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# Butler's *Kindred*: Non-Linear Genealogies and the Transformative Possibility of Breaking Genre Conventions

Hannah Rehak

As Harriet Jacobs wrote, "what tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery!" *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler, argues that the past cannot be disentangled from the present, particularly when that past is as traumatic and long lasting as slavery. Butler's novel demands young readers and scholars, alike, to confront the legacy of slavery through form, content, and the radical possibilities they both engender. Through a "métissage" of genres and a non-linear storyline, Butler's novel preserves its space in many literary canons, but also, I argue, offers the world outside of literature and academia the foundation for progressive possibilities in transformed language around trauma and healing (Flagel 217).

Like the world of main character Dana, Butler's novel cannot be situated within a singular era and cannot be understood through one genre. In fact, since the 1979 publication of the book, many scholars have dedicated time to the discussion of *Kindred's* genre. Academics and students have worked to determine in which canon *Kindred* belongs, considering it fantasy and science fiction, slave narrative and speculative fiction, and many other unique combinations.

Though Butler considered her book fantasy, scholars like Sherryl Vint consider *Kindred* "a key example of the neo-slave narrative, an African-American genre that investigates the history of slavery and reworks the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition" (241). However, Bernard W. Bell coined the term 'neo-slave narrative,' nearly ten years after *Kindred's* release, and thus scholars have long investigated other genres that mark Butler's text. In fact, most agree that the fluidity of genre is exactly the political making of Butler's book that continually puts *Kindred* "under investigation" in academic circles (Flagel 218). In her essay, "*It's Almost like Being There*": *Speculative Fiction, Slave Narrative, and the Crisis of Representation in Octavia Butler's Kindred*, Nadine Flagel writes, "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 narratives and speculative fiction" (217). Thus, instead of subjecting Butler's novel to one genre, Flagel finds that "it is precisely the terms of one genre that allow Butler to interrogate the assumptions and expectations held by the other" (217). Thus, it is how Butler subverts generic conventions that make her work so important.

Given that Butler wrote her novel over 100 years after the *Emancipation Proclamation*, it is no wonder her work cannot fully be considered a slave narrative. But aside from the temporal differentiation, it is crucial to note that other elements of *Kindred* remove it from this canon. According to Vint, "A key difference between *Kindred* and slave narratives is its far more explicit descriptions of violence" (249). Vint argues that this is partially due to differing audiences. Whereas slave narratives were published in the 18th and 19th century to propel the abolitionist movement, Vint argues that Butler's novel is for a contemporary audience "who may have become contemptuous of 'insufficiently radical' black ancestors'" (249). In other words, Butler is not concerned with alienating a White audience, but rather focuses her work on a Black readership that is perhaps intellectually removed from the history of slavery.

Beyond that, however, Vint emphasizes Butler's "concern with embodied experience" (249). For Vint, this embodied experience leads to a more accurate depiction of violence on plantations. Indeed, written as a first-person narrative, Butler's protagonist Dana allows the reader access to unrelenting trauma and atrocity. Alongside Dana, the reader bears witness to lashings, sexual assault, and suicide. According to Vint, this violence is a necessary difference from slave narratives because

the audience for neo-slave narratives includes contemporary black readers who

must come to terms with their own personal, familial histories of slavery. Butler... draw[s] on the slave narrative tradition, but... revise[s] it to serve the needs of a new community of readers who can see that emancipation was not sufficient to change the experience of African Americans but constituted only the first step in the journey to full personhood. (245)

Vint's emphasis on embodiment is Butler's radical focus to which this paper will ultimately return.

Yet, it is not just the genre of slave narrative that fails to encapsulate the work Butler's novel does, but generic attribution of science-fiction and speculative fiction also seem to fall short. For many scholars, calling *Kindred* 'science-fiction' reduces the implications of its politically charged use of generic conventions. That is not to say that *Kindred* is not science fiction, but rather "the dominant conventions of sf are insufficient for representing an African American vision of the future" (Vint 246). Dana's

"concern is not with grandfather paradoxes, with securing the past, but rather with ensuring that the past is actually heard. Her time travel is used not to change the past (and thereby the future) but to change our understanding of it, which changes the present and opens up fresh possible outcomes for our future" (Vint 255)

This breaks the common conventions of time-travel, while maintaining the science-fiction trope of affecting the past, present, and future.

Mark Bould echoes Vint in his essay, *The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF*, when he writes that much science fiction enables

discussions of race and prejudice on a level of abstraction while stifling a more important discussion about real, material conditions, both historical and

contemporary. And by presenting racism as an insanity that burned itself out, or as the obvious folly of the ignorant and impoverished who would be left behind by the genre's brave new futures, sf avoids confronting the structures of racism and its own complicity in them. (180)

In other words, Bould suggests that in much science fiction, allegories for racism remove the author and the present day audience away from their own hand in the historical genealogy of race and racism. Flagel, too, agrees in regards to the speculative-fiction component of *Kindred* and writes,

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. (224)

Many pieces of science-fiction use racial struggle to highlight a changing world, new conflict, or a brutal past, whereas Butler's combination of slave narrative and science-fiction intentionally locates the reader and the novel's characters in the literal struggle for racial equity through the facts of the past and the reality of the present.

Ultimately, it is the combination of genres that allows for the most comprehensive reading of *Kindred*, one that recognizes Butler's subversions of conventions and the symbiotic nature of slave narratives and science fiction in her work. Through her original take on a slave narrative, Butler creates a fantastical and non-linear storyline that re-centers an authentic history, comments on a traumatized present, and provides material for a better future. In *Kindred*,

Time travel enables Butler to fuse the fantastical with realist conventions, creating a work that is partly historical novel, partly slave narrative, and partly the story of how a twentieth-century black woman comes to terms with slavery as her own and her nation's past. (Vint 242-43)

Further, “the neo-slave narrative is liberated from the rigid forms of the nineteenth century through its meeting on common ground with speculative fiction” (Fligel 218).

Butler’s original, non-linear storyline is both geographic and temporal. Both nonlinearities manifest in Dana’s life caught between two homes. As she is ripped from one home, she gets thrown into another and must bear the burden of both. Indeed, Dana brings objects from 1976 to the past, just as she brings both mental and physical wounds from the past to 1976. When Dana returns after her first trip to Maryland, her back and shoulders ache where Margaret Weylin, Rufus’ mother, beat her. Her bruises and cuts only get worse as she endures hard labor and lashings on the Weylin plantation. Upon her third return to 1976, Dana says

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. (Butler 113)

This is not the first time Dana returns to the present with markings from her time away, but it is the first time she draws a connection between her bodily harm and the depiction of slavery in the contemporary books that surround her. In this instance, though Dana’s wounds are produced from her experiences in the past, they reflect what she understands of slavery in the present. Here begins the most evident focus on embodiment

highlighted by the work of scholar Benjamin Robertson. Robertson writes, Dana

inherits an internally incoherent, paradoxical history. More important... she experiences this history and the political power inherent in it not as something she reads, not as a conventional story, but rather as an embodied experience. (370)

This biopolitical reading of Butler’s novel offers a criticism of conventional historical narratives that distance the contemporary reader from slavery’s legacy. As Robertson writes, “History, for Butler, is immanent in and inseparable from the bodies of those who experience it. Bodies forge and maintain - in fact are - connections with the past” (363). Robertson’s reading also “offers a vocabulary for describing Butler’s intersection of a science fiction of the body with American history,” bridging the gap between allegorical fictions and historical trauma (363).

As Robertson suggests, over the course of the novel, Dana increasingly embodies her history. She is called back to the plantation, repeatedly injured, and she eventually falls into habits of submission, so much so that she is criticized by other slaves, particularly Alice, (the woman who must ultimately bear Dana’s great-grandmother, Hagar), for her willingness to obey Rufus. In one example, Alice, overwhelmed by her desire to kill Rufus, says to Dana “Do your job! Go tell him! That’s what you for- to help white folks keep niggers down...They be calling you mammy in a few years” (Butler 167). As Alice can see the transformation, Dana feels it, and in a line that echoes Frederick Douglass’ famous chiasmus, Dana asks herself “*see how easily slaves are made?*” (Butler 177). As Dana becomes more comfortable with her place in the Weylin household, the gap between the possibilities of the past and possibilities of the future is closed, almost eliminated entirely. In little time, Dana, a self-sufficient writer who dresses in gender-neutral clothing (a blatant anachronism in the antebellum

South), is ‘made into a slave.’ This characterization of Dana as a submissive slave dismantles the idea that people of the present are unaffected by the rules of the past.

Eventually, Dana starts to feel at home on the plantation. After her return with Kevin to the present, Dana reflects on the Weylin grounds, “I could recall feeling relief at seeing the house, feeling that I had come home... I could recall being surprised that I would come to think of such a place as home” (Butler 190). But it is not just that the past mirrors the present, but that the present mirrors the past, for Dana also muses on the unfamiliarity of her 1976 house, “I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time... Rufus’s time was a sharper, stronger reality” (Butler 191). Both she and Kevin cannot adjust back to their 1976 reality and along with the wounds on her back and face, Dana brings memories of the Weylin house to the present, “both our offices were ex-bedrooms in the solidly built old frame house we had bought. They were big comfortable rooms that reminded me a little of the rooms in the Weylin house” (Butler 193). Thus, Butler does not allow a separation of the two worlds and, though mere minutes in the present may be months in the past, the repercussion of Dana’s travels in time is the melding of two worlds, each affected by the other.

Perhaps the most symbolic instances of this essential melding are the moments of Dana’s dizzying jumps between the two times. Though instantaneous, Butler includes that Rufus can see Dana moments before he calls her to him. After she introduces Kevin to Rufus, Rufus says “I saw you... You were fighting with Dana just before you came here” (Butler 64). It is not just significant that in this moment Dana lives fully in the present and the past. I would argue the significance is that what is presumably Kevin and Dana having sex, Rufus interprets as violence against Dana. However seriously one takes the interpretation that Kevin and Dana have an abusive relationship, it is important to note that in this scene, as in much of the text, Kevin reflects Rufus’ behavior towards

Dana. This too suggests the recurring entanglement of past and present as products and reflections of one another.

Further, like Rufus, Kevin is an authoritative and stubborn character who often makes demands of Dana. When Dana recounts her marriage to Kevin at the start of the section aptly titled “The Fight,” the reader finds that Kevin at one time asked her to type his manuscripts, “I’d done it the first time, grudgingly, not telling him how much I hated typing... The second time he asked, though, I told him, and I refused. He was annoyed. The third time when I refused again, he was angry. He said if I couldn’t do him a little favor when he asked, I could leave. So I went home” (Butler 109). In a parallel, or rather, reflected scene, Rufus asks Dana to write his letters for him. After they trade threats back and forth, Dana has no choice but to agree, but not before Butler alludes to Dana’s conversation with Kevin. Dana says, “You’ll never know how hard I worked in my own time to avoid doing jobs like this” (Butler 226). In 1976, Dana has the skills to opt out of transcribing and the agency to refuse Kevin, two liberties she is not allowed on the plantation. Regardless, in both scenes her literacy, something so sought after among slaves in the antebellum South, is demanded by Kevin and Rufus, respectively, and in both the past and the present her resistance is met with hostility and entitlement. Though Kevin may fight his racial prejudice and male superiority complex, he expects Dana to give much of herself to him and gets bothered when she practices her agency. Thus, here we see a moment of unlearned oppressive tendencies. Scholar, teacher, and social worker Joy DeGruy addresses these tendencies directly in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: America's legacy of enduring injury and healing*, published in 2005. In this book, Dr. DeGruy writes about behavioral norms in contemporary Black communities that perhaps arise from centuries of oppression. She also considers what the effects of slavery are on White folks, citing unlearned oppressive habits. According to Dr. DeGruy, the symptoms of *Post Traumatic Slave*

*Syndrome*, or *PTSS*, include “transgenerational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression” (70). Though as a White man Kevin is not suffering from *PTSS*, he is affected by the legacy slavery and persistent racism, and clearly has yet to unlearn his expectation of Dana to perform labor at his command. Through DeGruy’s psychological lens, the reader can understand Kevin’s behavior beyond Butler’s sub textual critique of heteronormativity and sexism, encountering it as an extension of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, as well. Yet, even before Dana’s first trip to the past, Kevin’s reflection of Rufus in the novel is foreshadowed as Kevin and Dana sort books in their new shared home. Without any provocation, other than a comment about his tendency to get ideas while busy, Kevin gives Dana a look that “wasn’t as malevolent as it seemed,” for according to Dana, “he had the kind of pale, almost colorless eyes that made him seem distant and angry whether he was or not” (13). Nearly two-thirds of the book later, Dana describes Kevin upon his return to the present and says

the expression on his face was like something I’d seen, something I was used to seeing on Tom Weylin. Something closed and ugly... He gave me what almost seemed to be a look of hatred. (Butler 194-95)

In this moment Dana’s initial worry is partially realized, for when he first accompanies her to the past she says “a place like this would endanger him in a way I didn’t want to talk to him about. If he was stranded here for years, some part of this place would rub off on him” and after Kevin’s return she states that “he had changed - in five years he couldn’t help changing” (Butler 77, 196). In this example, the similarities between Kevin and the Weylin genealogy is there to begin with in the pale eyes and cold stares, but the influence of the antebellum South on Kevin is undeniable and he is not just a reflection, but also a product of the past.

Here again DeGruy’s research on the effects of 400 years of a master-slave relationship further illuminates Kevin’s actions.

Upon second reading, there is another moment of foreshadow when Kevin gives Dana a wooden ruler and demands she practice on him. “I untied the cord of the canvas bag and got up, discovering sore muscles as I moved. I limped over to him... and in a sudden slashing motion, drew the ruler across his abdomen” (Butler 47). Though it is an intimate moment, it is tainted by foreshadow for in the climactic scene of the story Dana sinks the knife “into [Rufus’s] side” and brings “it down again into his back” (Butler 260).

Another similarity between Dana’s relationships with Kevin and Rufus is the trust she puts in both of them. For the majority of the text, Dana is assured that she and Rufus have a mutual agreement regarding one another’s boundaries. As Rufus repeatedly breaches that trust, Dana finds ways to understand his actions, and towards the end of the novel tells Carrie that “somehow, I always seem to forgive him for what he does to me” (Butler 224). Though not as extreme, the physical relationship between Dana and Kevin is akin to Dana’s physical relationship with Rufus, for as she must reassert rules with Rufus, she must do the same with Kevin. For example, in the opening chapter, after Dana has returned from her momentary visit to the river, Kevin characteristically *demands* to know what happened. When Dana cannot express it in words, (another echo of Douglass and a trope of slave narratives), Kevin grabs her by the shoulders and does not let her go until she explicitly states he is hurting her. Almost immediately afterwards Dana says “I folded forward, hugging myself, trying to be still. The threat was gone, but it was all I could do to keep my teeth from chattering” (Butler 15). Though Dana seems to refer to her experience with Rufus, I would argue the ambiguity is hardly unintentional. Though Kevin was not trying to hurt Dana, he did, much the same way Rufus repeatedly does over the course of his life.

It is also not without consequence that those in the antebellum South assume Dana and Rufus sleep together, just as in the modern-day “slave-market,” the temp-agency, where Dana and Kevin meet, Buz insinuates a covert love affair long before anything physical happens between them. In fact, in the middle of the novel, Alice asks Dana if she would go to Rufus if he asked for her. When Dana replies “no,” Alice asks, “even though he’s just like your husband?” (Butler 168). Dana refuses to fully acknowledge their similarities but in the present day Dana’s cousin suggests that Kevin has been abusive, and again the Rufus’s abuse is misunderstood as Kevin’s.

By the end of the novel, Dana embodies the melding of the past and the present. Though Dana kills Rufus before he is able to penetrate her, his attack does end in a kind of rape, as his grip *seizes* her *unwilling* arm into the past. As Dana puts it,

something harder and stronger than Rufus’s hand clamped down on my arm, squeezing it, stiffening it, pressing into it- painlessly, at first- melting into it, meshing with it as though somehow my arm were being absorbed into something. (Butler 260-261)

This is the most literal moment of the past absorbing Dana. She recalls

I was back at home - in my own house, in my own time. But I was still caught somehow, joined to the wall as though my arm were growing out of it -or growing into it... my left arm had become a part of the wall. (Butler 261)

The significance of this amputation is perhaps best understood through the lens of Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters*, in which she writes “the ghost or the apparition is one form by which something is lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes” (Gordon 8). Indeed, in the prologue Dana explains “I felt as though I had another hand... Somehow, I had to see to be

able to accept what I knew was so” (Butler 10). In other words, Dana had to see what was not there, to understand any kind of truth about her experiences in the past and her injured body in the present. The site of amputation is a site of vacancy, and yet it is the most solid piece of evidence Dana has. She can feel her arm, but she cannot see it; it has become a phantom. Further, in the epilogue as she and Kevin search through newspapers and legal records, Dana is far less assured of what she knows. Dana questions why she seeks these artifacts and though Kevin suggests she wants “to touch solid evidence that those people existed,” the evidence falls short and the book ends without resolution (Butler 264). However, I would argue the true resolution of the novel comes by reading the prologue after the epilogue, for it is in the prologue that the evidence of her arm’s absence allows Dana to both acknowledge what she “knew was so” and to admit what she does not. In the final paragraph of the prologue Kevin says the cops wanted to know how such a thing could happen and his response is that he does not know. If the prologue is treated as the resolution of the novel Dana’s final words are then “neither do I” (Butler 11). I have no trouble reading the prologue as the intended resolution to this novel, as it further supports my interpretation that the entire book is ripe with literal and allegorical representations of the past producing and reflecting the present and the present producing and reflecting the past. This is further supported by Dana’s description of her arm growing into and yet also out of the wall. There is no beginning and there is no end. Thus, in a book that repeatedly dismantles the notion of a linear story, it makes complete sense that the book starts with resolution and ends with a question.

Albeit paradoxically, Butler’s novel continually calls into question the validity of written history to accurately get to truth. Dana’s literacy offers her little help in the 1800s and her knowledge of the Antebellum South from history books does not protect her. As Robertson suggests, Dana’s increasing embodiment of her

family history via “time travel suggests that it is only through bodily experience that Dana can come to truly know slavery” (244). In the final scene when she tries to “touch solid evidence,” but can only know it all happened by the absence of her phantom arm, Sherryl Vint responds that Butler “reminds us that there is more to truth and sanity that what survives in the official historical record” (251). Similarly, DeGruy writes that “Where facts are pieces of information, truth is the whole story. Facts can be used to mislead as well as to enlighten” (24). Thus, the facts of Dana’s story may not seem believable, but the reader has come to understand the logic of her time traveling and the figurative and literal trauma she incurs while away and upon return. Further, Dana’s mode of *knowing* relies on generic disruption that offers its own commentary on the limitations of form. For example, Fligel argues that Butler uses the rhetorical tropes of speculative fiction and slave narratives to critique genre conventions, ultimately “introducing a significant ambivalence toward literary representation” (228). Dana must embody her history by ultimately acknowledging the embodied absence of her amputated arm.

Butler’s enterprise in *Kindred* is one that requires the reader to acknowledge that, given the trauma of slavery, the past and the present are inextricably linked. As Dana’s effort to ensure Hagar’s birth produces the past, Dana’s experiences as a slave and Kevin’s experience as slave-master (to his own wife) produce the present. But even without the preservation of Dana’s genealogy and the material changes in her and Kevin’s characters, the past and present still reflect one another. This production and reflection is evident in the rules of Dana’s time travel that allow the sharing of material objects and physical wounds across time and space. It is evident in the glaring similarities between Rufus and Kevin and their relationships with Dana. And it is evident in

Dana’s phantom arm. By the end of the novel, (whether one reads the epilogue as the end or the prologue as the end as I suggested), Dana is haunted. In the words of Gordon, “haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition” (Gordon 8).

I believe, and I think Butler would agree, that Dana’s transformative recognition is the goal of recovering amputated genealogies (genealogies that exist but have been hidden from view). In other words, before the story begins Dana is haunted by the past in the politics of her relationship with Kevin, in her family’s bible and the unfamiliar names of her ancestors, and the existing racism in a present-day 1976 society comfortable with the white liberal fantasy of a post-racial society (as alluded to in the novel on page 150 when Alice says that Kevin “couldn’t tell the difference ‘tween black and white”). However, these hauntings draw Dana into the past where she comes to *recognize* slavery, though she cannot ever truly *know* it. The closest Dana can get to *knowing* this past is through embodiment of the violence and trauma of chattel slavery that lingers in the present day. Through the scholarship of folks like Bould, DeGruy, Fligel, Gordon, Robertson, and Vint, *Kindred* readers can come to name the healing powers of Butler’s convention-breaking text through its focus on embodied history, recognized trauma, and the continual effort to recover what has been amputated from written histories.

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