus, Butler begins to transform the image of the happy, smiling Negro mammy and gives her real emotions, a complex history, and depth that had been previously stripped from her.

In order for this development to happen, Butler uses the fantasy genre to displace Dana from her own time period and send her back to antebellum Maryland. To be more

specific, Butler uses magical realism to place Dana in the past and force to meet these folk figures. During Dana's third trip back, she learns from Rufus that it is 1819 (62). While the previous trips only lasted a few hours and Dana did not have much time to interact with anyone other than a handful of people, during this trip Dana meets Rufus's entire family and many of the house slaves, including Sarah. After Dana and Kevin, who was transported back with her this time, arrive and help get Rufus back home after he breaks his leg, Rufus's mother quickly relegates Dana to the kitchen to get her away from Rufus. Because she was not given directions, Sarah's mute daughter, Carrie, escorts Dana to the kitchen, and the moment Dana walks in she encounters Sarah. Dana immediately notices that "She was as light-skinned as [her] mute guide—a handsome middle-aged woman, tall and heavy-set. Her expression was grim, her mouth turned down at the corners, but her voice was soft and low" (72). From the moment Dana meets Sarah, the image of the mammy begins to be deconstructed. Rather than a dark-brown skinned woman with a perpetual smile on her face who is happily cooking in the kitchen, the reader encounters a fair skinned black woman who is described as frowning while she works. By inverting the stereotypical description of the mammy figure, Butler is able to bring to the forefront the inauthenticity of this racist characterization.

Unlike the popular caricature, initially there is not anything warm or friendly about Sarah. When Sarah asks Dana who sent her to the kitchen, she replies "Mrs. Weylin" which confuses Sarah (72). Dana clarifies and tells her "The red-haired woman—Rufus's mother," and this causes Sarah to respond, "Miss Margaret...Bitch!" (72). Initially, Dana thinks Sarah is referring to her, but she learns that Sarah is actually referring to Margaret when Luke cautions her to watch what she says. Here, Butler is

again combating the image of the mammy as good-natured, loyal, or jolly. Sarah is unhappy and hostile, especially towards Miss Margaret. Even though Dana attempts to make a connection with Sarah by agreeing with her assessment of Miss Margaret, Sarah "[says] nothing" leading Dana to conclude that the "warmth [she'd] felt when [she] came into the room was turning out to be nothing more than the heat of the fire" (74).

After Dana's and Sarah's initial interactions, the pairing of the two becomes clearer throughout the novel. In the first of the novel's time switches back to the relative past wherein Dana tells the reader how she and Kevin met and got married, she describes her working conditions and the types of jobs she and others had to perform:

You swept floors, stuffed envelopes, took inventory, washed dishes, sorted potato chips (really!), cleaned toilets, marked prices on merchandise ... you did whatever you were sent out to do. It was nearly always mindless work, and as far as most employers were concerned, it was done by mindless people. Nonpeople rented for a few hours, a few days, a few weeks. It didn't matter. (52-54).

Referring to the work as mindless, and often domestic or janitorial, is very similar to Frederick Douglass's words when he describes the work that he had to do while on Covey's farm. Dana's advantages as a free, contemporary black do not make her exempt from performing menial labor. The idea that the work that Dana is performing in her own time, despite the fact that she does have higher education, is one of the first places where her pairing with Sarah and other slaves can be seen.

Even though Dana does admit that the temp agency is the opposite of a slave market because the people come willingly and the agents do not care if the people show

up or not, the types of duties that are performed are not much different from the ones that Dana does when she is in the 1800s. After their first conversation, Dana stays in the kitchen and asks Sarah if there is anything she can do to help. Her first kitchen duty is peeling potatoes, which calls back to her earlier statement that she had to work in a potato chip factory and sort the potato chips (76). This type of work continues during Dana's time in 1819 as Dana's duty list expanded due to her extended stay. After the initial job, Dana continued "[helping] Sarah as well as [she] could," even though Dana was not very adept at cooking (81). Dana says

Under her direction, I spent God knows how long beating biscuit dough with a hatchet on a well-worn tree stump ... I cleaned and plucked a chicken, prepared vegetables, kneaded bread dough, and when Sarah was weary of me, helped Carrie and the other house servants with their work. I kept Kevin's room clean. I brought him hot water to wash and shave with, and I washed in his room....I kept my canvas bag there and went there to avoid Margaret Weylin when she came rubbing her fingers over dustless furniture and looking under rugs on well-swept floors. Differences be damned, I did know how to sweep and dust no matter what century it was.

(81)

In a later trip, Dana notes how she helped another slave wash clothes often as well. Many of these tasks can be considered just as mindless as the ones she would perform in her own time period at the job agency.

In addition to the type of work Dana has to do while in both time periods, her position in relation to other workers around her is also similar to that of Sarah's role in the

house. While Dana is working at an auto parts store, she says that she "had a habit of showing up every day and of being able to count, so the supervisor decided that zombie or not, [she] should check others. He was right. People came in after a hard night of drinking and counted five units per clearly marked, fifty-unit container" (53). Here, Dana, who does not enjoy her work, still performs the duties of checking the work of those around her, even though she has no stake in whether or not they do their jobs well. She performs this duty willingly, correcting the mistakes of those around her. Her unofficial job as a supervisor mirrors Sarah's role in the house. During Dana's fourth trip back to the past, she realizes that Rufus's mother has left the house to go live in Baltimore with her relatives after two miscarriages. Dana notes the way the house is run:

In Margaret's absence, Sarah ran the house—and the house servants. She spread the work fairly and managed the house as efficiently as Margaret had, but without much of the tension or strife Margaret generated. She was resented, of course, by slaves who made every effort to avoid jobs they didn't like. But she was also obeyed. "Lazy niggers!" she would mutter when she had to get after someone. I stared at her in surprise when I first heard her say it. 'Why should they have to work hard?' I asked. 'What's it going to get them?'

"It'll get them the cowhide if they don't," she snapped. "I aint goin' to take the blame for what they don't do. Are you?"

"Well, no, but..."

"I work. You work. Don't need somebody behind us all the time to make us work." (144).

While Dana fails to note the parallels between the two positions, the reader cannot. Both Dana and Sarah serve as regulators in their own time periods. While neither woman has anything to gain from these roles, they continue to perform them in order to keep their workmates from either being fired—in Dana’s case—or being beaten and sold. The circular nature of history is repeating itself and bringing attention to the direct links between the generations. Due to their willingness to do the job so that they can survive, both Dana and Sarah become people who are relied upon to keep systems going while keeping people from getting in trouble. Both women are veterans to their respective systems. They understand the way the systems work and know how to make them work to their advantage. Dana keeps the store running for her supervisor, and Sarah keeps the plantation workers busy doing their jobs so that there are not any unnecessary beatings on the plantation.

Rather than aspiring to perform these roles, both women are pushed into them as a means of survival. Both women are doing what is needed to keep food in their mouths and a place to sleep at night. Through equating Dana’s twentieth century work with Sarah’s nineteenth century work, Butler breaks down the boundaries between the two time periods and allows for a connection between the two women. Here, both women uphold their system because it is a necessity. This connection of sacrifice for survival enables the reader to see the way contemporary blacks are still sacrificing for their own survival in a similar way that their ancestors did. This connection is important in order to reclaim the image of the mammy. By paralleling Sarah and Dana’s work, Butler deconstructs the perception of the mammy’s willing participation in her own enslavement by juxtaposing it next to a contemporary image of a black woman working an odd and

unfulfilling job that offers zero upward mobility. While the modern black woman who has few job options and must work to eat and have a place to live, the enslaved black woman has no options in her work at all, and must work in dehumanizing conditions and hope that she can keep the system working as smoothly as possible in order to minimize violence for others. The mammy is no longer portrayed as a co-conspirator; instead, she is recast as a weary survivalist whose goal is to blunt the hardships the other slaves have to endure.

Not only do both women run their "work" places, both women are forced to let their oppressors live. In the beginning, it is easy for Dana to allow Rufus to live because he is a child whom Dana believes that she can influence. Dana attempts to teach Rufus how to respect black people in her early trips so that he would not become like his father. Each time Rufus was hurt in the first three trips, Dana did not hesitate to save him. However early on, Dana questions why Sarah does not poison Tom and Margaret Weylin. During Dana's third trip, she learns more about Sarah's children. After noting the resemblance between Carrie and Sarah, Dana learns that Carrie is Sarah's fourth child and "The only one Marse Tom let [her] keep" (76). While Dana is aware that slave children were sold during this time period, she is still shocked. Sarah continues to tell her the story about the other children: "Sold them. First my man died—a tree he was cutting fell on him. Then Marse Tom took my children, all but Carrie. And bless God, Carrie ain't worth much as the others 'cause she can't talk. People think she ain't got good sense" (76). After Dana gets this information, she notes Sarah's various expressions, saying:

I looked away from her. The expression in her eyes had gone from sadness—she seemed almost ready to cry—to anger. Quiet, almost

frightening anger. Her husband dead, three children sold, the fourth defective, and her having to thank God for the defect. She had reason for more than anger. How amazing that Weylin had sold her children and still kept her to cook his meals. How amazing that he was still alive. I didn't think he would be for long, though, if he found a buyer for Carrie... If she ever decided to take her revenge, Weylin would never know what hit him.

(76)

This play of emotions is important to the deconstruction of the image of the mammy. Generally, the mammy figure is depicted as having an unwavering loyalty to whites and a joyful acceptance of her position as a slave. Here, Sarah's varying emotions show the internal conflict she has to control in order to remain in the household. As a mammy figure, Sarah's job is to take care of Rufus, as well as her own children. Butler highlights Sarah's intense emotions to bring attention to the flawed concept of the mammy figure. Not only does Sarah have to accept the loss of her children, but she has to rejoice in the fact that Carrie is considered defective, all while taking care of other people's children. The rage that Dana glimpses is key in breaking down the image of the mammy. The happy, smiling, and accepting image of a mammy becomes less realistic as the reader is confronted the pain and rage Sarah feels because of her losses. Sarah's intense rage is completely contradictory to the stereotypical image of the mammy. By bringing Sarah's pain to the forefront of the novel, the reader begins to see the mammy folk image as more complex and realistic, and less of whitewashed caricature.

Though Dana is in a similar predicament, she is still amazed by the fact that Sarah has allowed the family to live this long. While Dana, like the critics of the mammy image

during this time, would look at her reluctance to murder the family as a sort of weakness, the reader gets the image of strength. In this scene, it is clear that Sarah holds the lives of her owners in her hands every day. According to Max Weber's definition of power, which states that power is "that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests" (qtd. in Patterson 1), in this situation, Sarah holds a measure of power in the household. While Dana assumes that it is Weylin who holds complete power over Sarah, the reality shows the opposite. The power play undermines the concept of slaves as mindless workers who accepts whatever is given to them. Here, the reader can see the subversive tactics employed by slaves not only to keep their masters in line in some ways, but also to keep their families intact to some degree. Later in the novel, when Carrie and Nigel have their first child, Dana believes that

Weylin ... had known just how far to push Sarah. He had sold only three of her children—left her one to live for and protect. [She] didn't doubt ...that he could have found a buyer for Carrie, afflicted as she was. But Carrie was a useful young woman. Not only did she work hard and well herself, not only had she produced a healthy new slave, but she kept first her mother, and now her husband in line with no effort at all on Weylin's part.

(169)

Dana's point of view gives Weylin all of the power. However, it seems that not selling Carrie Weylin could also still be submitting to the power that Sarah holds over him because he would have to sell Sarah if he sold Carrie, or risk being poisoned. He needs to trust Sarah; therefore he must keep Carrie. His common sense also shines through when

he deals with Dana. Tom Weylin is aware that he must treat Dana differently from other blacks because he has to rely on her to keep Rufus alive, much like he relies on Sarah not to harm the family when she cooks their food. Here, Butler is showing that women like Sarah were more than just cooks and house managers; she was a woman with power in the home. Sarah's agency is in her ability to choose whether or not the family lives every day. She knows the consequences of her choices as well. As a result, she choose to allow the family to live as long as it keeps her family together. It could be argued that Tom Weylin knows the power that Sarah holds because he recognizes the power that Dana holds. He recognizes that he needs Dana to keep saving his son, she he treats her more gently than he would like to. So, it would make sense that he knows that Sarah needs a reason not to poison the family. This reliance on Sarah and Dana gives both women a measure of power over Weylin, which enables them to both have a small measure of control over their lives and the way they are treated.

Though there are many noticeable parallels between Sarah and Dana, Dana cannot help holding on to her 1976 mentality and retain her feelings of superiority when she interacts with Sarah. When Dana embarks on the discussion of running away, Sarah quickly rebukes her. Dana recalls how Sarah "[jumps], [and] looked around quickly" and says: "You got no sense sometimes! Just talk all over your mouth" (144). When Dana tells her that they're alone, Sarah responds "Might not be alone as we look. People listen around here. And they talk too....You do what you want to do—or think you want to do. But you keep it to yourself" (144). Sarah continues to try to warn Dana about her intentions to run away by describing other failed escape attempts, but Dana counters with the information about other slaves who ran away and how she has "seen books written by

slaves who've run away and lived in the North" (145). Sarah's reaction to this information is indicative of her inner conflict caused by her position in the household. Sarah's claim that a successful escape attempt is like "dying...and going to heaven" because "Nobody ever comes back to tell you about it" illuminates why it is problematic for blacks during the militant sixties and seventies to berate slaves for not running away (145). Sarah represents many slaves who feared the uncertainty of running because of the many examples they witnessed of failed runaway attempts. Without anything to compare it to, freedom came to represent spiritual transcendence, rather than a tangible option. Therefore, Sarah is not staying in her position because she is, as Deborah Gray White says, "a woman completely dedicated to the white family" (qtd. in Robinson 51). Rather, Sarah stays because the only other options she knows are either being beaten and returned or being beaten and sold to the Deep South.

The hopelessness of her situation re-presents the mammy image as one fraught with fear and diminished hope. In this novel, the mammy is not holding up the institution of slavery, rather she is being crushed under it. Dana becomes cognizant that:

She had done the safe thing—had accepted a life of slavery because she was afraid. She was the kind of woman who might have been called "mammy" in some other household. She was the kind of woman who would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the headkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and who knew as little about freedom of the North as she knew about the hereafter. I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority.

Here was someone even less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. Or it did until Rufus and Nigel drove into town and came back with what was left of Alice. (144-145).

Despite the fact that Dana has so much knowledge about the past, she is still ignorant of the fear of being raised in slavery causes. Dana is purposefully created this way, and she was inspired by a real person in Butler's life who had a similar sense of "moral superiority." Butler states in an interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenam in 1988 that:

Kindred grew out of something I heard when I was in college, during the mid-1960s. I was a member of a black student union, along with this guy who had been interested in black history before it became fashionable. He was considered quite knowledgeable, but his attitude about slavery was very much like the attitude I had held when I was thirteen—that is, he felt that the older generation should have rebelled. He once commented, "I wish I could kill off all these old people who have been holding us back for so long, but I can't because I would have to start with my own parents." This man knew a great deal more than I did about black history, but he didn't feel it in his gut. (*Conversations* 21).

Therefore, it seems that in order for Dana to break down this moral superiority, she must "feel it in her gut," and it is not until Alice comes into the home that she understands Sarah's place and what it means to sacrifice for survival. The depictions of sacrifice and survival undermine the image of the mammy as an extension of the overseer, which, in turn, allows for a more open interpretation of her role within the slave system. Butler's

narrative allows for Dana and the reader to witness the conditions that slaves, especially the mammy figure, worked under. In order to keep the last piece of her family intact, Sarah must allow the Weylins to live, and she must do her job to the best of her abilities. Sarah's limited power over Weylin will only take her so far. Butler also states in this interview that she wanted to "put him in the antebellum South to see how well he stood up," meaning, she wanted to show these militant blacks how flawed their perception of slaves were (*Conversations* 21). This urge to deconstruct the derogatory image that has been perpetuated through society shows the most in Sarah's character because she is one of the most maligned and misrepresented. By exposing the limited agency that the mammy and other slaves had because of their positions within society, Butler's novel creates a more sympathetic image of these individuals that encourages the reader to embrace and respect them rather than demonize them.

Eventually, Dana is forced to confront her resemblance to Sarah once Alice becomes a slave in the home as well. After Dana helps Alice heal from the beating she endured when she ran away with her husband, it is up to Dana to help her accept her new role as a slave. A while after Alice is well enough to leave the room, Sarah leaves Dana in charge of the kitchen to get dinner to the Weylins. When Dana calls the young boys to come help send the food upstairs, one of the boys tells her "You sound just like Sarah" (159). This statement is compounded when Alice fully realizes what has happened to her—i.e. her beating, Issac's being sold deep south, and her own loss of freedom— and that Dana could have let her die. As a result, she flies into a rage at Dana and begins hurling insults at her: "'Doctor-nigger,' she said with contempt. 'Think you know so much. Reading-nigger. White-nigger! Why didn't you know enough to let me die!'"

(160). Alice's label "white-nigger" recalls Brown's words that the mammy was seen as "the representation of the white-identified, black female servant" (25). Much like the young black radical that Butler recalls from her college experience, Alice looks down on blacks who allowed themselves to be enslaved as people who presumably helped perpetuate slavery. Because she is born free, her perception of slaves is nearly as problematic as Dana's. This derision is problematic because it ignores the way systematic slavery used violence to force enslaved blacks to be subjugated. In addition to this, Alice ignores the way women are particularly vulnerable because of the constant of rape and the sale of their children.

Alice's derision towards Dana continues when Rufus enlists Dana's help to get Alice to come peacefully to her bed. Though Rufus informs Dana that he will rape Alice whether she comes willingly or not, he still hopes that Dana will go through with his plan. When Dana relates the message, Dana does inform Alice of her options, to go peacefully, to be forced, or to run away once again (165). Because Dana has not had first-hand experience with the rape culture of slavery, she attempts to advise Alice from her perspective as a contemporary woman who has always been in control of her body. As Alice ponders her options, she realizes the futility of her choices and tells Dana "I ought to take a knife in there with me and cut his damn throat...Now go tell him that! Tell him I'm talking 'bout killing him!" (167). Dana's response to this is to tell her to "tell him yourself," thereby forcing Alice to confront her position as a potential rape victim in order to see what her response might be. "Do your job!" Alice yells at Dana, "Go tell him! That's what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. That's why he sent you to me. They be calling you mammy in a few years. You be running the whole house

when the old man dies" (167). This is the first time in the book any of the characters confronts Dana on her position in the house. Much like Sarah did when Rufus was younger, Dana is still playing the role of his caretaker and saving him anytime he needs help. In this scene, he has even enlisted her to help another slave "do their job" rather than risk getting whipped, much like Sarah does when she keeps the other slaves on task. This jarring juxtaposition highlights the strain of the mammy's place in the household. Dana gets no pleasure in informing Alice of her limited options as a female slave in this society, but she understands all of Alice's options involve her being abused in some way. Like Sarah, Dana attempts to curb as much trauma as she can. This attempt to curb others' pain places Sarah and Dana in the roles of nurturer for other slaves. In other words, Sarah and Dana cannot be aligned with the owners of the house, but must be seen as allies of the other slaves. Though their sacrifices may not be apparent to other slaves or their descendants, the conflict the reader witnesses inside of Dana attempts to bring these complex relationships to the forefront of the novel.

Once Dana is confronted with the reality of who Rufus is and who she is keeping alive, she begins to break down psychologically. After she witnesses Rufus sell Tess, the friend she helps with the laundry, Dana goes to find solitude to process everything that has happened. However, Carrie intercepts her and takes her to her cabin instead. Once they are in her cabin, Carrie uses her special sign language to ask if Dana had seen the sale. Dana responds, "I saw...Tess and two others...I thought that was over on this plantation. I thought it died with Tom Weylin" (223). Carrie only responds with a shrug, and Dana goes on to tell her "I wish I had left Rufus lying in the mud ... To think I saved him so he could do something like this" (223). Here, Carrie corrects Dana by telling her

that Rufus needs to live, otherwise the entire slave population on the plantation would be sold. Dana sees the wisdom in Carrie's signed message and realizes that "Both the Land and the people would be sold. And if Tom Weylin was any example, the people would be sold without regard for family ties" (223). Watching Carrie with her children, Dana admits to Carrie that she was "beginning to feel like a traitor....Guilty for saving him....Somehow, I always seem to forgive him for what he does to me. I can't hate him the way I should until I see him doing things to other people...I guess I can see why there are those here who think I'm more white than black" (223). Carrie dismisses Dana's words with a "quick waving-aside gesture, her expression annoyed," and proceeds to "[wipe] one side of [Dana's] face with her fingers—[wipe] hard...and she held her fingers in front of me, showed [her] both sides," however, Dana does not understand the message (224). It is up to Carrie's husband Nigel to translate for her, and he tells Dana that it means "it doesn't come off...The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are" (224). It is important that this message is conveyed through Carrie. As Sarah's only surviving daughter, she would be the most familiar with Sarah's role as a mammy. Butler restores the familial ties between the mammy figure and her own children and disrupts the ties between the mammy figure and the white children. The stereotype relies on the mammy's devotion to the white family at the expense of her own, if her family is even acknowledged at all. While many may have seen her as an agent that aided in their oppression, people such as Carrie would understand that selling away people means more broken families and to keep the Weylins alive is not a sign of being a traitor or wanting to be white. Rather, it is an attempt to subversively control their lives. Sarah's and Dana's sacrifice to keep whole families from being broken apart making

them folk heroes rather than traitors. By acting rationally and thinking through their options, both women attempt to help families remain as whole as possible. Butler seems to interject herself into the novel through Nigel when he states that “the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are” seems to speak directly to modern blacks who have continued to demonize her image (224).

While disrupting the image of Sarah as the doting mammy figure, Butler places Dana into that role by making her be responsible for Rufus. This further allows Butler to examine what it meant to be a caretaker for white children during this time period. Dana's travels allow her to catch glimpses of Rufus's development into a young man. While she initially has hopes that she can be a positive influence on him and curtail the influences from his mother and father, she inevitably fails. Though Dana saves Rufus from many near death experiences and nurses him back to health many times, Rufus still grows into a replica of his father and becomes a man of his time. Dana's inability to nurture Rufus into a more socially enlightened man cause her to question why she continued to help him survive. After she realizes that Rufus nurses a very destructive affection for her and wants to keep her around because he wants someone to care about him, she says “And I did. However little sense it made, I cared. I must have. I kept forgiving him for things ...” (180). In this passage, Dana is not entirely sure that she does care. She continues this thought process saying:

Twice, he had made me lose control enough to try to kill him. I could get that angry with him, even though I knew the consequences of killing him. He could drive me to a kind of unthinking fury. Somehow, I

couldn't take from him the kind of abuse I took from others. If he ever raped me, it wasn't likely that either of us would survive.

Maybe that was why we didn't hate each other. We could hurt each other too badly, kill each other too quickly in hatred.

This passage foreshadows the ending of the novel where Dana does kill Rufus for trying to rape her. Dana's musing indicate that rather than holding a familial affection for Rufus like she did when he was a young child, she begins to tolerate Rufus's behavior as a means for survival. As someone who helped raise Rufus, she hoped that eventually he would be able to see black people as human beings and treat them better than his father and other racist white men during this time period, but society's influence on his life overshadowed Sarah's and Dana's influences. Once Dana realizes that Rufus is a man of his time, affection becomes replaced with weary acceptance of who he is, and she begins to anticipate the day when she would no longer be able to forgive Rufus's trespasses. Here, Butler is able to highlight the futile position of the mammy figure in the lives of the white family member. Though she takes care of them and attempts to subversively create a more humane generation, the institution of slavery and American culture during this time undercuts her efforts, which causes her feel conflicted emotions about the very children she helped raise. For Dana, the conflict is doubled because she knows that Rufus is her several times great-grandfather. She has to reconcile the fact that her white ancestors were both her family and her abusers.

During Dana's last trip, her final interactions are with Sarah and Rufus. After witnessing Rufus's malicious selling of a field hand who he thought wanted Dana, Dana finally reaches the breaking point that Sarah was never pushed to. She meets Sarah one

last time, and by this point, Sarah is well into her old age. Dana remarks that "everyone else [her] age called her 'Aunt Sarah'," and while she knows that "it was a title of respect in this culture" and she "respected her," she still links the word "Aunt" with "Mammy," and she could not force herself to say it, but "[Sarah] didn't seem to mind" (249). While the word still holds negative connotations for Dana, her "moral superiority" and shame have been replaced by respect and care for Sarah. Through Dana's journey, she is able to confront the stereotype of women like Sarah were supposed to be and reshapes it in the narrative to depict her as a complex human being with more power than was previously depicted. By the end of the novel, the title mammy no longer fits. Through Dana's narrative, Sarah's image has been captured and remolded to cleanse her of history's misconceptions and reclaim her within the community as a figure to be held in high esteem, rather than hated.

Reclaiming the mammy figure works to disrupt the narrative which claims that black women helped to uphold the system of slavery. By refiguring the mammy as a folk "hero" that subversively used her role to keep the black family together, she becomes the personification of strength, sacrifice, and survival. This complex rendition of the mammy not only allows her to have agency, but also enables her to be more than a smiling brown caricature. Instilling her with this agency enables modern blacks to reflect on their history and identify with these figures and reclaim them as their own. This re-imagining allows Butler to take by control over the mammy folk image in her novel. Butler's revised history enables both Dana and the reader to view enslaved black people, especially the women, with a healthy measure of respect and embrace their history without feeling as though they are also upholding a system that dehumanizes them.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

“It is in dying that we are born again to eternal life.” – Ernestine, *Underground*

Often when critics read Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, the focus of the novel is on the bodies of the black people who lived during this era. However, the narrative itself is fascinating in the way it confronts history in order to deconstruct it and rebuild it. Dana’s journey to antebellum Maryland enables the reader to take a new look at the characters they thought they knew, like Sarah’s role as the “mammy.” Butler’s blending of the Neo-slave narrative genre and Fantasy allows her protagonist to get up close and personal with these figures to see how well her “knowledge” of them in 1976 holds up—when she has to live as a slave herself. By closing the time gap and healing this disconnect between the generations, the parallels between Sarah and Dana become stark and direct. By crafting such a close parallel, black women are able to relate more to these stories, and as a result, reclaim control over their narratives and how they are depicted. This connection also shows that time is not a linear concept as the past informs present identity formation. To move forward would mean that the past is left behind, but, since the past is constantly present time becomes circular. When looking at the way time function with identity formation, one may note the way cultural images impact identity formation as well. As a result, the past informs a person’s identity formation equally as much as current experiences do. As black women were historically depicted either the concubine or the

mother, black women began to resent not being able to take control of the way these women were depicted.

This need to take control over how the mammy was represented began to show in black television shows like *A Different World*. *A Different World* dedicated an entire episode called “Mammy Dearest” to this reclamation effort. The protagonist, Whitley, worked to show others why stereotypical folk images should be embraced. While this episode aired in 1991, Butler does similar work in 1976 with *Kindred*. When Dana learns that Sarah is more than a smiling caricature, but is a complicated, strong woman meant to be respected, she is able to embrace those aspects of herself that resemble Sarah and use that strength to survive. Throughout the novel, Dana repeats that she is not as strong as her ancestors. Though Rufus and Tom Weylin are also her relatives, she is isolated from them. Dana is never able to fully embrace the Weylin’s as her ancestors because of the racist social divide that claims that she is inferior to them. The white supremacy superiority complex that infects Rufus causes him to sever the familial ties between him and Dana. Between the beatings, Alice’s rape, and the attempt to rape Dana, Rufus is incapable of being a source that Dana can draw strength from. Once she comes to know them intimately, she is able to harness this knowledge to become stronger and fight for her humanity. The strength that Dana gains from her enslaved ancestors endows her with a new respect from them, their struggles, and the ability to survive. In gaining this respect, black women also gain a new type of strength. This same strength is what enables her to kill Rufus at the end of the novel rather than allowing herself to be further violated. Therefore, reclaiming the image of the mammy would enable black female

readers to deconstruct the flawed narrative that have followed these folk images, and re-present them as strong figures and survivors.

This broken time gap not only enables Butler to reclaim and (re)present these figures, but it also serves to give Butler the platform to make a political statement about the appropriation of black narratives. Kevin shows the reader the problem of narrating from such an outside standpoint, and Dana highlights the issue of being black and too “knowledgeable” about history, without understanding the reality of what it meant to be a slave. As both characters’ knowledge about the past is filtered through their 1976 ontologies and flawed, incomplete history lessons when they are confronted with the truth, they are ill-prepared. As they live through history, they are able to find the flaws in contemporary historical characterizations of enslaved blacks and the institution of slavery itself. Kevin represents the problematic mindset of minimizing the dehumanizing aspects of slavery that are not directly related to physical violence. The novel’s version of slavery stresses the way underhanded tactics such as forcing blacks to watch others be beaten and breaking up families was as violent as and, in some ways, more damaging than physical violence. Bringing these issues to the forefront of the novel forces the reader to analyze the way psychological violence and fear were used to ensure that blacks remained in their subjugated positions.

Through Dana’s narrative, Butler’s novel seems to make the case for a more sympathetic view of enslaved blacks as she crafts characters who are complicated and flawed, yet honest in their thirst to survive and maintain their familial bonds. Ashraf Rushdy recalls Stokley Carmichael’s speech that black Americans need to “reclaim our history and our identity from the cultural terrorism and depredation of self-justifying

white guilt” (47). Reclaiming these narratives not only means reclaiming a more cohesive identity but also restoring balance to narratives of the past. Rather than slaves being demonized because they are crafted as complicit in their own dehumanization, they become folk heroes whose strength paved the way for their descendants to experience freedom. This revision allows black people to engage with these images without feeling that they are disconnected from their ancestors because they do not have any say in how they are depicted, which is important when attempting to craft narratives about the past. Appropriation is not exclusive to whites, black people who are uninformed and judgmental towards enslaved blacks are as capable of writing a skewed narrative as their white counterparts. These narratives could cultivate an extremist, overly romanticized view of these figures that would serve to further alienate modern blacks from their ancestors. This alienation would perpetuate the problematic identity formation of modern blacks as they lose touch with their history. Attempts to whitewash or radicalize history would only continue to polarize images of blacks as problematic. Because appropriation is not exclusive to whites, it is doubly important that black writers are what Barbara Foley calls “veracious [voices]” (234). These voices cannot inadvertently continue to stereotype slaves or go too far to the opposite end of the spectrum and erase how complex and fraught many life as an enslaved black was. There must be an active effort not to continue to caricature slaves or their pain as that would only serve to further deprive them of emotions and complexity.

Through proper narration, enslaved blacks can regain their place in black history as subversive agents who fought to maintain their families and their pride through subjugation. But, in order for this to happen, the narratives must be articulated by viable

authorial voices. When these narratives are told in a way that humanizes these folk figures, the legacy that modern black Americans inherit become richer and fuller. The show *Underground* shows how important it is for these relationships to be shown. The show touches on many of the same issues that Butler's *Kindred* does. One of the central characters in the show was Ernestine, an enslaved woman who ran the house slaves. This show takes the mammy figure and makes her younger, motherly, intelligent, and subversive. She manipulates the household to protect her children as much as she can. Like Sarah, Ernestine has seen more failed escape attempts than successful ones. While she does not advocate for her children to run, once her daughter Rosalee does runaway, she does everything she can to make sure Rosalee is not captured. Ernestine goes as far as to kill one of the captured slaves who planned to inform on her daughter to gain freedom for herself and her child. The show does not romanticize enslaved black people. In fact, the show makes a point of showing just how complex all of the relationships are. The show contained a veracity that often caused viewers to feel a myriad of emotions. But, many contemporary blacks embraced the show and all of the characters. As the show was created in part by a black woman, it can be argued that she had a vested interest in the reclamation of these image. Like Butler, she journey's to the past to formulate a narrative on behalf of people who cannot tell their stories. As she crafts this narrative, she takes full control of the images portrayed, continuing the quest to revise history to tell a more complete story.

As Butler showed in the novel, once this information is gone, it can be nearly impossible to retrieve. For modern blacks, it is imperative that authors attempt to retrieve as much of these narratives as possible not only because enslaved black voices deserve to

be heard, but also because modern blacks do not need to lose any more links to their history than they already have. Modern blacks are not only separated from that African ancestral heritage but also from their American heritage as their history is revised to diminish the problematic nature of institutionalized slavery and the effects that it continues to have on blacks socially and politically. Therefore, as Butler did with this novel, black people must research and learn their heritage. This can be done through digging through archives and reading slave narratives, or even researching into personal family histories. Relearning and reacquiring this lost or hidden knowledge would enable black authors to craft historical accounts that are more ethical and reliable, which would go a long way in helping modern blacks view their history. As Butler, through Dana, documents the journey to a journey that does not have one clear path, American history begins to depict black people, especially enslaved black people, as complex, intelligent, and multifaceted individuals. When writing historical documents about oppressed people, this needs to be shown. Otherwise, incomplete stereotypes will remain, and the quest for a cohesive and veracious history will continue.

REFERENCES

- Bast, Florian. "No.": The Narrative Theorizing of Embodied Agency in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Extrapolation* 53.2 (2012): 151-181.
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered*. Westport: Greenwood P, 1999.
- Billingslea-Brown, Alma Jean. *Crossing Borders Through Folklore: African American Women's Fiction and Art*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1999.
- Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. 4th ed. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Butler, Octavia. Interview with Randal Kenan. *Conversations with Octavia Butler*. Ed. Conseula Francis. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2010. 27-37.
- . Interview with Larry McCaffery and Jim McMenamin. *Conversations with Octavia Butler*. Ed. Conseula Francis. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 10-26.
- . *Kindred*. Boston: Beacon P, 1979.
- Donadey, Anne. "African American and Francophone Postcolonial Memory: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Assia Djebar's *La femme sans sepulture*." *Research in African Literatures* 39.3 (2008): 65-81.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003.
- Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Flagel, Nadine. "'It's Almost Like Being There': Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 42.2 (2012): 217-245.

- Gould, Philip. "The Rise, Development, and Circulation of the Slave Narrative." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 11-27.
- "The Economies of the Slave Narrative." *A Companion to African American Literature*. Ed. Gene Andrew Jarrett. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Moody, Joycelyn. "African American women and the United States Slave Narrative." *The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature*. Eds. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009. 109-127.
- Page, Philip. *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1999.
- Reid-Pharr, Robert F. "The Slave Narrative and Early Black American Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 135-149.
- Robertson, Benjamin. "'Some Matching Strangeness': Biology, Politics, and the Embrace of History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Science Fiction Studies* 37 (2010): 362-381.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H.A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Smith, Valerie. "Neo-slave Narratives." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 168-185.
- Warnes, Christopher. *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Weinsten, Cindy. "The Slave Narrative and Sentimental Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. 115-134.