

2-8-2019

The Journey of Return: Reviving the Past to Redefine the Present

Nouf A. Arige
CUNY College of Staten Island

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/si_pubs

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Arige, Nouf A., "The Journey of Return: Reviving the Past to Redefine the Present" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/si_pubs/158

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Staten Island at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

The Journey Of Return:

Reviving the Past to Redefine the Present

Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is a Neo-Slave narrative that interrogates the historical memory of slavery through Dana's character, a modern, African American woman who appears to be unacquainted with her ancestors' past. Through the element of time travel, Dana is forced to face the atrocities of the past and then struggles to guarantee her own survival from enslavement. Butler portrays Dana as a heroic figure whose ability to vanish into time and space fails to protect her from the shortcomings of the past and its cruelty, including the whippings, beatings and rape attempts, which she miraculously survives. However, Dana is intensely bruised from these occurrences which take place at the hands of white figures in the novel. The patrollers and Rufus's father represent those who attack Dana. Therefore, when she is forcibly relocated to 1800's Maryland, she begins to witness and suffer from the memory of slavery. Somehow, her modern life in 1970's California and her interracial marriage to a white man named Kevin made her disregard the discrepancy between her own past and her present daily life, circumstances that made it easier for her to accept her own reality with no regard to her skin color.

Through the utilization of the time travel literary device, Butler sheds light on a neglected memory, not only for Dana, but also for other African Americans who have forgotten or denied their own past suffering, and that of their ancestors. Dana's trips to the past catapult her into the slavery era, thus making her realize that mingling with white people had a price. Through this lens, the memory of the past transforms Dana and Kevin's present realities, redefines Dana's

African American identity and recreates an African American cultural memory that is filled with the possibilities of healing from trauma.

Despite some literary critics' acknowledgment of *Kindred* as a model of science fiction literature, Octavia Butler refused to categorize it as such. Instead, she defined the novel as "fantasy" (Randall 495). Butler continued to support her literary vision by saying "With *Kindred* there's absolutely no science involved. Not even the time travel . . . Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from" (Randall 496). The author's use of the time travel element allows the reader to meditate on its importance in telling the story and exposing the horrors of slavery in 1815. Time travel serves to help Dana re-live and re-experience her ancestors' memory of slavery in order to understand their neglected suffering and become conscious of this forgotten heritage. However, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy contradicted Butler in her allegation and affirmed that the novel consists of two elements, "science fiction, because it apparently employs time travel, and historical novel, because it is predominantly set in Antebellum Maryland" (135-136). Butler and Rushdy's classifications of *Kindred* are conflicting because Butler believes that time travel is only an imagined activity, one that she utilized to refer to the past. However, Rushdy claims her writing to be a type of fiction that involves science. Here, the transformation through time and space revives past memories and later changes the characters' present lives. In other words, Butler uses time travel as a memory device while Rushdy perceives the scientific usage of time travel as a means of historical change that needs to be acknowledged despite its non-palpable existence.

Butler's creation of *Kindred* is a historical resuscitation of the past because it exposes a unique form of cultural memory that is continuously lived by the protagonist through her sudden leaps to and from the past. As Lisa Yaszek noted, "As Butler suggests here, one of the goals of *Kindred* is to represent historical memory in a way that acknowledges the impact of slavery not just on isolated individuals, but on entire families and networks of kin" (1057). Butler's aim for detailing the slave memory originated from her innate desire to illustrate the unique interaction between history and memory. This correlation creates a cultural recollection of events that includes the effects on individual African Americans and their everlasting legacy of trauma. The resultant scars on African American people are distinguished by a struggle to speak, one that is buttressed by pain.

Moreover, Butler's profound personal experiences contributed to shaping and creating this narrative, which aims at drawing attention to the neglected facts within American history. In an interview with Butler, she spoke about the reasons behind writing *Kindred*, "My mother did domestic work and I was around sometimes when people talked about her as if she were not there, and I got to watch her going in back doors and generally being treated in a way that made me . . . I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she did" (Randall 496). The insignificance that her mother experienced as a black woman, a treatment that stripped her of her humanity, led Butler to invent this revolutionary piece of literature and transmit her readers to a history that was abandoned. She continued:

I think one of the reasons I wrote *Kindred* was to resolve my feelings,
because after all, I ate because of what she did . . . *Kindred* was a kind of reaction

to some of the things going on during the sixties when people were ashamed of, or more strongly, angry with their parents for not having improved things faster, and I wanted to take a person from today and send that person back to slavery (Randall 496).

Through relocating Dana to bear witness to the horrors of slavery, Butler delivered a new understanding of how the present is furnished with ultimate simplicity, yet it continues to blind people from investigating the past or the truth behind such a delightful present. Additionally, she recreated a form of memory that is molded into the concept of history. These elements have the power to alter the present and dictate a new understanding of the significant role that history plays in recording a transformative memory for individuals and for collective societies. For example, Butler details the environment where African Americans were overpowered, beaten and raped, demonstrating the control that white slave owners had. Then, Dana and Kevin are forced to directly experience the torture slaves endured. Hence, they are no longer able to resume their normal lives.

Dana's liberation from this painful memory of slavery is unattainable. This situation continues to haunt her present; thus, it lays down its darkness upon her. In her first and second trips to the past, Dana embraces the identity of an intruder who is trying to mend and protect someone who is alien to her, Rufus. However, as Dana's trips reoccur, her identity as a modern black woman is no more threatened by race, social class or gender. She begins to adjust to the fact that she is a slave and as if the Weylin plantation has become more of a home to her than her own. However, Maryann Hirsch attested to an opposite opinion that "[Dana] resolutely embraces

the identity of the 'stranger' rather than the returnee" (2). Hirsch characterized Dana as a stranger because she has no choice in her relocation to the past. She is forced into a situation, just as African Americans were taken from their homes and transported to America. They had no choice in their relocation. Despite my belief that Dana's absence from the historical scene is uncontrollable and that her forcible return to her past through time travel is governed by Butler's narrative, I agree with Hirsch's perception of Dana's detachment. Hirsch might have perceived Dana as a stranger in relation to her new unfamiliarity with the present, which became as historically alien as the past. Dana laments her reality by saying: "Today and yesterday didn't mesh. I felt almost as strange as I had after my first trip back to Rufus - caught between his home and mine (Butler 115). The discrepancy between the past and the present in time and distance continue to label Dana as an outsider despite her recurrent trips to the past.

Hirsch claimed that Dana experienced a dual estrangement, one from her present and one from the history of her ancestors. However, I view Dana's existence in the past from an alternate perspective. Dana begins her trips to the past as a stranger to her ancestral history and to her identity as an African American woman, but as these trips become inevitable, she ends up being a returnee to yesterday. This distinct time is filled with an unspeakable pain and dehumanization. "I had been home for eight days when the dizziness finally came again . . . I went to Rufus's time fully clothed . . . I arrived on my knees because of the dizziness" (Butler 117). As a result, Dana unwillingly and subconsciously becomes strangled with an ancient historical slot, not out of curiosity to seek new beginnings or to be more enslaved, but to claim freedom for herself.

During Dana's first encounter in the past, she is treated as a runaway slave. She is nearly raped by one of the patrollers, whose common practice is to torture black people. She describes the horror of that moment, "I had never been beaten that way before" (Butler 42). Being determined to defend herself, she survives the rape. She wakes up the next day lying on her own bed in present day California "bloody and dirty, but safe, safe"(43). The recurrent usage of the word 'safe' carries a certain delight and gratitude for the gift of life that Dana was granted. After such a horrible encounter, it seems that safety is regarded to be impossible amongst these insane events, those beginning with time travel and ending with daily confrontations in the past.

In another encounter with the horrors of slavery, Dana narrates, "I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies . . . 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" (Butler 36). Dana battles between the austere reality of the past and the hollow present of 1976, which offers her and her husband an idealistic racial equality that had a price of blood and dignity from her ancestors. Every return to the past reconstructs a more visual and vivid memory for Dana when she realizes that the people whom she keeps revisiting are her ancestors and relatives (Butler 37). This acute realization indicates Dana's ultimate clash between her false, meaningless present and the bitter past. Between these two, she becomes torn, struggles to maintain sanity and constantly seeks reasons and answers behind the neglect and the loss of her African American heritage and identity.

On her third compulsory trip to the past, her husband Kevin accompanies her. Surprisingly, she expresses disappointment and fear for him through this monologue: "But I

didn't want him here. I didn't want this place to touch him except through me" (Butler 59). However, as time progresses, she is grateful that he is there to protect her if danger should arise, and this was due to the unpredictability of the past and its inhabitants. The third trip was a turning point for Dana and Kevin because they astonishingly acclimatized themselves to that odd environment of slaves and being among slaveholders. As Dana notes, "Kevin and I became more a part of the household, familiar, accepted, accepting" (Butler 97). Dana is astonished by the familiarity and ease that she and her husband are undergoing, despite that this outdated era of enslavement carries racial and moral degradation in its layers.

Within the slavery institution, humans were treated as prey that should be conquered. This racial demotion of African Americans and the abusive treatment they experienced based on their skin color occurs earlier in Butler's narrative. At this point, she indicates that slaves are being sold through white owners. Her narrative aims at highlighting the occurrence of the slave trade at that time, which magnified the possibilities of racial discrimination and widened the scope of enslavement. Dana is astonished by the ease at which Kevin and she adjust to this unjust situation. Marianne Hirsch offered a justification for this reaction, "The paradox of captivity and enslavement is both its remoteness . . . and its proximity, less because of what's transmitted across generations in terms of memory than in the forms of structural violence and dispossession that continue to make that history pertinent to the present" (110-111). According to Hirsch, the connection between history and the present is ongoing because of the continuity of brutality against blacks and the deprivation of basic rights. This view essentially combines the present and the past into one time period.

Furthermore, when Butler uproots Dana from her California home, she witnesses a historical segment of slavery. This literary method documents the memory of the African Americans' plight, offering vivid details of the horrors slaves had to suffer. Butler thereby attempts to provide an opportunity to restore or heal a forgotten African American culture. As Hirsch noted in her investigation of Saidiya Hartman's novel *Lose Your Mother*, "Hartman is impelled not by a desire to recover a lost homeland but to witness, record, and repair a history of injury through which lives are undone and humans are transformed into commodities"(2). In view of this, there exists a definite contrast between Hartman and Butler's narratives because their tools in tracing the African American history and highlighting the collective struggles of the African Diaspora were entirely different.

The differences in Hartman and Butler's narrations do not diminish the extent of their courage to tell a painful story. Both were successful in transmitting the truth of the African American legacy without any traces of shame or regret. Hartman conducted a personal or individual journey of discovery about one of the slave trade routes in Ghana. While doing so, she documented some original anecdotes of slavery that had previously been fragmented without using exterior tools or influences. However, Dana was compelled through Butler's narrative to return to her past under the influence of a mysterious force of time travel to witness her ancestral history that is devoid of any civility or humane acts. Butler's narrative affirms that Dana's past must influence her present in such a brutal way so she can feel and experience the weight of the memory.

Literary critic Rushdy continued, “Dana’s act of memory, however, is more than a framing device for narrating her story. Her memory is a performance of history, a performance of such potency that it incorporates her into the past, leaving ‘no distance at all’ between her and the remembered events” (137-38). Dana experiences a limbo of time and place that requires sanity and faith. Her displacement also necessitates a deeper motivation to continue along this path of fluctuation between the agonizing past and the insecure present. The notion of being enslaved and exposed to beatings and whippings in the 1800’s at the hands of white superiors have marked Dana and forced her to forget that she was a free independent woman with indisputable rights. Hence, Butler enslaves her protagonist into time and space, forcing Dana to recover the untold history. Through this transportation, Dana lives the agonizing memory of her relatives’ racial discrimination, one that continued for decades. She is additionally given the opportunity to bear witness to these historical atrocities in American history, allowing her to convey the details in the present day.

Dana was propelled to a historical era where she made use of her literacy as a means to resist. This tool also helped her free some slaves from the darkness of their minds. Her aim was to achieve a sense of belonging by those in that time period, and possibly make a difference in the slaves’ lives. “Dana vows to make the best of her situation by teaching the slave children around her to read and write-and to run for freedom as soon as they can” (Butler 98). As Lisa Yaszek also illustrated, “Dana tries to make sense of her new world by adopting the “literacy-identity-freedom” paradigm typically associated with the male oriented slave narratives” (1060). Dana and Kevin are two modern people who undergo a major relocation and live a history that

failed to be properly transmitted, especially by Dana's living relatives. Their modernity and cultural background of 1976 should have conflicted with the era of enslavement. However, they adjust to this past environment by making use of their knowledge acquired in the present.

Nevertheless, Dana's eventual sense of worth and purpose is still imperiled by the confines of slavery in which she lived. In the past, she attempts to awaken African Americans to their dire situation with minimal success. Thus, the results she obtained failed to equate her expectations.

A forced adjustment was not the only hurdle that Dana and Kevin had to overcome. There were deeper concerns that plagued Dana's mind, ones that she had no means to control. Dana conveys her inner thoughts to the reader through this monologue: "Free speech and press hadn't done too well in the Antebellum South, Kevin wouldn't do too well either. The place, the time would either kill him outright or mark him somehow. I didn't like either possibility" (Butler 77). She feared that her husband would lose his own identity. Kevin, as a modern white man, was not exposed to a similar cultural heritage and he was not psychologically prepared to experience such a perilous time. Subsequently, Dana reconsiders her own thoughts and feelings by noting, "I began to realize why Kevin and I had fitted so easily into this time. We weren't really in. We were observers watching a show. We were watching history happen around us. And we were actors" (Butler 98). This realization made Dana's adjustment to the facts of history more comforting and her role as an eyewitness more credible.

Dana's fear of being scarred is understandable. However, it is interpreted by the literary critic Marc Steinberg as: "By assuming the form of the slave narrative and by shifting its focus from past to present to past, Butler's novel stresses the ways in which present-day African

Americans might suffer from the markings of the past” (468). Dana has physically and psychologically suffered from an uncontrollable transmission to this time in history. One of Dana’s confrontations with the memory of slavery proved agonizing as she attempted to escape while under Rufus’s scrutiny. Her main aim is to resist the oppressive methods of being whipped or humiliated again. However, her ancestor Rufus places her into captivity and this strips Dana of any means to fight back.

Dana additionally suffers from a desperate need for salvation due to this era’s predation and extreme subjugation of humans. In one of her recurrent monologues, she notes, “I was totally beyond reasoning. I had never in my life wanted so desperately to kill another human being” (Butler 176). The idea of being beaten once again at Weylin’s hands infuriated her, resulting in a state of erraticism. Despite her anger and rejection of such oppression and being overpowered, she was unable to defend herself against degradation; instead, she surrendered and bowed to mortification. Dana loses her ability to fight due to the constant physical abuse she underwent and the resultant emotional trauma that stripped her of any means to conquer these attacks. This situation ultimately eradicated her perseverance levels. The white oppressors compelled Dana to sacrifice her individual and human dignity through her acceptance to the humiliation and the pure acts of tyranny and repression. Dana renounced her rights as a modern African American woman and embraced the reality of an African slave whose salvation and freedom is never claimed. In other words, Dana accepted the notion of being a fighter for a lost cause and decided to retain the memory instead of changing it.

Dana's submission to the abusive treatment at the hands of white owners teaches her a painful lesson, one often heard from our teachers in school. History repeats itself and with slavery, the acts of oppression are difficult to erase by any form of denial, opposition or tolerance. Literary critic Christine Levecq interpreted Dana's eventual acceptance to the reality of this historical oppression and its possible reoccurrence, "[Dana] does learn from her experience, but what she learns is that oppression engenders recurring, and hard to disentangle, forms of resistance and accommodation" (534). In other words, as Dana experiences the complexity of oppression that slaves underwent, her existence as an African American survivor becomes redefined.

Dana's encounters with the past intensify her misery and elevate her sense of compassion and moral responsibility towards her people, whose need for survival and freedom were historically denied. Dana describes one of her bitter whipping instances, "He beat me until I swung back and forth by my wrists, half-crazy with pain, unable to find my footing, unable to stand the pressure of hanging, unable to get away from the steady slashing blows" (Butler 176). Dana endured this same punishment for a second time; however, it was Tom Weylin, Rufus's father, who delivered the forceful blows. When she tries to escape to find her husband, she directly experiences the consequences of such an action. Understandably, the circumstances of the past negatively affected Dana, but this is coupled with a desire to stay. Dana. Levecq stated, "History assaults her physically, marking her with indelible scars" (530). Despite this fact, Dana perceives the 1800's as her real home. Although this may be true, Dana still compares the present reality to the past. She notes:

I felt as though I were losing my place here in my own time. Rufus's time was a sharper, stronger reality. The work was harder, the smells and tastes were stronger, the danger was greater, the pain was worse . . . Rufus's time demanded things of me that had never been demanded before, and it could easily kill me if I didn't meet its demands. That was a stark, powerful reality that the gentle conveniences and luxuries of this house, of now, could not touch (Butler 191).

Surprisingly, whenever Dana returns to the present, she fits in perfectly despite the traces of the past that keep holding on to her. The reasons behind her quick adjustment to the present are due to her unconscious refusal of her ancestors' history and her eagerness to return to her modern world, where she enjoys her basic rights of dignity, individual freedom and humanity. Evidently, Dana's effortless adjustment to the past, as well as to the present, still seems ambiguous. As Richmond Alasdair stated, "Backward time-travel still seems irrational, since a traveller can only be incorporated into the warp and weft of an already determinate past" (315). Although Dana's transformations through time are illogical, Dana lacks the mental clarity or sound judgment in deciding how to handle her experiences. Explanations for this vary, but the evidence indicates that the time element always betrays Dana in her absorption of the events that abruptly occur. In comparison, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy wrote about a similar context, "Home," in *Kindred*, is more than a place; it signifies the liminal site where one can lose or reclaim a historically-defined modern self" (140). In Dana's case, this might be true, since her historical identity has already been determined by her ancestor's birth, Hagar. She has secured Dana's

existence, which in turn liberated her from the confines of slavery and paved the way towards a present that is filled with possibilities and pleasant opportunities of love and tolerance.

Kevin's interracial marriage to Dana in present day California refutes all racial biases and erases every attempt to revive that bitter history of the African Americans enslavement at the hands of white supremacy. Their union establishes the possibility of a mutual acceptance and tolerance between blacks and whites. It also reconstructs an agreement to perceive their differences in race and skin color as an opportunity towards a demographic and cultural understanding. Due to Kevin's modernity and unawareness of Dana's historical heritage, his physical confinement in the Antebellum South for five years was unsettling because it created an immense gap between the present and the past. When Kevin gets the chance to go back to his present day life in 1976, the adjustment to his daily routine, such as turning knobs on the television set or fumbling with his typewriter were traumatic, essentially inviting a sense of pity. Kevin's confusion about his present is best described by Alasdair, "The sanctity of the past is not threatened, and uncertainty transfers to which branch you inhabit" (315). In other words, the history of the 1800's was not altered by Dana and Kevin's trips; instead, history changed them. In this respect, the atrocities they experienced left them questioning their current lives. Although we would expect them to return to the present with a feeling of relief, they conversely feel that their home in 1976 fails to be as inviting as it had once been.

History transformed Dana and Kevin in dramatic ways. It altered their perceptions of history and its correlation to slavery. Revisiting this era also impels them to reassess their purpose in life and their relationship. History urged them to evaluate their current understanding

of the present through the erasure of certain misconceptions about African Americans' history. It additionally supplied them with a stark truth. The occurrence of slavery was not a myth, but a historical fact that was neglected instead of being properly addressed. Afterwards, Dana's attempts to soothe Kevin's bewilderment in the present is fueled by her innate hope that he will understand the painful past in ways that will not jeopardize the future of their relationship. She tells him, "Kevin, you can't come back all at once any more than you can leave all at once. It takes time. After a while, though, things will fall into place" (Butler 194). Dana attempts to ease Kevin's return to the present by explaining how his memory of the horrors he encountered will require time and a significant readjustment.

Kevin has difficulty dealing with the present, which is understandable due to the long period of time he spent in the era of ignorance, along with the exhausting exposure to the enslavement of the body and mind. His psychological struggle, which prevented his acclimatization to his present, was due to witnessing one of the most horrifying scenes that he considered to be a stain on American History. The white population treated African Americans unjustly and the overall behavior failed to indicate any sense of humanity. For example, he "saw a woman die[s] in childbirth once" (Butler 191). The woman's death did not occur due to poor medical care, but to the practice of oppression. Kevin's description of this woman's childbirth scarred him and left him psychologically impaired to the degree that he lost faith in his present, crippling his ability to reconnect with Dana and his reality. He describes "This woman's master strung her up by her wrists and beat her until the baby came out of her-dropped into the ground" (Butler 191). This barbarity left Kevin stupefied with anger, bitterness and uncertainty.

Kevin's final transmission to 1976, where ideologies have progressed and the white suppression of blacks does not exist damaged Kevin's sense of place and time. It also instilled the seeds of doubt concerning his attachment to his present day California or to the era of slavery in the Antebellum South. Rushdy continued to explain, "Home" becomes a variously significant term and concept. For Dana, it marks the place between present relations with Kevin and past relations with Rufus. For Kevin, it marks the places where he and Dana can communicate" (140). The issue of what is 'real' to Kevin and Dana has been veiled with obscurity. This ambiguity is due to the recurrence of the excursions to the past, which became inevitable for Dana until she was able to kill Rufus. This opportunity only presented itself once she was certain of the birth of the one woman who guaranteed her own birth. As for Kevin, the length of time he spent in that era of history made him lose his sense of place, time and belonging to his own present day. Thus, his experience created a psychological fluctuation between truth and imagination.

Dana and Kevin's mental distortion led to an unsuccessful recovery. This was a result of the extensive trauma they witnessed and the weight of memory they had to endure and accept as their legacy. The attempt to write those painful experiences down on paper becomes futile as Kevin and Dana's literacy loses its meaning and its influence on their present time. Their inability to express themselves through writing in the present is rooted in the past, a time when their literacy was viewed as a threat and as an act of treason against the white owners' rules for maintaining slaves. With the aim of freeing slaves from ignorance and helping them understand their human rights, Dana and Kevin attempted to teach some slaves how to read and write. Nevertheless, their efforts were doomed. Dana was severely punished by a whipping and an

intense beating because she was considered a free slave whose crime was breaching the law set by whites. This denied the offering of any kind of education to slaves, while Kevin was saved by his skin color as a superior white. Butler clarified the threat that education poses, “[It is] dangerous to educate slaves, education made blacks dissatisfied with slavery” (236). The white owners feared an educated slave would become enlightened and aware of their basic rights to individual freedom and human dignity. Moreover, such knowledge would deprive superior whites from their unrivaled practice of supremacy and oppression. .

Dana’s attempt to teach a slave how to read in the 1800’s resulted in her being whipped to the point of vomiting, which demonstrates the whites’ extreme disdain and complete intolerance towards educated slaves. When Dana returns to Los Angeles, she tries to recover these incidents by writing, but her memory refuses to comply. She describes this attempt by saying, “Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it” (Butler 116). Dana’s uncertainty of her ability to record her memories of slavery in the present reflects the traumatic aftermath the past has left, making her feel insecure. Likewise, Kevin finds it impossible to write about his experiences in the past (Butler 196). Although writing was Kevin and Dana’s profession, both could not overcome the contrast of time; hence, they lost the ability to express themselves. It could be said that they had drowned in the muteness that era of the 1800’s prescribed. Rushdy stated, “Apparently writing cannot provide Dana or Kevin with the necessary medium for self-recovery or recovery of home” (141). This insight supports the notion that Kevin and Dana were not only struggling to use writing as a means for finding peace and recuperation, but they also struggled with the notion of ‘the real home.’ Their incapacity to

separate the past from the present or to address their insecurities on paper clearly details their suffering.

Towards the end of Butler's novel, Dana's killing of Rufus leaves her stranded between her past legacy and her present reality. This distinguishes 'home' as an unidentifiable landscape for Dana whose arm gets stuck in the past. The loss of Dana's arm indicates that she needed to be a part of her African American heritage and no matter how she tries to escape the horrors of this memory, she needs to acknowledge the truth of belonging to that familial history. Rushdy affirmed " [This] reinforces for her a sense of home and a sense of family" (141). Despite Dana's rejection of oppression, her ancestors' history is laden with violence and brutality, and this can be difficult for a modern woman to absorb. Yet, Dana needs to accept her family's history, understand its complexities and the bitter fact that the past could be considered 'Home.' However, in *Kindred*, the notions of family and home raise some serious concerns of belonging because the time frame that Dana and Kevin are trapped in plays a major role in defining what family and home actually are.

In the present, Kevin becomes Dana's only family member and is therefore an embodiment of home. Meanwhile, home takes another form of familial belonging for Dana. Her ancestral history comes into play when Dana's shocking oscillation between the past and the present begins to develop and forces her to witness, remember and play the role of a rebellious descendant. Lisa Majaj noted, "Family stories typically ground ethnic identification, and the popularized search for 'roots' is often articulated as 'remembering who you are' (105). Dana's remembrance of such a history is only administered by force. She was abruptly snatched from

her present life to witness and record her ancestral roots. Since she had never intended to search for past family members, it could be said that the past was thrust upon her in the same manner that the confines of slavery were cast upon her ancestors. As a result, Dana's memory of that history was absent and Butler's narrative and usage of time travel compelled her to experience the trauma of the past and the silence of the present.

The effects of this traumatic transmission from the past to the present and vice versa is best described by Hirsch when she brilliantly noted, "To be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation" (107). Dana and Kevin's inability to write fully translates the risky transmission to the past. Hirsch also explained this aspect, "These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present" (107). Dana and Kevin are unable to continue writing in the present, and this is due to an existential crisis of time, place and space that left them intellectually paralyzed. They can no longer express the horrors of that memory because it lingers in their present, distracting their consciousness and disturbing their willingness to forget and move forward.

Butler's powerful narrative, which reconstructs the past through the abrupt abandonment of the present, transforms Dana and Kevin into two anomalies whose traumatic experiences in the past have deviated them from the norms of their present daily life in 1976. Dana's bodily injuries begin with her exposure to the continued beatings and whippings at the hands of white oppressors and ends with the loss of her arm to the memory of slavery. The experience leaves her physically and psychologically scarred to the extent of losing her sense of identity, place and

time. Simultaneously, Kevin's prolonged stay in that era of slavery for five consecutive years had a cruel psychological impact, one that diminishes his sense of belonging.

It is worth noting that the dramatic changes in Dana and Kevin's characters, along with the alteration of their perceptions of history and memory are significant. Their transformations indicate how factual knowledge plays a major role in affecting one's ability to communicate weaknesses, fears and insecurities to others or even to themselves. Moreover, they engender an element of self-discovery, one in which Dana and Kevin experience and attempt to escape. However, the past continues to haunt their present and forces them to embrace its reality and the altering impact on their present day lives. Butler successfully investigates the horrors of slavery through time travel, and this necessitates an acknowledgment of the amalgamation between history and memory. The former lays the foundation of the cultural, social and political heritage, while the latter resides as an accumulation of historical records. Unfortunately, time tends to dilute details within our memory. Thus, Butler has revived an era that awakens the reader to the atrocities of the past and their influence on the present.

Furthermore, Butler reconstructed the African American identity, culture and heritage through a narrative that is laden with the peripheral memory of slavery in order to recreate a historical truth. In this respect, oppression and trauma can scar generations to come and still linger in the survivors' memory without hope of a full recovery. Consequently, Butler resuscitated the African American traumatic memory to define history and remove all traces of doubt concerning the African American historical suffering and to affirm the historical truth of white oppression against blacks.

Works Cited

- Hirsch, Marianne "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics today* 29:1 (Spring 2008):103-128
- Hirsch, Marianne and Miller, K. Nancy "*Rites of Return, Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*" (2011). Columbia University Press, New York, Chichester, West Sussex.
- Kenan, Randall "An interview with Octavia E. Butler." *Callaloo*, Vol.14. No.2 (Spring 1991). pp. 495-504. *JSTOR*. Accessed April 7, 2013
- Leveq, Christine " Power and Repetition: Philosophies of (literary) History in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*." *Contemporary Literature* XLI, 3 (2000): 526-549. *Academic search complete*.
- Majaj, Lisa Suhair. "*The politics of memory.*" *Memory and cultural politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic literatures*. Ed Amritjit Singh, Joseph Skerett, and Robert E.Hogan.Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996. 106-133.
- Richmond, Alasdair. "Time-Travel Fictions and Philosophy." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Oct. 2001).pp. 305-318. *JSTOR*. Accessed August 15, 2013.
- Rushdy, H. A. Ashraf. "Families of Orphans: Relation and Disrelation in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *College English*, Vol. 55, No 2 (Feb, 1993), pp.135-157. *JSTOR*. Accessed August 15, 2013.
- Steinberg, Marc. "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative." *African American Review*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (2004), pp. 467- 475.
- Yaszek, Lisa. "A Grim Fantasy": Remaking American History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*." *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2003). pp. 1053-1064.