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Kindred: History, Revision, and (Re)memory of Bodies

The figuration of bodies in Octavia Butler’s texts is largely dependent upon a narrative history and the memories that constitute the past and present. Octavia Butler’s narrative allows us to imagine how the past can exist in the present and how the present can be manifested into the past by way of time travel. This is demonstrated most clearly in the narrative of *Kindred* (1979), which tells of a twentieth-century black woman who must (re)live certain aspects of the lives of her ancestors in order to insure her present existence. In this novel, slavery determines the value of black and white bodies in nineteenth-century ante-bellum America and continues to influence their value in the twentieth century.

The historical fact around which *Kindred* revolves is the American institution of slavery and its practice of treating African (black) bodies as chattel. To read of such a peculiar institution in a history book is far from experiencing its horrific reality. Even to remember slavery first-hand as a participant cannot compare to reliving the actual experience. Fortunately, the boundaries of time separate our present world from that of the past. In *Kindred*, however, Butler disrupts laws of time and physics. By taking the protagonist, Dana, back to ante-bellum Maryland, Butler bridges the past and present and blurs boundaries of physics and history. The story distorts the historical time-line of Dana’s past and present so that it is non-linear.

In the novel, this disruption happens in order that we and Dana might do the impossible and undesirable: travel to a time in American history where black bodies were not recognized in law or general custom as possessed of value other than as goods to be bought and sold. In Butler’s “time machine,” history is transformed, by way of the reader’s imagination, into a present reality so that we might see, through Dana’s eyes,
exactly how humans were magically turned into beasts. Such an experience exceeds memory obtained from or produced by the reading of history books or second-hand slave narratives (second-hand because the ex-slaves themselves have written their stories from memory formulated after their bondage). Dana’s mode of re-experiencing is, in the phenomenological sense, even more radical than such a narrative because she is made to live an experience that happened before she existed.

By positioning Dana’s story as lived experience, Butler reformulates the laws of the written narrative. The narrative of *Kindred* is elevated to more than a tale told to an audience by a narrator. It becomes an experience shared by Dana and the reader who, like Dana, becomes a passenger gaining access to a portal through time, beyond the formation of Dana’s family history.

The fact that written history is not necessarily equivalent to universal truth is far from controversial. Historians are constantly revising textbooks that were thought for decades to be accurate. Depending on countless variants, the personal experience of one can seemingly become “the way it was” for many. Ultimately, the person or people with the resources to write and publish historical texts are the caretakers, or griots, of recorded memories. According to the historical text *Negro Thought in America 1880-1915* by August Meier, if we consider the attributes of the oral tradition, unwritten memories are often the location of the most accurate account of individual histories. It is what Dana does not remember about her past (and America’s past) that fuels her adventure. Thus, Dana’s unrecorded or unremembered memories set in motion the making of her history and the construction of her body.

**History of a Slave Narrative**

The tradition of the slave narrative is one concerned with the identity of the black person as human, intelligent and deserving of freedom. The *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845) begins with the words, “I was born.” By stating this obvious fact the ex-slave/narrator writes him or herself into humanity. The ex-slave also moves a step closer to establishing the grounds of communication with sympathetic whites, especially abolitionists. Dana’s experience, on the other hand, is much less concerned with the notion of sympathy than the slave narrative. It is largely invested in the process of reliving the experience and understanding the institution of slavery. Through Dana’s lived experience of slavery in the past, she can better understand the legacy of slavery in the present.

Other thematic moments in slave narratives—Douglass’s, for ex-
ample—such as the description of the physical brutality of slavery, the acquiring of literacy, the plot to escape, and the experience of freedom, all acted as the foundation of a literary recipe for the telling of the personal history/histories of the ex-slave. Many later writers, with intent to expose the injustice of slavery and the humanity of the African America, took up Douglass’s recipe. Unfortunately, the narratives produced using this rubric often constructed poor images of women and their varying experiences in slavery.

Characters such as Harriet Jacobs’ Linda Brent, Frances Harper’s Iola LeRoy, and Pauline Hopkins’ Sappho serve as the best examples of uneasy portrayals of women in slavery. These three characters are so pious and chaste that they seem unreal and unbelievable in their lack of flaws that would make them seem like flesh and blood women. Deborah McDowell says that such characters are “all trapped in an ideological schema that predetermined their characters” (McDowell 98). Morally perfect and asexual characters such as Iola in *Iola Leroy* (1892), Linda in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Sappho from *Contending Forces* (1900) were limited in their character development because of genre and the function of the narratives.

Fortunately, Octavia Butler does not have to negotiate Victorian standards in order to construct her conception of an American black woman. Thus, *Kindred* is a narrative primarily concerned with Dana’s experience within American slavery. In other words, Dana, not the injustices of American slavery, is the center of the narrative. There are no political incentives to convince readers of the narrative to end slavery. There is also no attempt to prove Dana’s humanity because both of these points have been accepted as fact in Dana’s life long before the narrative begins. In this way *Kindred* disrupts both the premise of traditional masculine slave narratives and Victorian notions of women.

Butler makes a departure from Douglass’s masculine rubric by adding powerful female images to her already untraditional narrative. The feminine elements, such as the heroine at the center of the text and the familial relationships, are all analogous to those found in feminine slave narratives written by black women writers. Likewise, the familial relationships shared by Dana and her ancestors were equally crucial not only for her freedom but for the existence of her entire family. This similarity is one of several that mark *Kindred* as a revised, if not proto-modernist, feminine slave narrative. Just as Linda Brent used the threat on her children’s lives as incentive to escape slavery, Dana uses a similar threat to motivate herself to continually (re)enter slavery and negotiate for both her own life and the lives of her ancestors.
Ultimately, through Dana’s familial relations she is allowed to travel through time and space and from freedom to slavery. Crossing boundaries is at the core of the whole historical or narrative structure of the novel. And although in many ways Dana is dependent on her ancestors, the lives of her grandparents and parents will be determined by Dana’s success or failure in a past that she helps to mold. The conceit of Kindred is that Dana sees how the bonds of the past become the very means to freedom from her legacy in the present; not only is the past necessary to the present/future, but the present/future becomes the very way or means by which the past acquires its meaning in Dana’s life.

**Narrative Architecture**

Kindred begins with a prologue that immediately addresses the issue of the body. Dana’s first words are, “I lost an arm on my trip home” (Butler 9). Before the narrative even begins, the question of the deconstruction and dismantling of a body has been established. The next sentence in the prologue situates another crucial issue at the center of the narrative. When Dana tells us, “And I lost about a year of my life and much of the comfort and security I had not valued until it was gone” (9), she does two very important things. First she informs the reader that her tale will unfold around the notion of the displacement of the present as simply present, or as the only feature of time, a concept that is far from traditional and even further away from a feminine slave narrative written in the late 1800s. Second, with this simple sentence she places a discussion of the loss of security in a position that is inextricable from issues of the body. A loss of security implies a loss of control over the environment surrounding an individual. By definition, slavery entails the idea that a body can be constantly vulnerable and subject to abuse.

In Kindred, Dana, the black heroine, is shifted into the ante-bellum South by way of a metaphysical time-machine (i.e., the imagination of her ancestor) where she loses her twentieth-century ability to control the placement of her body. From the year 1976, Dana, a twenty-six-year-old black woman, is pulled mysteriously back in time by a white, slave-owning relative. I use “mysteriously” because it is not made entirely clear at this point, or indeed throughout the text, exactly how Dana’s body is moved from one location in time and space to the next. What we do know is that Dana’s great-grandfather, Rufus Weylin, has somehow caused Dana to be transported back to ante-bellum Maryland, whenever his life is endangered. Not until Dana’s life—that is, her physical existence, in the past—is threatened is she able to return to contemporary Los Angeles. The physics involved in this seemingly-magical transportation is left for Dana and the reader to
figure out. What seems to be most important is that the system of transportation works and cannot be avoided. Although it may seem random, within the fabulous frame of this narrative the existence of Dana and her family in the present is dependent on how well she copes with the very real results of the time traveling process of her reliving of the past.

In a more practical sense Dana’s method of transportation is important because it gives the reader a way of rethinking the relationship between the past and present. Dana’s movement through time in the narrative suggests that the past can exist in the present and that the present can exist in the past. If such a contradiction can occur, then the notion of memory becomes much more complicated than simply remembering something. If Rufus’s imagination is Dana’s primary method of transportation to the past then memory becomes her ticket back to the present. To return to her present she must alter the past by at least saving Rufus’s life. This altering necessitates a memory of the past that will allow Dana to exist in the present.

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. If Rufus is the origin of Dana’s experience in the past, he must also be a central figure in her present. This is only possible if the past and the present are somehow inextricably connected outside any quantum understanding of time and space. Dana’s method of traveling through time and space can therefore be interpreted as rethinking the past and the present.

In a much less fabulous manner, Dana’s trips to the past can be compared to the middle passage experienced by slaves being transported from Africa to the Americas. Dana begins to feel dizzy and nauseated just before she is transported to a place outside of her home and away from her husband. Her nausea foreshadows her move to the past, but is also analogous to the nausea and disorientation that captured Africans must have experienced as they were loaded onto slave ships headed for a new world at the end of a long middle passage.

On June 9, 1976, Dana and her husband Kevin (both writers) had just moved into their new home and were about to begin celebrating Dana’s twenty-sixth birthday when her own private middle passage begins.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of a woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming....
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Drowning! (13)

Dana rescues the child from the river only to have her life threatened by the child’s father. The shock of looking down the barrel of a rifle about to be fired ends Dana’s first visit to the past as her nausea returns to take her back to her home in 1976 only a few moments later.

It is not until Dana’s second trip to the past that an explanation of her excursion begins to be revealed. The little red-headed child that Dana has saved from drowning in the river is the same child she finds setting fire to draperies at a window on her second trip. Apparently the child is about to start a fire that will undoubtedly kill him and everyone else in the house. Dana puts out the fire and finds herself stranded with no money and no idea how to get home. The red-headed child, Rufus, is four years older than he was during their last meeting, which for Dana was less than 24 hours ago in 1976. Rufus informs Dana that she is a long way from her home and her husband. By asking Rufus several questions, Dana deduces that somehow Rufus has set in motion the forces that have transported her body through time and space. We also find out why Rufus’s father was about to kill the person who had just saved his son’s life. Because of Dana’s clothing and dark skin, she was mistaken for a male slave attempting to harm Rufus and his mother. Rufus tells her, “You were wearing pants like a man—the way you are now. I thought you were a man” (22). “He [Daddy] thought you were a man too—and that you were trying to hurt Mama and me” (23).

This moment of mistaken identity is the first sign that Dana’s body has not only been moved through time and space but has also experienced a redefinition of social meaning. Black females in the ante-bellum south did not usually wear pants and certainly did not do so while saving little white boys from drowning. Therefore, at her moment of peril Dana’s body could have only been perceived as one thing: a dangerous black male. In 1815, the year to which Dana is transported on her second trip, her body does not exist as it did in 1976. Dana’s body has neither the security nor agency that it may have had in 1976. In 1815 the definition of Dana’s body is reduced to property possessed by a white land-owning male. The “racialization” and “gendering” that Dana experiences when she is transported to the 1800s is dependent largely on the social practices of a particular point in American history. The devaluing of Dana’s body from a twentieth century black woman writer to “a poor dumb scared nigger” (48) is a result of a nation of people categorizing bodies solely on the basis of a categorical logic based on distinctions of race and gender.

On Dana’s third trip back to ante-bellum Maryland, her white husband Kevin is transported with her. The year is 1819 and Rufus has managed to fall from a tree limb and has broken his leg. Dana and Kevin
accompany Rufus back to his father’s plantation under the guise of female slave and white slave owner. As her owner, Kevin is put in the position of protecting Dana by providing her body with the security that she no longer has the power to supply for herself under the prevailing social terms. Dana realizes this, and considers the negative results that might develop from such a responsibility.

A place like this would endanger him in a way I didn’t want to talk about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him. No large part, I knew. But if he survived here, it would be because he managed to tolerate the life here. He wouldn’t have to take part in it, but he would have to keep quiet about it. Free speech and press hadn’t done too well in the ante-bellum South. Kevin wouldn’t do too well either. The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn’t like either possibility. (78)

Dana fears that the time and place would necessarily redefine the value of Kevin’s body as it had done to her own. More importantly, Dana is afraid that Kevin will be afflicted by a white male ideology from the ante-bellum South, one that dictates that a white male body has much more value than a black female body. Dana is concerned that, among other possible effects, Kevin’s entire understanding of the body will be negatively affected by the socio-historical practices of the nineteenth century. Thus, as a marker for race relations and gender possibilities of the 1970s, Kevin is in jeopardy ironically because of his race and because of his twentieth century socialization.

By positioning Kevin next to Dana in 1819, Butler encourages the participants in the narrative to juxtapose Kevin and Rufus, two white men in a black woman’s life. Both are inextricably linked to the history of American slavery just as Dana is linked to her black ancestors. As travelers between two time periods and locations, Dana and the reader must consider the fact that Kevin is a white man with privileges and power in the past and present. And as a black woman Dana must negotiate with this power if she is to survive in either time period.

The one time that Kevin is not present to protect Dana’s body, she is caught teaching a slave child how to read. Tom Weylin, Rufus’s father, finds Dana in the cook-house giving Nigel, Rufus’s black playmate, a reading lesson:

I withdrew my finger and let the book close. I was in for a beating now. Where was Kevin? Somewhere inside the
house, probably. He might hear me if I screamed—and I would be screaming shortly, anyway. (106)

Dana is caught breaking one of the most common proscriptions of slavery in the ante-bellum South. Tom Weylin drags Dana out of the cook-house and attempts to beat her to death. Dana says, “I thought Weylin meant to kill me. I thought I would die on the ground there with a mouth full of dirt and blood and a white man cursing and lecturing as he beat me” (107). The shock and fear of the experience causes Dana to return to 1976. Kevin is left in the past to wander until Dana returns for him.

Rufus’s inability to possess Dana’s body completely and indefinitely is symbolic of the fact that Dana’s body has not been fully constructed within the time frame or historical period in which Rufus exists. Dana Franklin’s body cannot be completely “real” to Rufus because in the historical sense, she has not yet been born. Dana is an unborn specter from the future trying to insure its birth into a twentieth-century reality, a time and place that will identify Dana Franklin as a black woman writer and a human being.

Kevin’s time in ante-bellum America offers the participants in the narrative the opportunity to make observations about the treatment of a white male body versus that of a black female body. Although Kevin has suffered during his stay in the 1800s, it is clear that his gender and race must have played a crucial role in his survival. Aside from some unexplained scars on his forehead and witnessing “a woman die in childbirth once” (191), Kevin experienced a freedom and mobility that Dana’s black female body could not have afforded her in the early 1800s. During his “prison sentence,” Kevin “had a job as a teacher” (193), was able to wander “farther and farther up the east coast” (192), and “would have wound up in Canada next” (193). Thus, by allowing Kevin to travel back in time with Dana, Butler illustrates a few of the complicated boundaries founded on race, gender, and power that is specific to a time and place. In a final battle, Dana tells Rufus, “Keeping you alive has been up to me for too long!” (259). Dana realizes that Rufus’s desire to possess her body has transcended any discussion of reason. Either Rufus must die or Dana must forfeit her body and identity as a free black woman from 1976. The ability to prevent her body from being raped is one of the few boundaries not yet crossed that rescues Dana from completely becoming a slave in ante-bellum America.

A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as
In the process of defending herself Dana stabs Rufus to death with a knife. The fear and shock of her act of lethal self-defense sends Dana to July 4, 1976 (the day of her independence), without her left arm.

Rufus’s death at Dana’s hands can be interpreted as the closure of an obscure symbiotic relationship or as the beginning of another unwritten narrative. The term “symbiotic” is useful here because both Rufus and Dana have benefited from their relationship. Rufus obtains moments of security and a piece of Dana’s body, but loses his life. Dana obtains the security in knowing that her progeny will be given the opportunity to exist and eventually reproduce free children in a better time and place. By keeping Rufus alive over the years, Dana has secured her existence in the year 1976. Dana has also shared an experience with her ancestors that would not have been possible without the existence of Rufus Weylin. By using Rufus as a conduit, Dana is enabled to experience first-hand the horrific elements of American slavery. Even the loss of Dana’s left arm can be interpreted as an unforgettable reminder of how the past necessarily forms the present and can also dismantle it. Dana’s left arm in a more concrete sense is the price for crossing boundaries of time, place and body.

**A Revision of Literary Bodies**

*Kindred* blurs the genre borders. Dana’s experience is told on the basis of a literary kinship. This literary kinship forms a window that offers a view into the abyss of possibilities surrounding the feminine slave narrative and the Wellsian time-travel story. By introducing the possibility of time travel into a narrative structure initially designed to speak to a relatively small sympathetic nineteenth-century audience, on the basis of references to a relatively immediate temporal and spatial domain, Butler considerably expands the value and accessibility of the slave narrative form. Reading *Kindred* as a revised slave narrative sheds new light on the goals and boundaries of more traditional narratives. The narrative frame in which Butler situates Dana is not governed by the same ethical codes or social and political goals as documents produced in the late 1800’s. Where Harriet Jacobs or France E. W. Harper might have been constrained in the portrayals of
their female characters, Butler is able to fully develop Dana into an overtly empowered, sexual, and complicated female heroine.

In the telling of Dana’s adventure, Butler establishes a subtext consisting of body politics, and a critique of the agency attached to the black female body. Both the feminine slave narrative and American historical fact play crucial roles in Butler’s re-writing of a complicated black heroine’s genealogy. Everything from the “groups of young whites who ostensibly maintained order among the slaves” (37), to the vivid description of the Weylin plantation and its operation and the difficulty involved in finding Rufus Weylin a rich white wife show signs of Butler’s historical research. Unlike traditional slave narrative, *Kindred* allows the reader to experience slavery with the protagonist, instead of merely identifying with the memoirs of an ex-slave second-hand. Dana carries us with her through time, through life-threatening moments including an attempted rape, and most importantly through her thoughts about the vulnerability of every slave.

The reader’s ability to access Dana’s experiences is largely due to the fact that Dana is a professional writer by choice and trade, as opposed to an ex-slave writing an intentionally-political narrative to end slavery. Because of historical hindsight, as a writer and storyteller of her fabulous journeys, Dana is able to reflect on her experiences in a much more vivid and believable manner than a Linda Brent or an Iola Leroy. Because we are given the opportunity to visit the Weylin plantation and know the complexity of Tom and Rufus Weylin personally, our pictures of the victims and tyrants of the ante-bellum South are by far more vivid than those found in the traditional slave narrative. The character of Alice Greenwood develops into more than a typical victim of slavery pushed to suicide. Butler writes Dana and Alice as agents willing to sacrifice their lives in order to maintain control of the agency and identities that make up their bodies. Thus, Alice’s suicide becomes an act of resistance to the brutality that Rufus has inflicted on her mind and body throughout the narrative.

Although Jacobs’ Linda and Harper’s Iola are not “allowed” to respond to their victimization in such extreme fashion as Dana and Alice, we as readers of *Kindred* can come to a better understanding as to why this was the case. Dana’s twentieth-century perspective on the ante-bellum South presents a much better explanation than does Linda’s or Iola’s nineteenth-century avoidance or complete absence of issues of slavery. As readers who are from a time and place very similar to Dana’s, we identify with her in a way that allows us to say, “I probably would have done what Dana did under those circumstances.” Dana’s language and voice are clearer and less inhibited than the voices of Jacobs and Harper were allowed to be during the nineteenth century. In several ways Butler’s characters fill in the gaps of
older narrative structures by positing real people where there were once idol images. Through Dana and Alice we are able to better speculate on the sexual relations between Linda and the father of her mulatto children, or how Iola Leroy must have felt when a vengeful uncle snatched her freedom away from her. Butler gives Dana license to reveal all of the unspeakable sins of slavery that her ancestors were unable to pass down. The reader does not have to assume an incident of rape or molestation in Dana’s story because Butler allows Dana to speak what was once the unspeakable. In this way in the *Kindred* narrative the body is positioned as a scene of the unspeakable.

**On Imagination**

In order for the narrative of *Kindred* to function, both Dana and the reader must share some remembrance of the ante-bellum South and the time and space in which it occurred. Without such a memory the narrative would not be possible, because the participants would not have points of reference. Dana’s experience only opens on the basis of the fact that her knowledge and memory of the histories of her family and country is and must be incomplete. Yet there are traces and there are memories. Without Dana’s vague memory of “Grandmother Hagar, Alice Green-something and Rufus Weylin” (28), she would have been rendered completely dysfunctional in a time and place that was utterly foreign. Because Dana remembers fragments of her past, she is able to recognize this foreign context and make sense of what is happening to her in her present. In this way *Kindred* transforms what is generally referred to as history into something that necessarily includes memory. Unlike traditional science fiction novels, *Kindred* presents a version of a time travel narrative in which memory and imagination are the most important means of transportation. There are no machines involved in Dana’s movement throughout the narrative—unless we consider our imaginations and Butler’s narrative as organic mechanisms. The idea that the body is only bounded by the human imagination seems to be what makes Dana’s travels possible. Dana and the reader are led to believe that Rufus caused the present and past to somehow fold together, but such an explanation seems both simplistic and presumptuous with regard to the agency of a five-year-old child. A more reasonable deduction might take into consideration the imaginative capacity of a professional fiction writer and a child who obviously believes that anything is possible, such as swimming without knowing how to swim. Dana’s time travel is less important to the way she defines herself and her place in history than her actual experience of surviving the past in the present.

*Kindred* originates from a complicated location of ambiguity. It is
imagination that allows Butler to manipulate boundaries of the real world without relying on science fiction or the impossible. As a (re)visionary writer, Butler allows Dana to attempt to rewrite the feminine slave narrative by means of her memory. Because of Dana’s ability to create through the use of her imagination as a professional writer, the folding or overlapping of time and space becomes the ambiguous location. Through *Kindred*, Dana is transformed into one of the many contemporary black women visionaries who have written African-American historical novels, as a sign of desire to re-vision African-American history from an imaginative and informed point of view.
Works Cited


