

“It’s Almost Like Being There”: Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*

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Abstract: Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred* (1979) combines characteristics of two primary genres: slave narratives and speculative fiction. Employing the conceptual framework of *métissage*, the article examines the interaction of generic attributes. Some generic qualities simply overlap. More frequently, Butler’s novel imaginatively defamiliarizes and revitalizes each generic cluster of attributes as a critique of the other. Such a critique often pushes toward the literal: for instance, speculative fiction’s latent investment in aliens and the master-slave dialectic is made manifest; slave narratives’ reliance on literacy is exposed. The novel’s commitment to reinvigorating perceptions of slavery complicates and compromises certain types of representation—particularly literary or discursive representation—thus contributing to a crisis of representation characteristic of black feminist postmodernity.

Keywords: neo-slave narrative, speculative fiction, slave narrative, genre, African-American women

Résumé : Le roman d’Octavia Butler *Kindred* (1979) combine les caractéristiques de deux genres principaux : récit d’esclave et littérature de l’imaginaire. Se plaçant dans le cadre conceptuel du métissage, cet essai se penche sur l’interaction des attributs de genre. Certaines qualités génériques se recoupent simplement. Plus souvent, avec une grande originalité de l’imaginaire, le roman d’Octavia Butler défamiliarise et revitalise chaque ensemble d’attributs d’un genre comme critique des attributs de l’autre. Une telle critique force souvent vers le littéral : par exemple, l’attachement latent de la science-fiction aux extra-terrestres et à la dialectique maître-esclave est rendu manifeste ; la dépendance des récits d’esclaves à la maîtrise de la langue écrite est mise à nu.

Mots clés : néo-récit d'esclave, littérature de l'imaginaire, récit d'esclave, genre, femmes afro-américaines

Since Octavia Butler's death in 2006, her speculative fiction has been subjected to rigorous critical reassessment. While all of Butler's works rethink racial and gendered identity, *Kindred*, especially, one of only two stand-alone novels by the author, has garnered considerable attention and is likely to be the most enduring of her novels. One of the main reasons for its pre-eminence is that *Kindred* (1979) is the author's most sustained exploration of America's past and therefore it participates in a popular African-American interest in history.¹ As one of the early generation of neo-slave narratives, the novel's energy derives from its deployment, combination, and modification of the conventions of slave narratives² and speculative fiction.³ Arguably the most popular vehicle for imagining alterity in the nineteenth century was the slave narrative; in the twentieth, speculative fiction. Yet both have been dismissed at times for being formulaic, repetitive, and non-literary. 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. *Kindred* defamiliarizes and revitalizes each generic cluster of attributes as a critique of the other. This article examines, first, how the novel is an interrogation of hegemonic constructions of gender and race as alien concepts of otherness. In passing, this reading addresses some of the noticeable patterns in critical reception that may unintentionally reproduce essentialist interpretations of Butler's novel. Second, I examine the ways in which received genres may embody—and revised genres complicate—these concepts. Finally, the tension between genres contributes to a crisis of representation and a deep ambivalence about literary representation in particular.

The interpenetration of genres is informed by the concept of *métissage*. Critic and poet Édouard Glissant uses the term to express the technical aspects of *relation*, a conceptual framework laterally connecting black peoples who have undergone "ruptures" and "dislocation" of forced exile in the so-called New World (61); relation is the tangled network of "shifting and variable" cultures that testifies to both loss and creative potential in diasporic dispersals. According to Françoise Lionnet, *métissage* is a braiding together "of cultural forms through the simultaneous revalorization of oral traditions and reevaluation of Western concepts" (4), in which "we become free to interact on an equal footing with all the traditions that determine our present predicament" (7). It can apply to theory or praxis (8), to cultural

interactions, to discourse, to genre, and to intertextuality. Thus, it “rejoins the signifying practices familiar to all oppressed peoples, in particular to the descendants of slaves in the New World” (18). *Métissage*, unlike theories of hybridity (see Stephanie Turner’s reading of *Kindred*), positively describes a “balanced form of interaction [or] reciprocal relations [that] prevent the ossification of culture and encourage systematic change and exchange” (16).⁴ Hence, while the present article does assume a certain agreed upon, predictable set of features for both slave narratives and speculative fiction, it should be understood that such genres are not fixed but fluid. In fact, it is precisely their fluid interactions in *Kindred* that are under investigation.

Time travel, the most prominent aspect of speculative fiction in the novel, permits Butler to construct moments of concrete contact—often conflict—between her protagonist, Dana Franklin, an African-American woman living in 1976, and slavery among her ancestors in nineteenth-century Maryland. Through the insertion of slave narrative elements, Dana’s otherwise fantastic experience of slavery becomes typical, credible. Butler’s intensely literal questions about slavery also push open the latent content of such aspects of speculative fiction as time travel, human/non-human and master/slave dialectics, and dystopias. Reciprocally, Butler’s insertion of speculative elements exempts the slave narrative from the stringent demands of documentary realism, such as chronological rigidity and a male-centred emphasis on education. To adapt Virginia Woolf’s notion of Shakespeare’s sister, Dana is “Nat Turner’s sister,” more frequently vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse and subject to emotional blackmail than black male slaves. Through speculative fiction’s juxtapositions, the conditions and logic of slavery are made immediate and jarring. The neo-slave narrative is liberated from the rigid forms of the nineteenth century through its meeting on common ground with speculative fiction. As Missy Dehn Kubitschek concludes, “*Kindred* provides a *literal* paradigm of coming to terms with a history of slavery and oppression, a process that is in other works frequently metaphorical” (51; emphasis added; see also Rushdy 107). In my assessment, it also provides a “literal paradigm” for coming to terms with the submerged gendered and racial content of speculative fiction and slave narratives.

The genres overlap in several important respects: the traumatic journey, escape from slavery, and qualified freedom. Crossley argues that Dana’s unexplained time travel may be “the vehicle that looms behind every American slave narrative, the grim death ship of the

Middle Passage from Africa to the slave markets of the New World. In her experience of being kidnapped in time and space, Dana recapitulates the dreadful, disorienting, involuntary voyage of her ancestors" (xi). Critics have overlooked that the cyclical repetitions and vertigo are also characteristic of speculative fiction's time travel (Jakiel and Levinthal 137). Dana repeatedly experiences typical symptoms, such as nausea at terror of the void and a sense of chaos, emptiness, isolation, infinitude, separation, and absence. In other words, the disorienting nausea and fears of her travels owe as much to speculative fiction as they do to slave narratives.

Like many slave narratives, this novel includes accounts of failed escapes and punishments (Olney). The only relatively successful escapes are Dana's, and they occur through the dimension of time, not space, bridging slave narrative and speculative fiction. Here, escape has temporal as well as geographic contours. As the fugitive slave faced punishment, death, fear, separation from loved ones, recapture, ignominious return, and punishment, so too does Dana face these in time travel. Escape to the future offers as many threats as escape to the North: Dana is obliged to fear for her own life in order to generate escape; she is constantly aware that she may be "recaptured," called back to nineteenth-century Maryland, and punished for prior actions; she leaves behind her husband on one journey; and she loses a limb in her final escape. The arbitrary nature of time travel and Dana's constant dread of it stimulate the reader's appreciation of the arbitrary and quickly changing logic of slavery and of the slaves' complex psychological responses to situations of bounded choice—what Crossley calls the "ethic of compromise" or "situational ethics" that record both agency and victimization of the recording subject (xxi, xxii).

Finally, the link between genres is also clear in their less-than-perfect enjoyment of freedom. While fugitive slaves often celebrate the passage to freedom, they also qualify descriptions of the "free" North and Canada with accounts of racism or of responsibilities to those left behind. Though they have reached a place where they can articulate moral absolutes, they recognize that freedom is relative and not absolute. (This sense was of course heightened after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and the increasing lack of security experienced by fugitive slaves in Northern states.) Escape through time proves to be as uncertain as escape north. Dana's freedom is tainted by the loss of an arm and by the break-up of the slave community caused by her escape. There is an analogy between the place where fugitive slaves found a qualified freedom—the North—

and the place Dana finds a qualified freedom—the present day of 1976.

These overlappings between slave narrative and speculative fiction precursors establish a tension in Butler's novel in which the critique and revision of these genres take place. While slave narratives reassuringly root themselves in the formulaic opening of "I was born ..." and branch into a by-and-large chronological sequence of events, the sequence of Dana's story is more complicated, as a result of time travel and the narrative framing provided by the prologue, epilogue, and regular *analepses* (flashbacks). Time travel disrupts the line of life and narrative in such a way as to restore uncertainty and critique the linear fulfilment of slave narratives. Briefly, Dana moves into the past when her ancestor Rufus's life is endangered; she moves back when she believes that her own life is endangered. The novel carefully notes the characters' ages as well as the dates and lengths of Dana's six trips to the past. Duration is not synchronous between the 1800s and 1976, but there is a consistent ratio: ten minutes in the nineteenth century takes a few seconds in 1976, several months take a few hours, and so forth. History is compressed; the past takes up less time in the present. And while duration may be proportional, occurrence is unpredictable: Dana cannot predict when in 1976 she will be called to the 1800s, and once there, she cannot predict when she will be called back to 1976.

After her first two trips into nineteenth-century Maryland and in the absence of a technological explanation for what has occurred, Dana rationalizes the time travel with the psycho-biological explanation that she has been brought back in time to save Rufus and perhaps to mitigate the effects of slavery on her slave ancestors. While this explanation is espoused by nearly every critic of *Kindred*, I resist it, not to disrupt the validity and the reliability of Dana's experience, but to sharpen the reader's perspective on the ways in which Dana (and her critics) internalizes and reproduces the logic of sexism and racism.⁵ Neither Butler nor her protagonist should be projected into the role of nurturer, and each should be appreciated for her self-conscious, interrogative independence. Dana's paradoxical situation *vis-à-vis* her ancestry stems from the masculinist speculative fiction term "grandfather paradox." (This term relates to one's ability to influence one's own birth by tampering with the past. If someone goes back in time and kills his grandfather, then, when he returns to the present, he ceases to exist. But if he doesn't exist, then he can't have visited the past and have killed said grandfather.)⁶ In the following passage, Dana explores

the reasons for her time travel when the life of Rufus Weylin appears to be in danger:

After all, what would have happened to me, to my mother's family, if I hadn't saved him?

Was that why I was here? Not only to insure the survival of one accident-prone small boy, but to insure my family's survival, my own birth.

Again, what would have happened if the boy had drowned? Would he have drowned without me? Or would his mother have saved him somehow? Would his father have arrived in time to save him? It must be that one of them would have saved him somehow. His life could not depend on the actions of his unconceived descendant. No matter what I did, he would have to survive to father Hagar, or I could not exist. That made sense.

But somehow, it didn't make enough sense to give me any comfort. It didn't make enough sense for me to test it by ignoring him if I found him in trouble again—not that I could have ignored *any* child in trouble. But this child needed special care. If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox. (29)

Butler's introduction of the grandfather paradox to this slave's narrative is no mere playful moment of superficial self-awareness but a sustained intertextual playing with or signifying on speculative fiction's trope. Dana's progress is full of questions that do not have answers, or have only conditional answers. Dana knows that the fact of her own existence guarantees the survival of Rufus without her help; in other words, the "law of preservation of reality" prevails (Fritz Leiber; qtd. in Hacker and Chamberlain 359). But Dana chooses to believe that there is an imperative to help Rufus in order to secure the birth of her ancestor Hagar, and her thought process reveals the choice's provisional quality. Furthermore, if Dana were correct that her primary function was to ensure Hagar's birth, then there would be no reason for her to return after Hagar's birth; yet she does. Dana's quest is to preserve her life (and paradoxically to put it under occasional threat, since only fear will allow her to escape slavery). Her aim is conservative rather than transformative, although her logic dictates that she change history in order to preserve it; if she did not intervene at moments in which the life of Rufus or Alice was threatened, she would not preserve her own existence. Dana's terror of history—its linearity yet arbitrary impersonality—leads her to try to bring the past under her influence in the only way she can. This biological/genetic imperative is analogous to the situation faced by many slaves: their fears of possible repercussions and of punishment, even death, may not

have been accurate—but this unease was sufficiently justified to keep many of them subservient, conservative.

For all that they celebrate Butler's work, critical assessments, in addition to accepting Dana's logic here, often reductively re-inscribe onto Dana the nurturing role of motherhood.⁷ Instead, like Christine Levecq, I argue that Dana's repeated gestures toward mothering are important because they are immediately aborted. For instance, Alice, when ill, calls Dana "Mama" (153), but she soon looks scornfully on Dana's attempts to keep the peace: "They be calling you mammy in a few years" (167). Dana's fledgling hope of forming a connection between herself and Alice (as in their joint initiation into the violence of slavery, discussed below) ends with her becoming complicit in Alice's rape and concubinage, as she persuades Alice to accept Rufus's sexual advances so that she can give birth to Hagar. The possibility of surrogate mothering or racially conscious sisterhood is raised, then repudiated. Dana struggles with issues of guardianship, parenthood, and appropriate influence; she asks, "What did I know about teaching children?" (88). Her insecurities foreshadow her failure to fill this role. Nurturing is not destiny but self-delusion. Rejecting Dana's optimism on this point is critical if we are to resist the critical impulse to "mother" and if we are to comprehend fully the time travel in the novel. Speculative fiction's engagement with the means of human reproduction and the trope of exercising control over reproduction (consider, for instance, *Brave New World*) offer an ethically fraught alternative to the nurture imperative. Butler reduces the technology of production and reproduction to the fundamentals of surviving conception and childbirth in the hostile environment of slavery.

The possibility of a nurturing relationship between Dana and Rufus also deteriorates into mutual fear and reluctant cooperation, then a much more calculating and less altruistic arrangement, and finally a violent antipathy. My reading of Dana's killing of Rufus is inspired by Maureen Barr, who points to feminist speculative fiction's reversals of narrative expectations. In challenging masculinist presentations that find narrative fulfilment in women's deaths and pleasure in the misery of others (*Schadenfreude*), Barr cites Judith Fetterly's analysis of submerged patriarchal structure in narrative: "[T]he motive underlying the desire to perfect is the need to eliminate" (qtd. in Barr 27); eugenics and death are thus interlinked. The key reversal in *Kindred*, and a critique of traditional speculative fiction, is that this drive to perfect and to eliminate is evident not in a white

man's interactions with women but instead in a black woman's interactions with a white man, as she tries to socialize and control Rufus: finally the novel's climax substitutes the death of a man for the rape or death of a woman. Dana finds control, not in *nurture* (as she proposes), but in *murder*.

Dana has been forced to capitulate to cultural and biological destiny (blackness, femaleness, the logic of time travel, and the grandfather paradox) to such an aggravated extent that Rufus's death is a necessary relief from narrative compulsion and a climax that unites slave-narrative resistance with time travel and the grandfather paradox. Dana kills Rufus to protect her existence when protecting him no longer serves that function.

He lay with his head on my shoulder, his left arm around me, his right hand still holding my hand, and slowly, I realized how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this. So easy, in spite of all my talk. But it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into the flesh I had saved so many times. So hard to kill ... (259–60; original ellipsis)

Dana has tried everything: running away, cutting her own wrists, freezing when threatened, succumbing to beatings. Frightened of the possible repercussions of her actions, she has avoided fighting back. Dana may be complicit in Rufus's sexual coercion of Alice, but she will not allow the same arrangement for herself. Rufus's attempt to rape her is the wall of the unacceptable. "I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover. He had understood that once" (260). She realizes that her own identity does not permit her to make the same choices and compromises of bounded choice that a nineteenth-century slave might make, that these will break her.

She puts forward her own inviolable definition of contemporary black womanhood by finally dismissing any effort to nurture. Her mission has never been to nurture Rufus but to *control* his life, and this includes eliminating him when necessary. Dana regains power and control as a killer: she regains her place in time and her life, home, and husband in California. Most relieving, in terms of the novel's conflict, she is no longer locked into a vicious and violent cycle of dependence. She gains more by killing Rufus than she ever did by saving him. Though she does not escape unharmed, she regains physical and emotional freedom. Lisa Long reads

Rufus's attempted rape of Dana as a metonym for intrusions from the past and states that, when Dana kills Rufus, "she literally kills her past" (470). This murder may be read as a choice to abandon or lessen the past. The loss of Dana's arm manifests this lack, not only by testifying to the history of violent struggle but also by showing that history can disarm the present.

Butler reinvigorates speculative fiction's master-slave dialectic by giving it a historical referent, and, in so doing, she subverts its traditional assumptions and paradigms. Much speculative fiction is explicitly or implicitly engaged with issues of slavery and freedom, possession and liberation, but divorces these issues from the material conditions of slavery. In his anatomy of science fiction, *Alien Encounters*, Mark Rose elaborates on instances of the master-slave narrative: texts can "turn upon a transposition of the 'natural' relationship between man and machine: man becomes the slave, the machine the master" (153). Stories about artificial life (robots, cyborgs, androids) "tend to revolve around some form of master-slave antimony" (157). Speculative fiction projects the human tendency to enslave and/or be enslaved onto non-humans.⁸ Yet another way in which speculative fiction's racial and gendered dimensions can be diluted is through imposing a "universal," interpretative story of contact as a metaphor for any human contact (see Rose 81). Thus, the master-slave dialectic heightens conflicts in speculative fiction, but authors otherwise sensitive to power, class, and gender imbalances evacuate slavery of the historical, human, racialized context from which it derives its potency.

In other words, speculative fiction perpetuates assumptions about slavery as a state of exception, without reference to its particular historical incidence. While much of the genre—and criticism of the genre—is heavily invested in this master-slave dynamic, by the 1970s, very little of it referred to the most obvious historical example of slavery in western civilization: the enslavement of Africans and their descendants in the New World. "Science fiction as genre has seldom evoked an authentic African setting or employed non-stereotypical blacks as characters" (Govan, "Connections" 83). Butler tackles the "insidious problem" with speculative fiction, commenting that it "has always been nearly all white, just as until recently, it's been nearly all male" (qtd. in Salvaggio 78). To Butler, "science fiction [is] a way of disseminating the fact that we don't have only one kind of people, namely white males, in this world" ("Sci-Fi

Visions" 33); or, as Frances Smith Foster notes, "Octavia Butler consciously chose to introduce the *isms* of race and sex into the genre" (38). Butler's capacity to interrogate and critique the master/slave trope as a universal becomes immediately visible in her response to Larry McCaffery's comment: "In one way or another, all your books seem to explore different forms of slavery or domination" (Butler, Interview 56). She answers, "I know some people think that, but I don't agree, although this may depend on what we mean by 'slavery'"; she defines "slavery" precisely as "humans being treated as if they were possessions" (57), claiming that, of her novels, only *Wild Seed* and *Kindred* treat slavery explicitly. Her correction of the interviewer signals a prickly sensitivity to readings that abstract the universal away from the particular and historical.

Butler's novel suggests that, if speculative fiction is defined by its formulation of free will versus determinism (dramatized as freedom versus slavery), then it ought to consider the phenomenon of American slavery. Authors do not actually have to reach too far into the possibilities of human experience and consciousness to find incidents of mastery and slavery; they are available in the surrounding history. There is no need for artificial intelligence and life forms to explore and illuminate the power-struggle dynamics within the master/slave binary. Butler reanimates the discussion of mastery and slavery in her chosen genre by setting parts of *Kindred* (and *Wild Seed*) within the world of slaves in Africa and the New World. She reconnects abstract notions of human freedom and subjection to a tangible and concrete past of racial (and gendered) exploitation. *Kindred*'s subject matter exposes what is generally obscured and/or rendered cliché in the genre. In short, it makes the latent content of speculative fiction manifest.

Conceived in this light, the black female protagonist pits her humanity against the rhetoric of an alien inhumanity. For Rose, speculative fictional texts "are composed within the semantic space created by the opposition of human to nonhuman. Indeed, this opposition defines the semantic space, the field of interest, within which science fiction as a genre characteristically operates" (31–2). If the concept of "alienation" originally derives from Marx's description of the capitalist industry's hostility to the inherent relationship between a worker and his labour, then the obvious example is the distance between slaves and their usually unpaid, unchosen labour.⁹ Slaveholders routinely reduced slaves (literally and figuratively) to the

non-human, denying their status as human and insisting that people of African descent belonged to a separate species and/or that they were comparable to cattle or horses. Slave narratives bitterly incorporate this confusion; witness Frederick Douglass's catalogue at a valuation of property: "There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination" (35; for similar phrasings in *Kindred*, see, e.g., 26–7, 211–2). Butler has written that "[s]cience fiction has long treated people who might or might not exist—extraterrestrials" but "did nothing to make us think about here-at-home human variation—women, blacks, Indians, Asians, Hispanics, etc." (qtd. in Govan, "Connections" 87). There is no need to talk in remote terms about aliens and the alienation process, when, right in front of us, we have the experience of millions of people who were forcibly alienated from family, economy, society, religion, language.

In Butler's novel, the debate over the humanity of the slave that is inherent to the slave narrative dictates that the role of alien shifts to the "here-at-home" version: Dana is threatened by the attempts of others to fix her status as non-human. Crossley observes that Butler challenges the utter otherness of aliens: "The alien . . . has been not a monstrous figure from a distant planet but the invisible alien within modern, familiar, human society: the woman as alien, sometimes more specifically, the black woman" (xvi). From the outset, Dana is an archetype of the lack at the centre of slave narratives—the lack of family, security, certainty, love, mobility, choice, education. Moreover, Dana is alien to 1976 because women are othered and alien within a patriarchal society, as Barr argues (31), and blacks are aliens in racist, hegemonic American culture. Furthermore, she is a sole survivor of slavery. Her isolation is especially evident in the epilogue after she returns to Maryland in 1976 and discovers the breakup of the community of slaves that resulted from Rufus's death. Thus, the slave narrative of a black woman is an appropriate vehicle for speculative fiction as well as a rebuke to patriarchal American culture, which has created its own monstrous threat through practices of exclusion.

A strong sense of *estrangement*, the process in speculative fiction by which familiar becomes unfamiliar, accompanies the logic of the slave narrative and is highlighted in the structural book ends of prologue and epilogue that frame Dana's narrative. Dana has not

only lost an arm: "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). The novel begins with Dana's confused pain and her meeting with Kevin in the hospital. "I lost an arm on my last trip home" is the opening line of the prologue (9). She begins her narrative, not by drawing attention to her development and freedom, but by drawing attention to her maiming, the problematic of "home," and her distance, at the time of narration, from the events she describes. Later, readers realize in horror that her new and unfamiliar "home" in the Californian present is as responsible for Dana's injury as is past violence at the antebellum Maryland plantation. Dana's arm merges entirely with the wall designed to shelter her in a bizarre example of the transfiguration and mutation typical of fantastic literature. (We might think here of the ways women are similarly immured in the domestic space in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" or Poe's "The Black Cat.") "Home," a key problematic in both slave narratives and speculative fiction, fails to protect and may cause injury and is thus a richly over-determined concept in this novel. By beginning with her narrator in a disoriented, post-traumatic state of disfigurement, Butler dislodges both her and the reader from the secure, familiar, and protected space of "home." The uncertainty of "home" is expressed in Dana's attitude toward the South of the past:

I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house [the Weylin plantation], feeling that I had come home. And having to stop and correct myself, remind myself that I was in an alien, dangerous place. I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home. (190)

Words such as "alien" have special resonance in the work of a science-fiction writer. Here, "alien" refers to a site that might be mistaken for the familiar but is precisely the unfamiliar, the uncanny. Dana is alien, but so is the Weylin plantation.

Kindred also includes reciprocal rhetoric that calls into question the humanity of the slave-owner. Dana describes Tom Weylin thus: "He wasn't a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper" (134). His ordinary qualities make him representative of the attitudes of the average Southerner. Though Dana refuses to cast him in the role of monster, he sets the stage for her more damning

indictment of the larger slave-holding society as “monstrous.” Later, in the climactic scene, Rufus’s humanity is compromised: “I had never heard anyone scream that way—an animal sound” (260). Like Dana, other slave narrators sometimes rhetorically direct the terms of the oppressive, dehumanizing rhetoric against proslavery advocates, as when Harriet Jacobs repeatedly classifies slave-holders as snakes. In Butler’s version, whites—who largely control definitions of humanity in the novel—are structurally and figuratively situated in the role of the other. What all this anxious othering reveals is that, in American slavery, “victims and perpetrators are seldom, if ever, alien to each other” (Parham 1317; see also Yaszek 1062).

Dana’s isolated ineffectuality reframes the dystopian element of speculative fiction within the slave narrative. In a well-researched account of slavery, Butler produces a dystopia—a tale of dislocation and reprogramming within an environment inimical to human existence—that is different from the urban nightmares of much speculative fiction. Many dystopian elements of Butler’s novel, such as the isolation and lack of resources, among other drawbacks, originate in its rural setting in Maryland. Futuristic urban sites full of technological marvels are not the only sources of disorienting horror, and they may even set up false dichotomies, in which the rural and the past are mistaken for nature, and the urban and future, for artifice. By invoking speculative fiction through time travel and utilizing the rural past on which the slave economy is based, Butler structurally opposes this simplification and its attendant nostalgic view of early American life.

Butler’s novel not only uses the slave narrative to turn the table on the conventional assumptions and rhetorical tropes of speculative fiction but also deploys speculative fiction to critique the conventions of the slave narrative, introducing a significant ambivalence toward literary representation. Dystopian fictions often involve the exorcism or deprogramming of the protagonist’s mind; the analogue from slave narratives is the emphasis on self-education and literacy. The immediate juxtapositions of time travel enable a critique of the slave narrative’s emphasis on literacy.¹⁰ Where Douglass’s literacy leads him to dissatisfaction with slavery and eventually to freedom, it leads Dana to complacency and acceptance of slavery. Initially, Dana wants to “take out some insurance” against her return to the past by re-programming Rufus to accept blacks and treat them well. She plans to “keep him from growing up into a red-haired version of his father” (81). Dana’s ability to read aloud

gives her the opportunity to “program” Rufus when he breaks his leg. But the slave-holding system is too strong, and literacy becomes a liability in her negotiations with Rufus: “Despite Dana’s education, maturity, logic, and assertive approach, she cannot change Rufus’s socially engineered position as her superior” (Paulin 182). When he demands that she burn a map of Maryland she’s brought with her in exchange for his sending a letter from her to Kevin, she thinks, “I wanted to do things the easy way if I could. I wanted to stay here and let a letter go to Boston and bring Kevin back to me” (143). The letter (and the literacy and education it symbolizes) is to do the work in Dana’s place. But it is “the easy way,” a weakness, not a strength, as she discovers when Alice exposes Rufus’s deliberate deception and his failure to forward the letter. Rather like Harriet Jacobs’s literacy, discovered by a master who then proceeded to torment her with sexually suggestive notes, Dana’s literacy contributes to exploitation.

Dana’s self-appointed task shifts from socializing Rufus to teaching other slaves. However, her education, rather than cementing bonds, actually drives a wedge between Dana and potential allies. When Nigel and Carrie ask her to teach them to read and write, she obliges but has to hide the fact from their slave parents, who are afraid of the risks. As Dana muses with bitter humour, “If anything went wrong, there would be blacks to take their revenge on me when the whites finished” (106). Alice voices suspicions of the larger community when she tries to wound Dana with insults bound up in her education: “Doctor-nigger ... Think you know so much. Reading nigger. *White nigger!* Why didn’t you know enough to let me die?” (160). According to Hazel Carby, such ambivalence toward literacy marks the return of “the folk” that a focus on the literacy of slave narratives may have suppressed; the folk challenges the primacy of slave narratives (137–8). bell hooks writes,

From slavery to the present, education has been revered in black communities, yet it has also been suspect. Education represented a means of radical resistance but it also led to caste/class divisions between the educated and the uneducated, as it meant the learned black person could more easily adopt the values and attitudes of the oppressor. (98)

This ambivalence also emerges through the troubled status of writing as representation discussed below.

In the process of attempting to program others to reject the oppression of slavery, Dana is the one who gets reprogrammed so that she begins to think differently and make different choices.¹¹ This alteration testifies to the force of slavery: in the nineteenth century, slavery was routinely condemned for its brutalizing effects on both slaveholders and slaves. Anyone who might seem to be outside of the totalizing system was absorbed and altered by it (as in dystopian narrative). This society may not have been urban, mechanical, or technologically advanced, but it was certainly alienating, totalitarian, and nightmarish in its treatment of slaves as non-human. Dana's recognition of this, as well as her inability to act, based on her faith in literacy, implicitly widens the focus of Butler's critique of speculative fiction and slave narrative.

The novel's premise of time travel into slavery highlights Dana's unpreparedness for the precise conditions that shaped the very texts that have shaped Dana's perceptions of slavery. Written history has not communicated experience in an adequately meaningful way. As a college-educated, twentieth-century writer, Dana remains bound to literacy, which is more often a liability than an aid in her day-to-day existence in antebellum Maryland. Butler repeatedly underscores the space between Dana's reading and her experiences. Sometimes her reading informs her, as when it helps her to identify the patrollers who raid the Greenwood home or when it prescribes a mien appropriate to slaves, but it cannot assist or protect her. For all that Dana's books about slavery have told her about the conditions of slavery, they fail to provide a pattern for free papers (48) or maps. Her reading has exaggerated and perpetuated myths of plantation life, where slave children always eat out of troughs (72) and the slave-owners always inhabit white mansions (see 67, 116). At best, literacy allows her to articulate her problem, but it offers no solutions or practical knowledge, and so heightens her discomfort under slavery. "I almost wish I hadn't read about it," she asserts (48), wishing that she could be unaware of the potential repercussions of her decisions and able to make independent choices.¹² She echoes Douglass's lament: after learning to read as a slave, he comments, "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy" (33). This passing thought of Douglass's is an enduring vulnerability in Dana's encounter with slavery. *Kindred* does not imply that we should not publish or read slave narratives, or not try to understand the histories of slavery; nevertheless, the limits of history are sharply delineated in the meta-historical dimensions of the novel.

Butler's particular version of generic *métissage* affects the status of the representation of the real. This is only to be expected when realism and verisimilitude are the primary modes of slave narratives, and the fantastic is the stock in trade of speculative fiction. The imaginative time travel of speculative fiction allows Butler to juxtapose events that conventional historical approaches usually consider separate. Yet Dana's first-person point of view replicates and signifies on the self-authenticating structures of slave narratives. Ostensibly transparent and functional, the narrative describes physical pain and suffering through the apprehension of all the senses, contributing to the realism of the speculative fiction. Combining speculative fiction and slave narrative results in the continual renegotiation of the status of representation. Hortense Spillers neatly articulates this problem: "In a very real sense [for contemporary writers and readers], 'slavery' is *primarily* discursive, as we search vainly for a point of absolute and indisputable origin, for a moment of plenitude that would restore us to the real, rich 'thing' itself before discourse touched it" (29; original emphasis). Spillers insists further,

I want a discursive "slavery," in part, in order to "explain" what appear to be very rich and recurrent manifestations of neo-enslavement in the very symptoms of discursive production and sociopolitical arrangement that govern our current fictions in the United States. At the same time, I suspect that I occasionally resent the spread-eagle tyranny of discursivity across the terrain of what we used to call, with impunity, "experience." (33; original emphases)

Spillers has good reason to suspect the dismissal of experience, for "not all 'experience' is accorded social and cultural recognition or legitimacy" (Smith and Watson 28), and certainly black experience has been treated differently. In such circumstances, authors are not prepared to relinquish an appeal to experience or the specificity of slavery.

To explore the representation of painful experiential slavery, I call on the work of Elizabeth Spelman, who draws the reader's attention to the economy of suffering, noting that pain and healing are unfairly distributed so that oppressed minorities may do the symbolic work for their communities. Spelman demands awareness of exploitation of the labour of suffering, which she expresses in an agricultural metaphor of unfair profit: "You sow the seeds, I pluck the fruits of sorrow" (172). The trope of time travel facilitates

Butler's finessing of this point, permitting Dana to talk about her *own* sufferings as a slave *and* as a twentieth-century black woman; Dana eventually possesses both sides of the analogy. Dana does learn the painful distance between discursive and experiential slavery, but she can only learn that distance by travelling it.

As a result of time travel, the wounds of slavery in the novel are open as late as 1976—a rather different approach to the marks of suffering than that of most neo-slave narratives, where scars that testify to pain are healed over, symbolizing the healing process within (e.g., witness Harker's revaluation of Dessa's scarred genitals in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* or Paul D.'s caressing of Sethe's scarred back in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*). To refer figuratively to the scars of slavery is a common trope for describing the violence of slavery and its impact on the cultural, psychological, and social climate of the present day of the writer. Scars are authenticating reminders of the materiality of history. Pain's legitimacy secures trauma's reality. Nevertheless, the metaphor or symbol tacitly admits that the wounds are healed, that scars are reminders of wounds and not the wounds themselves. There is thus something capitulatory about scars; they can be a compromise. In a continuum of bodily injury in *Kindred*, a scar marks Kevin as a sympathetic character, one who suffers alongside Dana. On the other hand, Alice's scars are wounds that don't heal over. After Alice nearly dies, Dana writes, "She was healing emotionally as well as physically. I had helped her to heal. Now I had to help Rufus tear her wounds open again" (165). Physical and emotional wounds are rhetorically indistinguishable. Dana often carries neither healed wounds nor memories of wounds but *open* wounds into the present. A wound is no mere reminder of an injury but is that injury itself, which is remembered while it heals, which hurts while it heals (if it heals at all). Butler's time travel means that the wounds of slavery literally and figuratively have not healed over by 1976.

Not only is Dana wounded, but she is also disfigured, made unwhole. This loss is a symbolic irony. Consider the tremendously popular and influential *Roots* by Alex Haley (published 1976, and broadcast on television in 1977), in which genealogical and psychic completion and wholeness are achieved through contact with and knowledge about one's ancestors. Instead, Dana's loss of an arm implies that trying to uncover the family secrets of the past and getting too close to the past is dangerous, that total and complete wholeness of self is unavailable. As Rushdy comments, "[T]he discovery and acceptance of impurity does not produce certainty,

liberate the memory, and give a sense of fullness to family narratives" (106).

By showing the pain involved in recovering the past, Butler attests to a deep contradiction between seeking to recall and understand the past as a means of "possible political self-recovery," a way to become "whole," and the destructive potential historical excavation harbors for the contemporary African American subject. (108)

Butler says, "I couldn't let her come back whole" ("An Interview" 498). For Dana as writer, the loss of this possibility of self-recovery is a more significant and permanent loss of control than other losses that occur. Her story is about reconnection with the racial life, with the experiences of her ancestors and others like them, and, though reconnecting does not make her whole, it may make her a writer. While scars suggest healed violence, Dana's open wounds (and to some degree Alice's) suggest the unresolvable traumatic rawness of contact with the past.

Just as the representation of pain through healed scars is exposed as a rhetorical trope, the representation of violence through visual media is debunked. Dana's time travel may exhaust and damage her, but it rejuvenates language, reinfuses it with the menacing meanings of literal truth. In this novel, Spillers's desire for both a discursive and a literal slavery achieves what is at once its most sustained and its most fraught position. Dana employs the rhetoric of slavery rather casually and callously as a comparison to her own work, referring to a temp agency for which she works as a "slave market." A slave auction or slave market often appears in slave narratives; this particular slave market is, however, wholly figurative:

I was working out of a casual labor agency—we regulars called it a slave market. 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. They always had more job hunters than jobs anyway. If you wanted them to think about using you, you went to their office around six in the morning, signed in, and sat down to wait ...

Getting sent out meant the minimum wage—minus Uncle Sam's share—for as many hours as you were needed ... 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. (52)

This comparison connects the nineteenth- and twentieth-century worlds of capitalist ownership and underpaid exploited labour, as Spaulding (52) and Vint (243) observe. The corporate attitude toward “nonpeople” is parallel to slavery’s dehumanizing efforts. However, the rhetoric is amplified by Dana’s contacts with slavery and with the impact of slave sales on families. Dana’s experiences as a slave rapidly underscore the weakness of such comparisons. In Spelman’s terms, Dana reaps the rhetorical analogy of comparing temp work with a slave market, while slaves at such markets did the labour of suffering. What might otherwise be a powerful metaphor has become an abuse of metaphor, a useful perversion of language or a *catachresis*; following Gayatri Spivak, *catachresis* is a subaltern refusal of appropriation and an insistence on the empirical (251–3). In one figure it unites Spillers’s discursive and experiential slavery. The open wounds, the breakdown of figurative language, and the breakdown of communication discussed below, signal the failure—the deliberate artistic failure—to transcend trauma and discover universal meaning.¹³ Butler’s rhetorical tropes draw attention to the discursive act of limiting language to show the discursive and rhetorical ways in which contemporary black identity is imbricated with slavery. Dana is forced to confront the situation in the casual labour agency as different from slavery. Reading slavery, knowing slavery from a distance, enables one to make analogies; experiencing slavery, knowing slavery intimately, makes one wary of analogies.

A further realization of the failure of rhetorical exaggeration occurs when Tom Weylin threatens Dana, shouting at her, “I’ll flay you alive!” (202).

My aunt used to say things like that to me when I was little and did something to annoy her—“Girl, I’m going to skin you alive!” And she’d get my uncle’s belt and use it on me. But it had never occurred to me that anyone could make such a threat and mean it literally as Weylin meant it now. I turned and left him before he could see that my courage had vanished . . . He could do anything he wanted to to me, and I had no enforceable rights. None at all. (202)

The original words of the aunt—“I’m going to skin you alive!”—contain no idle threat. Still, the words and action pale in comparison with Weylin’s words and the action he threatens; Dana realizes that slavery and its apparatus of cruelty have the deadly power to keep language literal. In *Kindred*, literal language is reinvested with

significance and violence. The use of figurative language is only possible in safety, and then it may be inappropriate in juxtaposition with the experience of those who have been subject to the literal force on which its power relies.

Butler complicates the status of representational claims to authority through Dana's interactions with the discourse of history. Like fugitive slave narrators before her, Dana testifies to the brutality, violence, and other abuses endemic to slavery. She records a series of brutal initiations into slavery with painstaking verisimilitude. After being threatened for the first time in the South, Dana comments, "As real as the whole episode was, it's beginning to recede from me somehow. It's becoming like something I saw on television or read about—like something I got second hand" (17). As Levecq writes, "[T]he novel stages a hovering between event and memory, raw encounter and retelling, reality and textuality" (527). Butler suggests that reliving the past, whether through time travel or writing autobiography, can be as painful as the original experience, but in communication the experience translates into representation and becomes less potent.

The tension between violence and its representations increases as Dana's initiation to the violence of slavery is graphically extended in the mutual confrontation of speculative fiction and slave narrative. Since 1976 in the novel corresponds to the period of historical representation and the 1800s to the literal source, time travel stages the collision between the representation and the literal in slave narratives. On her second trip, Dana views a terrible scene in which her ancestor Alice's father is whipped by patrollers:

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. Why didn't they stop!

"Please, Master," the man begged. "For Godsake, Master, please ..."

I shut my eyes and tensed my muscles against an urge to vomit.

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

and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. And my mind was darting from one thought to another, trying to tune out the whipping. (36; original ellipsis)

Levecq observes that in scenes such as these “the concurrent shock to Dana (and to the reader) comes precisely from the sudden materialization of what until now had been known exclusively through texts” (530). The realism is compelling, partly because of its indebtedness to slave narrative models and partly because of its evocation of many senses. The scene evokes scenes where slave children are initiated into violence (e.g., Douglass 13–6); Dana and the watching child are both disregarded child observers. *Asyndeton* in parallel constructions such as “hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip” and “jerking, convulsing, straining” breathlessly piles on details. Dana must shut her eyes to reduce the sensory overload. The painful feelings of nausea point to the undeniable reality of the body—both Dana’s body and the whipped body of the man. Nausea interprets violence as part of an unnatural order against which the body rebels.

In the passage above, Dana’s dismissal of filmic violence distracts from the fact that what we are reading is another representation of violence. Artificial gestures—such as the catachresis “literally”—strip away the scene’s claim to any status other than that of construction. When Dana shows Kevin in 1976 how she would protect herself in the 1800s, she claims, “I’ve been watching the violence of this time go by on the screen long enough to have picked up a few things” (48). Though introduced to slavery’s brutality, Dana still articulates her identity as that of a twentieth-century spectator; she asserts distance while time travel negates it. Yet she also reveals anxiety: “[M]ost of the people around Rufus know more about real violence than the screenwriters of today will ever know” (48). Again, representations of violence are limited to the screen. The written word is a privileged representation, as Rufus compliments Dana on her reading to him: “It’s almost like being there watching everything happen” (87). Like Dana, the novel critiques a dependence on discursive slavery but relies on it to provide an experiential slavery.

Dana gradually shifts away from registering a connection between sufferer and sympathizer and the initial violation of the safety of representation to move toward her realization that she is not uninvolved. She grows numb to violence directed toward others, more aware of potential violence directed toward herself. Instead of the violence of the first scene, communicated in parallel, inevitable

constructions impressed with the rapidity of sensation, the violence she suffers occurs in slow motion. The imagery describing her experience—hot irons, searing, burning—is taken verbatim from the details of actual slave narratives.¹⁴ Yet the collapse of the rhythm of her prose into short, staccato, fragmented, repetitive sentences; her ignorance of anything other than traumatic pain; and her stomach's involuntary revulsion—"I vomited. And I vomited again" (107)—are indebted to twentieth-century versions of traumatic realism. In spite of increased experience with pain, Dana still filters her experience through pictorial representation: "My back was cut up pretty badly too from what I could feel. I had seen old photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves. I could remember the scars, thick and ugly" (113).¹⁵ Even here, in the connection between the photograph and the literal, suffering body, time travel's catachresis recharges representations of slavery with immediacy.

While a special place is reserved for writing, simultaneously literacy as representation in Dana's own creativity undergoes erosion. A writerly crisis "dramatizes a readerly crisis" (Parham 1325). Dana's ability to write depends on her frustrated attempts to communicate her struggles and sufferings as a slave: "Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away" (116). Much later, after Alice's funeral, Dana admits, "Sometimes I wrote things because I couldn't say them, couldn't sort out my feelings about them, couldn't keep them bottled up inside me. It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for no one else" (252). Dana's struggle with the past is connected with her struggle to write, to practise literacy meaningfully, and as long as she is bound to the past she will not be able to write or to share what she writes. While it is possible to see the novel as a correction of the historical record, *Kindred* is also a novel about a writer coming up against material she cannot write—an anti-work-in-progress novel. Like Morrison's *Beloved*, this is not a story to be passed on: "If we told anyone else about this, anyone at all, they wouldn't think we were so sane," Dana and Kevin remind one another (264).

Events are represented as more convincing and powerful than representations (the paradox is deliberate), and the tension between actuality and representation goes apparently unresolved. Can the novel reserve a privileged place for experience, this rapid embodiment and literalization of slavery? Can the novel reserve a privileged place for literary representation after belabouring the limits of literacy and creation?

In writing, the body becomes “a text, that which holds the narrative” (Parham 1322). Readers only ever encounter disappearing traces of embodiment. Ultimately, in spite of the novel’s own doubts about literature, it too (like Dana, like Spillers) privileges discursive over experiential slavery. Nevertheless, because *Kindred* insists on finding ways to reinvest language with experience, it stages precisely that black intervention in the postmodern dismissal of essentialism, often formulated as a loss of identity, that Spaulding describes:

[E]ven as they reject realism and embrace non-mimetic devices in their treatment of history (a quality they share with other postmodern fiction), many writers of postmodern slave narratives retain a stable conception of identity and historical authority that comes out of the cultural and racial politics of the sixties (3; see also 13–7)

I would add that this concept of identity also emerged from the gender essentialism of the seventies and eighties. To put this another way, Butler’s work poses a challenge to the master narratives of postmodernism as well as those of genre because it is “deeply informed by Afro-American perspectives with strong tones of womanism or feminism” (Haraway 378).¹⁶

238 Spelman writes that “[t]he more assuredly we present ourselves as enduring what others have experienced, the more expertise we implicitly assume as interpreters of their suffering and of their sense of appropriate responses to it” (165–6). Dana endures what the slave experienced and therefore assumes an authoritative role as interpreter of that experience. What better way for a black woman of the twentieth century to present the experiences of slaves than for her to *become one herself*? What better way for a writer to emphasize then leap over the problematics of representing slavery than to use time travel? The conventions of speculative fiction allow Butler to *appear* to leap representation and valorize real experience, “stark, powerful reality” (*Kindred* 191). Dana attempts to impose between herself and slavery a chronological and intellectual distance that time travel makes negligible. Dana’s travels bring her into pointed contact with slavery, yet are ineffective against the grinding monologic ideology of slavery. The impact of Butler’s novel can be more fully described with reference to both slave narratives and speculative fiction traditions that are fully integrated and inextricable, both giving context and meaning to the events of Dana’s fantastic narrative. In particular, the novel challenges the emphasis on literacy and/or nurturing in slave narratives and speculative fiction’s reliance on concepts of alienation, master-slave dichotomies, and dystopia. By demonstrating how a set of responses to slavery can be estab-

lished, modified, and normalized in a modern individual's perceptive experience and by having Dana run through a variety of responses, from horror and fear to complicity to violent resistance, Butler makes all of the available responses to slavery more comprehensible. In more conventional treatments, slavery is a somewhat over-rehearsed historical phenomenon in which slaves are often dogmatically interpreted as demonstrating exclusively victimhood or rebelliousness. In Butler's novel, slavery—both discursive and experiential—becomes a charged and immediate presence in modern-day life, whose shape changes daily and whose contours readers must renegotiate continually if they are to make any sense of it and its place in their present existence.

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Notes

- 1 Butler's *Wild Seed* also uses the historical materials of slavery, in this case to embellish and complicate its presentation of reproductive control and the emergence of a new race.
- 2 Particularly as described by Olney; this is something I emphasize in my teaching of the genre.
- 3 I use the term *speculative fiction* because it is more common, and it absorbs both *science fiction* and *fantasy*. The book was not originally published as science fiction and Butler preferred "fantasy" or "historical novel" (see Butler, Interview 65–6; "Sci-Fi Visions" 31; Beaulieu 119), since there is "no science" in *Kindred* ("An Interview" 495). And yet Dana, the novel's narrator, states with some authority that "[t]ime travel was science fiction in nineteen seventy-six" (63). Butler was relying on definitions of conservative, old-agenda science fiction privileging the "plausibility" of science fiction *novum* (technology and so forth). Soft-agenda science fiction privileges the "ethical implications and resonances" of these changes, emphasizing "problems and conditions already clearly recognized in contemporary society" (Landon 177, 176). Soft-agenda science fiction has gradually come to be seen as more important, leaving its own mark on style and theme. For the purposes of this critique I consider this novel to be soft-agenda science fiction within the genre of speculative fiction, and critics' comments on "science fiction" are understood to apply to this instance of speculative fiction.

- 4 Lionnet rejects any translation of *métissage*, declaring that “the word does not exist in English,” except in words and phrases—creolization, hybridity, mulatto, half-breed, mixed blood—with strongly negative connotations (13). *Métis* means “mixed” and refers to cloth made of two different fibres (14).
- 5 Dana’s behaviour is overwritten as nurturing, which is normalized as a biological imperative. Beaulieu’s reading of Dana’s time travel as having the ultimate objective of nurturing herself is a projection of an altruistic misreading produced by Dana’s own self-assessment. Paulin writes that, “[i]n order for history to unfold, Dana must help Rufus survive long enough to father the child who will become Dana’s great-great-grandmother” (167). McKible writes that Dana “must aid” Rufus. Parham, too, that Dana “must” save Rufus (1318). Govan, while aware that Butler wants to avoid the trap of technological information and speculation and to focus instead on ethical, psychological, and sociological situations and while sceptical of Dana’s role as “mentor” and “teacher” (“Homage to Tradition” 89), does accept Dana’s logic; she writes that “Dana must assist Rufus in his conquest of Alice or her personal history, her present, will be irrevocably altered” (94). Such words as “must” establish a biological, genetic imperative for Dana’s questionable actions that does not necessarily exist.
- 6 “This is the kind of argument that frequently leads nonreaders of science fiction to shake their heads and decide to stick to conventional literature—whatever that is” (Jakiel and Levinthal 133). Mark Rose describes the grandfather paradox:

[F]inally we must acknowledge that we are constituted by time. Exactly this is implicit in the paradox in which the time traveler murders his grandfather and thereby ceases to exist. Much of the fascination of the time loop is related to the fact that it represents the point at which the spatialization of time breaks down. In such circumstances time itself as we normally conceive it disappears . . . There is a further reason for the prominence of the time-travel paradox. As I suggested earlier, science fiction can be understood as mediating between spiritualistic and materialistic world views, between free will and determinism. We can note now that the paradox at the heart of the time loop is that both free will and determinism are asserted simultaneously, for here genuinely free agents are nevertheless caught in cycles of determined repetition. Through the time loop, then, science fiction can construct its characteristic activity in a particularly concise and provocative form. (108–9)
- 7 See McKible; Raffel; Mitchell; Beaulieu. Barr claims that Dana “is a woman who rescues a male, a white male’s black fairy god mother” (48) and “a ‘mother’ to her ancestor” (50). Mitchell names Dana “her own ancestral mother” (52). Similarly, Beaulieu labels Dana “a surrogate mother” (120) and “the mother-figure in the novel” (121).

- In spite of Long's doubts about such readings of "family ties" as "troubling" (469), she also asserts that "Dana becomes the symbolic mother," "nurturing and protecting [her] older kin and ancestors" (473). Spaulding asserts that Dana has a "maternal role" (59). Kubitschek's claims are more moderate: "Dana has experienced a relationship analogous to that of the slave mother/child and felt the terrible burden of socializing kin into slavery" (36).
- 8 In an echo of proto-feminists who wholeheartedly adopted the rhetoric of slavery without adopting the slave's cause (for British examples, see Ferguson; for American examples, see Yellin), a feminist critic of speculative fiction employs the analogy of "slavery" to depict a sexual relationship between humans where race is not implicated (Barr 109).
 - 9 For a lengthy discussion of Marxism and slavery, see Cassuto.
 - 10 The value of literacy and education is overtly asserted in slave narratives written by Adams; Manzano; Josiah Henson; Northup; Black; Pickard (the narrative of Peter and Vina Still); Thompson; and Douglass.
 - 11 Such a shift in character mimics Sophia Auld's as she succumbs to the slavery system (see Douglass 31).
 - 12 Not only is Dana's reading a liability but so also, more literally, is the history book she brings with her; see 140–1, where Dana thinks about how the history book she has brought with her could be used to suppress Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Tubman.
 - 13 Naomi Mandel reminds readers that the unspeakable, "the rhetorical invocation of the limits of language, comprehension, representation, and thought on the one hand, and a deferential gesture toward atrocity, horror, trauma, and pain on the other," is a "discursive production that is re-created and reinforced whenever the limits of language, of comprehension, and of thought are evoked" (4).
 - 14 The association of burning with whipping was a rhetorical commonplace in slave narratives. Solomon Northup's master "declared that when he came out again he would warm us well" (223). Northup writes that, under the lash, "[m]y sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!" (25). Charles Ball recorded his sensations on being whipped: "The first strokes of the hickory produced a sensation that I can only liken to streams of scalding water, running along my back" (383).
 - 15 Ex-slaves referred to excessive punishment often in narratives and displayed scars on lecture circuits. Photographs of fugitive slaves were circulated in anti-slavery circles. Like a fugitive slave lecturer who must bare his back to prove his identity as an ex-slave and do anti-slavery work effectively, Dana feels compelled to display her wounds as evidence of her claims of usefulness: Rufus will not let her treat Alice's wounds until he sees how well hers are healing. His demand makes her "[swallow] a few indignant words" (147), but she accedes to

the degrading exposure. Frederick Douglass works the memory of marks on his body into a startling moment of creative self-awareness in the midst of a description of living conditions on a certain slave plantation:

I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes. (26)

This vivid juxtaposition of the relatively safe act of a fugitive slave's writing, as figured in the pen, and the jeopardy slaves face daily and nightly, as figured in the cracked feet, is significant. Though the cracks no longer exist, Douglass's side-by-side comparison brings them into view. We can see both the cracks in Douglass's feet, and the feet as whole, healed. Symbolically, as the pen may be laid in the cracks, the act of writing autobiography may heal the wounds of a slave's past. But Douglass's wounds are healed; Dana's are not, and this difference points to a crucial difference between Butler's version of a slave narrative and the nineteenth-century version.

- 16 Supporting a reading of Butler as resistant to postmodern relativism, Jesser reviews Butler's reservation of gender's biological difference.

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