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### The Personal is Historical: Slavery, Black Power and Resistance in Octavia Butler's Kindred

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## **The Personal is Historical: Slavery, Black Power and Resistance in Octavia Butler's *Kindred***

In 1968, Octavia Butler attended community college in Pasadena, where the spark that would become her 1979 novel *Kindred* was ignited. That year, Pasadena City College (PCC) offered its first-ever course in Black literature in which Butler remembers being introduced to “writers I'd never heard of and to a literature I knew almost nothing about and to words I'd never heard before” (Rowell and Butler 1997, 60). Butler remembers her last year at the college as “very strange, because we had assassinations for midterm and finals,” referring to the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy (60). Butler locates the origin of *Kindred* in a student's comment from this period:

I heard some remarks from a young man who was the same age I was but who had apparently never made the connection with what his parents did to keep him alive. He was still blaming them for their humility and their acceptance of disgusting behavior on the part of employers and other people. He said, "I'd like to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long. But I can't because I'd have to start with my own parents." When he said us he meant black people, and when he said old people he meant older black people. That was actually the germ of the idea for *Kindred* (1979). I've carried that comment with me for thirty years. He felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context of being necessary for not only their lives but his as well. (51)

In this moment, PCC became, for Butler, a microcosm for debates playing out on the national stage, as questions of resistance to oppression, violence, and the right to self-defense rose to prominence. Stokely Carmichael had invoked the words “Black Power” for the first time in 1966, the Watts

rebellion had erupted in nearby Los Angeles in 1965 and the Black Panther (BPP) was born a few hundred miles up the coast in Oakland, California in 1966. Butler remembers her years at PCC as a period in which “the black nationalist movement, the Black Power Movement, was really underway with young people”(51). Pasadena was home to Jonathan Jackson who would be slain in a 1970 shootout in a Marin County Courtroom trying to liberate his brother, George Jackson, a BPP member later killed at San Quentin State Prison (“Jonathan Jackson”). Students from PCC who were active in the Black Student Union, of which Butler was a member, played an important role in the formation of the Black Cultural Nationalist US organization founded by Ron “Maulana” Karenga (Brown and Carson 2005, 41–42). Here, like elsewhere in California, Black college students were frequently “at the forefront of radicals” (Murch 2010, 99). Born out of this moment, *Kindred* is a novel which enacts a literary encounter between Butler’s generation and the past as Butler transports her 1970s protagonist, Dana, back to the antebellum past where she is faced with life or death decisions regarding her ancestors that are only rhetorical to Butler’s classmate. *Kindred* is Butler’s attempt to resolve some of her own conflicted views on the politics of the period, or what she calls “some 1960s feelings” (Kenan 1991, 497).

That the political “germ” of *Kindred* is located in Butler’s experience of the late 1960s is frequently noted by scholars, but few engage directly with Butler’s contribution to political debates that erupted within the civil rights and Black Power movements in that turbulent year and intensified over the subsequent decade. Kelley Wagers (2009) refers to Butler’s discussion of the “germ” of *Kindred* while omitting any reference to the politics of Black Nationalism while Lisa Yaszek (2003) reads it as a “critique [of] the masculinist figure of the heroic loner,” with no discussion of how the politics of the Black Power movement might relate to the “masculinist narratives of African-American history” against which she reads Butler’s novel. This tendency to erase the political context of 1968 from readings of *Kindred* is striking. While much scholarship has focused on “the

novel's jarring juxtaposition of the antebellum past with its 1970s present," Philip Miletic (2016) argues, the "present" invoked is "an atemporal" one, in which scholars such as Sarah Wood and Christine Levecq "only minimally, explain *what* in the literature and rhetoric of the 'contemporary scene' draws Butler's attention"(261). Wood gestures toward such a reading, arguing that "*Kindred* can be read as Butler's response to the ideological disparities that emerged within the black protest movements of the 1960s"(87); but, as Miletic observes, does not "detail those ideological disparities"(264). Seeking to fill this hole in scholarship, Miletic contextualizes *Kindred* in the political rhetoric of the 1960s and 70s and places Butler within a continuum of the "growing black female activism and literature of the 1970s" as evidenced by the publication of *The Black Woman* (1970) which included feminist critiques of Black Nationalism by Frances Beal and Toni Cade Bambara. The political interventions of Black feminists certainly reverberate within Butler's work, but this analysis would be enriched by a more nuanced exploration of gender politics within the Black Power movement, particularly within the BPP (See Farmer 2017; Phillips and LeBlanc-Ernest 2016; Spencer 2016). Similarly, Miletic's tendency to conflate the Black Arts and Black Power movements and his focus on the poetry of Amiri Baraka as the primary symbolic voice of these movements, precludes a more expansive exploration of political debates within the movement.

Prior to Miletic's 2016 article, the most sustained analysis of *Kindred's* relationship to the movements of the period comes from Ashraf Rushdy (2001) who reads *Kindred* as a palimpsest novel responding to the political moment of the 1970s. Rushdy argues that Butler rejects the emphasis on "purity" in cultural nationalist and New Left ideologies of the 1960s—even as she evinces sympathy for their militant radicalism. In focusing on continuities between ideas of purity in New Left and Black Power Movements, Rushdy tends to minimize the complexity of these debates, reading the novel primarily as a rejection of a "vulgar, compensatory nationalism"(Itabari Njeri, quoted in Rushdy 2001, 102).<sup>2</sup> The complexity of these debates is precisely, what I would argue is at stake in

*Kindred*. Drawing on work by Miletic, Rushdy and other critics who emphasize the feminist impulse in Butler's work,<sup>3</sup> I argue that Butler does not simply react to but engages with the political movements of this turbulent period to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of power, oppression, and resistance, insisting on finding continuities between the resistance of her generation and that of generations past. Rooting *Kindred* in the political debates of the Black Power movement, I argue that the novel invites contested readings, providing a multi-layered meditation on political questions that elude resolution.

At this historical juncture of 1968, the personal for Butler—as for much of her generation—was inextricably intertwined with the political. That Butler was in a class on Black literature at all was a result of student activism for Black studies which laid the foundation for the BPP.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Butler's recollection of this student's words frames this new militancy as a generational shift that, for Butler, is both familiar and intensely complicated, requiring an interrogation of history and the very meaning of resistance. If her classmate provided the spark, it is Butler's mother who provides the heart of the novel. Like many of her radicalized generation, Butler initially cannot understand her mother's failure to openly resist the racism she experiences on a daily basis. She explains:

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...I spent a lot of my childhood being ashamed of what she did, and 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 feeling 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. (Kenan 1991, 496)

The personal, for Butler, is not only political—but, crucially, it is historical. Confronted with the gap between her generation’s militancy and the perceived passivity of generations past, Butler, I argue, interrogates this divide and refutes contemporary ways of seeing the Black Power and Civil Rights movements in binary opposition. This is critical in the Californian context where an older generation of migrants from the South played a vital role in the burgeoning Black Power movement of the 1960s and 70s. Ignoring that history has, as historian Donna Murch argues, “artificially divided the larger black freedom struggle into discreet, binary terms set against one another by ideology and region” in such a way as to render “the political significance of California’s migrant diaspora largely invisible”(2010, 4). Butler’s novel implicitly rejects this vision of history, drawing on the author’s personal and familial history to provide a complex and nuanced history of resistance, survival and struggle.

Butler’s mother, also named Octavia, was part of the great migration from the South to the North and West, away from the horrors of Jim Crow. Born in 1914 in Louisiana, she spent her early years on a sugar plantation in conditions that weren’t “far removed from slavery, the only difference was they could leave, which eventually they did”(Kenan 1991, 496). California led western states as a destination for Southern migrants and Butler’s mother’s journey from Louisiana to Pasadena was part of a broader historical trend that contributed to the militancy and radicalism of the 1960s (Murch 2010). The Black Power movement in California was rooted in the experiences of migrants who fled Jim Crow only to find segregation and racism deeply entrenched legally, socially and culturally on the West Coast. As Terrance Roberts, one of the Little Rock Nine who moved to Pasadena after Little Rock high schools closed to prevent integration, explains, “the attitudes that people held in Pasadena were no different than the attitudes people held in Little Rock” (Poullisse and Painter 2013).

*Kindred* is a novel born out of dual interlocking histories—the history of Black student radicals who provided its political “germ,” and of Southern migrants like Butler’s mother for whom such radicalism seemed impractical if not dangerous—and yet, whose daily acts of resistance Butler seeks to narrativize and recover from invisibility. Written over the course of a decade which saw the birth and obliteration of the BPP and other radical movements, *Kindred* engages with political debates they inspired while also grappling with the cost of their demise. Thus, the central conflict in the novel is the tension between self-preservation, accommodation, resistance, violence and self-defense. *Kindred* is Butler’s meditation on vital debates within the Black Power movement—in the late 1960s and early 1970s: the right to self-defense in response to state-sanctioned violence, the possibility and limits of interracial solidarity and relationships, and strategic questions of collaboration and resistance in opposing existing power structures. Butler complicates contemporary debates about strategies of resistance, focusing on generational continuities rather than the generation gap of dominant historical narratives.

While Butler frequently eschews political readings of her work, *Kindred* is a notable exception.<sup>5</sup> Butler returns frequently, in interviews and speeches, to the story of the novel’s origins in the Black Power movement at Pasadena City College. With each iteration, Butler adds important details revealing her to be far more than a passive observer in this history. In one of the earliest published recollections of the encounter, Butler notes that she was member of “a black student union, along with this guy who had been interested in black history before it became fashionable” (Francis 2009, 21). This important detail—that she was a member of the same Black Student Union, debating “*along with* this guy” (emphasis added) is omitted from many discussions of the event. Indeed, Butler’s own political activism is rarely invoked in discussions of the novel at all—as she is most often portrayed apart from and in opposition to the Black Power movement. Positioning herself as a participant in this retelling, Butler also draws a parallel between this student’s “attitude

toward slavery” and the one she “held when [she] was thirteen,” reminding us that the distance in their political views may not be insurmountable (21). In later interviews, she refers to the student alternately as a “friend of mine,” “a classmate,” “our scholar” and the “best resource on black history”(182, 196). The image of a student leader who is a friend, a fellow activist, an admired scholar who belongs to a “we” of which Butler is a part, complicates readings of *Kindred* that focus solely on what Butler rejects in the politics of Black Power and Black Nationalism. In all versions of *Kindred*'s genesis, Butler draws attention to three key elements of the story that provide a political framework through which to read *Kindred*: the student in the anecdote roots the novel in the politics of Black Nationalism, his comments remind Butler of her own feelings about her mother and the unsung heroism of survival, and the incident compels her to meditate on the difference between knowing history and feeling it, as she seeks to move beyond a purely cerebral understanding to an embodied experience of the past—an approach to history that *Kindred* enacts on a literal level.

*Kindred*, I argue, presents a vision of history that is inherently traumatic: the past haunts the present as the protagonist, Dana, is literally drawn back and forth in time from 1970s Southern California to the antebellum South. If the slogan of second-wave feminism that “the personal is political” was meant to underscore the ways in which individual experiences of oppression were woven in to the political fabric of America; it was also a reminder that there were no individual solutions to collective problems. For Dana (and Butler), the personal is not only political but historical, rooted in a familial and national history that entangles the protagonist, reminding her that individual survival and resistance always has a collective and historic cost. To paraphrase Karl Marx (1852), the trauma of history “weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living” for Dana and her contemporaries as they struggle to learn from a history of resistance that has been silenced. Recovering and remembering that history and stressing the continuities between past and present is central to the political project of *Kindred*.

## Truth Stranger than Fiction

Drawing upon the traditional slave narrative and science fiction, Butler creates a new form: a variation on the neo-slave narrative (Rushdy 1999), or what she calls a “grim fantasy” that hovers between past and present. Set in 1976, the bicentennial of the declaration of independence, the novel tells the story of Dana, a Black woman writer who is married to a white man, Kevin, also a writer. Dana is drawn back into the antebellum past to save Rufus Weylin, whom she first encounters as a young “accident prone” boy. Rufus, we soon learn, will grow up to be a plantation owner who will rape Alice (Dana’s great-grandmother), a free Black woman whom Rufus later enslaves. Dana’s six trips back in time to pre-civil war Maryland provide a lens through which Butler explores issues raised by both the Black Power movement and unearths a long tradition of resistance, particularly among women, who have much to teach Dana about survival and strength. Thus, the novel comments on the present as much as the past.

Butler’s return to the slave past to understand the present reflects a broader shift in intellectual and political paradigms, occasioned by the rise of the New Left and Black Power movements which sought to rewrite history from the “bottom up” (Rushdy 1999, 32). Nonetheless, the form of the novel itself—which relies on the fantastical to unearth the historical—points to the difficulties of such a project. Just as Butler rejects binary depictions of the history of anti-racist resistance, she challenges attempts to order and define genre from the outset. The novel opens with Dana and Kevin attempting to categorize their books. While Kevin shelves the nonfiction in one bookcase, Dana shelves the fiction separately: “We had so many books, we had to try to keep them in some kind of order”(Butler 1988, 13). It is at this moment, as Dana and Kevin are attempting to separate fiction from nonfiction, fact from fantasy, that Dana’s own grim fantasy begins as she is

transported in time and space to antebellum Maryland. In this scene, Butler challenges the attempt to impose order on the narrative as *Kindred* itself straddles genres, drawing on historical experience while using fantasy to transport the narrator back and forth between the 1970s and the 1800s.

Dana's narrative, then, cannot be neatly shelved. This scene can be read as a rejoinder to Butler's 1968 classmate who "knew a *lot* more than I did about Black history [but] it was all cerebral"(Francis 2009, 182). Despite his "vast collection of facts," Butler observes, "he didn't feel it in his gut" (196, 21). This story repeated in multiple interviews provides a clear impetus for Butler's aesthetic choices, a genre-straddling experiment with form designed to make the reader *feel* history.

Time travel provides a vehicle through which the narrator can physically "witness" slavery and thereby assert her narrative authority—nonetheless, truth continues to be problematized and contested as the history of slavery eludes documentation and historical representation. As Lisa Long (2002, 477–78) points out, "Butler herself, in an interview with Sandra Govan, admits to tempering the 'harshness' of the 'real experiences' because the slave narratives proved such 'grim reading.'" That Dana and Kevin are both writers serves to further highlight the difficulty of narrativizing this history. It is their common interest in writing that brings Dana and Kevin together when they both work at "a casual labor agency" that "regulars called... the slave market"(Butler 1988, 52). When she first meets Kevin, he is about to "escape," having sold his first book. When asked about her own writing, she says "bitterly, 'What would a writer be doing working out of a slave market?'"(53). As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu notes, Dana's casual evocation of the image of "the slave market" to describe her working conditions in the present shows how far removed she is from the actual horrors of daily life in the antebellum South (1999, 118). Nonetheless, in explicitly thematizing the relationship between writing and slavery in the present, Butler points to the continuities between chattel slavery and modern wage slavery and institutionalized racism, particularly as they serve to stifle literacy, writing and creative labor. Butler drew on her own experience as a temporary worker

and struggling writer in the 1970s in ways that are palpable within the text (Francis 2009, 221). For Miletic, the question of literacy is crucial to the novel, as he reads Dana's struggle to write as a testament to the male-dominated canon of literature about slavery in the 1960s and 70s and an attempt to carve out space in literacy for all Black women (2016, 263). Miletic notes that both Kevin and Rufus ask her to be their secretaries, thus, appropriating her labor as a writer while insisting on their own narrative authority (271). Dana adamantly refuses to be Kevin's secretary, while in the antebellum South, refusing Rufus proves more difficult. This is also a poignantly autobiographical moment in the text as Butler's refusal to be a secretary and to limit her ambitions to those of her mother is a recurrent theme in interviews.

As an orphan, it is only Dana's never-explained physical return to the past that provides her with a connection to her antebellum ancestors. As a writer, Dana is both literally and artistically an orphan. That this unexplained fantastical form of time travel is her only means of reconstructing family history and laying claim to the political and artistic traditions of her ancestors makes Dana a fitting symbol of a new generation of African American women writers for whom fiction became a means of reclaiming a history and creative tradition too often silenced. If Butler's use of time travel allows her protagonist to artistically and politically reclaim and confront her enslaved ancestors directly—in a way that her classmate was unable to do—the truth of Dana's story is consistently challenged in the present. The novel becomes the physical enactment of trauma as history refuses to remain in the past—while the witness in the present struggles to assert the veracity of her experiences. In this sense, the historical in *Kindred* is never uncontested, teleological, or even quite past—instead, it is a site of struggle—one, that is deeply political and personal.

### **Black Power and the Right to Self-Defense**

First invoked by Carmichael in 1966 after having been arrested on spurious charges while marching through Mississippi with King, “Black Power” had a powerful resonance for activists in the civil rights movement who had been arrested and beaten, watched nonviolent protesters murdered, and risked their lives for small gains as the segregationists’ most vicious acts of racism went unpunished. “This is the twenty-seventh time that I’ve been arrested,” Carmichael declared, “I ain’t going to jail no more....What we gonna start sayin’ now is Black Power!” (quoted in Joseph 2007, 142). This new spirit of militancy was crystallized in the founding of the BPP in Oakland, California the same year. Deemed by J.Edgar Hoover “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country” (quoted in Russonello 2016), the BPP was subjected to unprecedented state-sponsored repression and vilified in the media for their assertion of the right to self-defense. Strategic and tactical debates about how to combat the violence of the segregationists had been crucial to the civil rights movement since its inception, but were heightened by the ascendant militancy of the Black Power movement.

Butler’s recollection of her classmate’s words evokes this new militancy not only as a political gap but as a generational gap, echoing rhetoric of the period mobilized to explain the political differences between King and Carmichael which elided similarities in their political trajectories (Sokol 2017) and failed to capture the complexity of debates about strategy, tactics and political principles. In fact, the BPP turned toward aptly named “survival programs,” such as freedom schools and free breakfast programs post-1968. Nonetheless, the growth of COINTELPRO, and growing sectarian conflicts within the Black Power movement increasingly led to physical and ideological clashes. US, which had a significant presence at PCC, was in frequent conflict with the BPP during this period—a conflict exacerbated by FBI operatives—leading to the deaths of John Huggins and Bunchy Carter allegedly shot by US members at UCLA in 1969 (Brown and Carson 2005, 91–99).

As a student first at PCC then at California State in Los Angeles, Butler was immersed in the political debates of this period, even as it became increasingly difficult to find her own place within them. As Canavan argues, “Butler’s political leanings [did not] fit easily into black politics of the late 1960s and 1970s; she did not feel at home either in King’s conciliatory liberalism or in the more radical, more separatist Black Power movements that were its chief challenger”(2016, 28). In notes from this period, Butler writes that while the Black Power movement has the potential “to destroy the work already accomplished by Dr. Martin Luther King and company. It also has the potential to create, to give the Black American pride in himself and his race.” “The question,” she asks, “is can the Black power movement do one without the other?” (Butler 1968). This question animates *Kindred*. While in most interviews, the student from Butler’s memory is an anonymous symbol of this perceived political “generation gap,” an unpublished speech from 1986, titled “Why Did I Write Kindred,” suggests a name, with “Clyde” in angle brackets. As if to emphasize her own reluctance to share more than the bare details, she writes next to the name: “Tell what he said then stop.” Later, she includes the name again—crossed out—followed by the words “kill all old people who’ve held us back” (Butler, 1986). Without a last name, the student cannot be identified. It is worth noting, however, that one of the founders of the Black student union of PCC was a prominent activist by the name of Clyde Daniels-Halisi. Born the same year as Butler, he attended the same high school, and was in 1967 president of the Afro-relations club in Pasadena for which Butler served first as treasurer and then secretary, a position from which he resigned in March of that year. Daniels-Halisi joined Karenga’s US organization along with other PCC students, and co-edited *The Quotable Karenga*, along with James Mtume (formerly Forman), also a student at PCC and treasurer of the group founded by Daniels-Halisi, then named the Afro-American Club (Butler 1966-7). Whether or not the Clyde of Butler’s notes is in fact Daniels-Halisi, this possibility is a potent reminder the student in question is an individual, not a symbol of a unitary Black Power movement,

and his words uttered in a highly polarized political context, as different groups fought to influence the future of the movement. Butler's front row seat to this battle for political influence led to increased cynicism about the movement even as she recognized its potential.

While *Kindred* would become the most notable published expression of Butler's deliberation on these "1960s feelings"; other writing from this period gives insight into the centrality of these concerns. The unpublished draft of a screenplay, *Dare*, whose title comes from the fictional name of a Black Nationalist group, is one of Butler's most explicit attempts to give artistic expression to Black Nationalist politics on college campuses in this period. In *Dare*, Butler demonstrates a deep familiarity with organizational structures of such groups, including the centrality of the newspaper and the drive for recruitment and growth. In *Dare*, it is not the emphasis on "purity" within the movement that makes Butler uneasy; rather, the lack of it and what she portrays as a willingness to bend the truth and capitalize on anger elicited by state violence against activists for the sake of organizational growth (Butler 1970). *Dare* is cynical evocation of the politics of the period—an unfinished expression of Butler's conflicted feelings at the height of the movement; but it is a window into Butler's developing political sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> Published a decade later, *Kindred* provides a fictional opportunity to engage more fully with these debates and questions of violence and self-defense, interracial relationships and solidarity and the efficacy of direct action and negotiation as political strategies. While Butler may reject the politics of her classmate, she does not reject the politics of the period altogether, arguing for a more complicated exploration of these debates as questions of political strategy rather than principle.

In *Kindred*, violence is a recurring motif and a crucial question that Dana must resolve if she is ever to escape the grips of her slave ancestry. In one of her early trips back to the Weylin plantation, Dana finds a brutally beaten man hung on a tree whom we later discover is Alice's father. The reality of violence shocks Dana as she describes:

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.

(Butler 1988, 36)

That Dana immediately infantilizes herself in this scene is a testament to the failure of her modern "liberation" to help her. Emphasizing the gap between 20<sup>th</sup> century depictions of violence on the screen and historical reality, Butler moves beyond familiar visual images to a visceral description of Dana's first encounter with the brutality of the antebellum South. Her depiction of victims of violence "shamed before their families" reminds us of her classmate's comment, at the same time as her insistence on her (and, by extension, her generation's) lack of preparedness for such an experience implicitly refutes its logic. Thereafter, Dana herself is attacked by a patroller and beaten with a level of violence she has never experienced. This crucial moment sheds light on Butler's views on violence and self-defense, drawing a strong distinction between the violence of the oppressor and that of the oppressed. The right to self-defense is no longer an abstract question for Dana as she moves from child-like horror to determined resistance. From this point on, Dana carries a knife and tells Kevin that she would have no qualms using it: "Before last night I might not have been sure, but now, yes" (47). This echoes Carmichael's description of his own turning point as he watched police beat protesters: "I knew I could never be hit again without hitting back" (quoted in Joseph 2007, 128). In notes from 1968, Butler writes that it is the violence of the Klan and its "white nationalism" that "put the words 'Black Power' into Stokly Carmicheal's [sic] mouth" (1968). This idea reverberates in this passage as there is no doubt that Dana's assertion of her right to self-defense is a justifiable response to the state-sanctioned brutality of the antebellum South.

If *Kindred* thus affirms the right of the oppressed to self-defense, the novel questions its efficacy. Even armed, Dana tells Kevin, “I just can’t make myself believe I can survive in that place. Not with a knife, not even with a gun” (Butler 1988, 48). While she might be able to defend her life against one patroller, the systemic violence of daily life under slavery is far more difficult to resist. As historian Edward E. Baptist (2014) argues, violence akin to torture known as “the pushing system” was as essential to increasing productivity on the plantation as the cotton gin. Gendered violence—particularly the systematic rape of female slaves—was also central to the perpetuation of the institution of slavery. For Dana, rape is a prospect worse than death. Yet, in fighting back against the patroller’s attempt to rape her, Dana realizes that she could have put both herself and her ancestors in even greater danger:

I would have used your knife against that patroller last night if I’d had it. I would have killed him. That would have ended the immediate danger to me and I probably wouldn’t have come home. But if that patroller’s friends had caught me, they would have killed me. And if they hadn’t caught me, they would probably have gone after Alice’s mother. They . . . they may have anyway. So either I would have died, or I would have caused another innocent person to die. (Butler 1988, 51)

Butler makes clear the limitations and dangers of individual acts of violence in the face of an institution based on *systemic* violence. In the wake of Watts and COINTELPRO, activists grappled with the idea that individual acts of violence might unwittingly invite greater repressive violence against the people they were intended to defend. The BPP’s turn toward survival programs post-1968 was a recognition of the limitations of armed self-defense as a strategy—particularly as Hoover and the FBI sought to vilify the BPP as a violent group to justify infiltration, arrests and even the

assassination of militants, such as Fred Hampton. Dana's meditation on self-defense in this scene echoes these concerns, reframing the debate around violence in terms of strategy, not morality.

### **The House Slave & The Field Slave: Appeasement, Negotiation and Militancy**

Read from the political perspective of the 1960s and 1970s, Butler's depiction of slavery and slave resistance—in particular, Dana's role on the plantation—actively engages with debates about collaboration and resistance that emerged from post-Black Power fractures in the civil rights movement. While references to King from earlier drafts of the novel were deleted, and direct references to the sixties are few and far between, their presence, and Butler's repeated location of the novel's origins in the politics of the Black Power movement, encourage such a reading.

Dana's central paradox is that her existence depends on keeping Rufus, a white slave owner and Dana's great-grandfather, alive long enough to fulfill his historic role of raping Alice, her great-grandmother (and fictional double), and begin the ancestral line that will beget Dana. From her first encounter with Rufus, Dana questions her ethical responsibility vis-à-vis the accident-prone young boy, saying: "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 survival? . . . If I was to live, if others were to live, he must live. I didn't dare test the paradox" (Butler 1988, 29). This conundrum defies the militancy of Butler's contemporaries, placing Dana in a world where she must—or believes she must—collaborate and appease to ensure her and her family's survival. Dana's acceptance of this historical role, despite the anxiety apparent in the questions that saturate the text, is far from obvious. That history could depend on an unconceived descendent is a time-travel paradox that Butler does not solve (nor does she appear to have any interest in doing so). We have no choice but to accept Dana's logic, despite a disquieting sense that perhaps the truth is far more complicated.<sup>7</sup>

Dana's frequent gambles with history make the moments when she chooses not to ethically, politically and historically questionable—and rich with political significance in the post-1968 moment when debates about strategy vis-à-vis institutionalized power structures and the establishment were exigent. Rufus becomes a perennial blind spot for Dana as he overestimates her influence on him. Dana attempts to influence Rufus as a child telling Kevin, “even here, not all children let themselves be molded into what their parents want them to be.” Kevin replies, “You’re gambling. Hell, you’re gambling against history”(83). Dana’s decision to “gamble” with history here lies in stark contrast to her unwillingness to imagine the birth of her own family history from somewhere other than the brutal and violent rape of Alice.

Dana's role becomes increasingly troubling as she attempts to mediate between an increasingly brutal Rufus and members of the slave community, most notably Alice. As Rufus grows up, he becomes increasingly violent in his sexual desire for Alice. Dana is called back to save him after Alice's husband Isaac, a slave, beats him—a turning point in the narrative as Rufus unquestionably asserts his power as “master.” Isaac is tortured and sold south. Alice is punished for aiding him by being sold into slavery—purchased by none other than Rufus. Despite Dana's conscious empathy and identification with Alice, she unwittingly becomes a conduit for Rufus's destruction of her. The climactic moment in Dana's dilemma occurs when Rufus enlists her to convince Alice not to resist when he rapes her. Dana initially refuses to help him, but Rufus compels her to reconsider:

“You want her to get hurt?. . . All I want you to do is fix it so I don't have to beat her. You're no friend of hers if you won't do that much!”

Of hers! He had all the low cunning of his class. No, I couldn't refuse to help the girl—help her avoid at least some pain. But she wouldn't think

much of me for helping her this way. I didn't think much of myself. (Butler 1988, 163–64)

Despite her guilt and hesitation, Dana rationalizes her decision, based on a genuine desire to prevent Alice from suffering even greater pain. This incident *should* convince her once and for all that she exerts no power over Rufus, nor will he ever break from “his class.” Nonetheless, Dana continues to collaborate with and, at times, trust him. The absurdity of this is revealed when Alice discovers that Rufus has failed to send Dana’s letters to Kevin as he promised, exposing Dana’s naïvete. As Dana eventually learns, affective relations in the antebellum South do not allow for relationships unimpeded by economic relations which give Rufus an interest in dominating, brutalizing and violating slaves on the plantation—no matter the bond Dana nurtures with him as a child. Dana’s mistaken belief that she can overcome the master/slave relationship proves futile and destructive. In her analysis of the novel, Angelyn Mitchell argues, “Dana can be read as a heroic figure [for saving Rufus and family], even though her success is dependent upon the sexual enslavement of her great-great-grandmother”(Mitchell 2002, 45). This interpretation elides the far more complicated questions about cooperation and resistance at heart of a novel that consistently and purposefully elude easy readings.

Dana’s ethical dilemma cannot simply be read as an act of family preservation. It is also an act of self-preservation. It is notable that while Rufus calls Dana back in time, excruciating pain and the fear of death are the only mechanisms through which Dana can return to her own world. “Family” might call her back in time, but, when her own survival is threatened, it is the present, far removed from her kin in the antebellum South, that provides asylum. That Dana must keep Rufus alive long enough to ensure the birth of Hagar and Joseph is an assumption that remains unquestioned throughout the novel (and, by most critics).<sup>8</sup> An unpublished draft presents an alternate version of *Kindred* set in the Patternist universe, in which Dana and Kevin rescue a young

Alice and bring her back to their present to raise as their own child. This suggests that Dana's decision to keep Rufus alive and accept the sexual enslavement of Alice is not the only option—but a choice with repercussions Butler encourages us to consider and question. For this reason, reading Dana as a maternal figure, as both Beaulieu and Mitchell (2002) do, is difficult. Earlier versions of *Kindred* do feature a protagonist who is a mother herself, suggesting that Butler depicts Dana as childless for a reason. In one draft, Butler's protagonist even finds solace in the fact that she is physically unable to have children as it prevents her from experiencing the particular horrors of motherhood under slavery, including the constant fear of having her children sold (Butler 1975). Dana is also frequently mistaken for a man, and, as Miletic argues, her actions can be read as “resistance to being confined to the roles of motherhood and domesticity”(2016, 273). Ultimately, it is self-preservation, more than nurture of her family that guides her decisions as to when and how to “gamble with history.” Dana is faced with the actual possibility raised by Butler's classmate: the possibility of killing—or allowing to die—the ancestors who held her back. But to do so, she realizes, would be an act of self-annihilation. Indeed, the militancy that inspired the novel, we are reminded, is only possible among those who survived. The cost of that survival is a central motif in *Kindred* (and, in Butler's work more generally).

In returning to the history of slavery to debate the strategies and tactics of the present, Butler implicitly invokes political tropes of her day—most notably, Malcolm X's famous speech, “Message to the Grassroots” in which he uses “the house Negro and the field Negro” as an allegory for the schism between his own politics and the more “moderate” politics of nonviolent civil disobedience, launching a particularly sharp critique of King.<sup>10</sup> The house Negro, Malcolm X argues, “loved the master more than the master loved himself. They would give their life to save the master's house—quicker than the master would” (X 1994, 11–12). “If someone came to the field

Negro and said, ‘Let’s separate, let’s run,’” however, “He’d say, “Any place is better than here.” You’ve got field Negroes in America today. I’m a field Negro. The masses are field Negroes (11–12).

The tensions evident in the debate between Malcolm X and King pervade the text as Dana’s experience complicates the divide between house and field slave in Malcolm X’s allegory. Read through the lens of the 1960s, Dana’s vacillation throughout the novel between overt resistance and accommodation vis-à-vis Rufus and the slaveholding class he represents can be read as a commentary on debates around cooptation in the civil rights movement. Dana’s relationship with Rufus contains echoes of the experiences of civil rights activists—from members of SNCC who conceded to Kennedy’s demands to shift focus from freedom rides to voter registration only to find themselves in jail to the supporters of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party betrayed by moderates of the Democratic convention who seated Dixiecrats in their place (Shawki 2006, 165–69). The political ramifications of Dana’s relationship with Rufus are highlighted by Alice who berates Dana for not letting Rufus die, calling her, “Doctor-nigger...Reading-nigger, *White-nigger?*”(emphasis in original, 160). As Wood notes, the anachronistic use of this last term (with emphasis) serves to “transcrib[e] 1960s attitudes onto a 19<sup>th</sup>-century context”(2007, 85). More than simply transcribing attitudes, I would argue, Butler uses these confrontations between Alice and Dana to comment on 1960s politics, calling into question Dana’s strategy with Rufus in words that recall Malcolm X’s allegory.<sup>9</sup> When Dana goes to Alice bearing Rufus’s ‘message,’ Alice responds angrily, saying, “I ought to take a knife in there with me and cut his damn throat...Now go and tell him that! Tell him I’m talking ‘bout killing him”. Dana’s neutrality is put into question as she refuses to be the bearer of Alice’s militant message. Alice’s reply echoes Malcolm X’s depiction of the house slave’s role in keeping other slaves “in check”(X 1994, 12). “Do your job! Go tell him!” Alice demands, “That’s what you for—to help white folks keep niggers down. That’s why he sent you to me. They be calling you mammy in a few years” (Butler 1988, 167). Alice’s indictment of Dana calls

Dana's strategy into question. Nonetheless, as Mitchell notes, if Dana "could be labeled an enabler, it would be more accurate to indict the real culprit—slavery"(2002, 50). Dana, like other characters in *Kindred*, struggles with near daily decisions to revolt, which might be suicidal, or to submit and live to fight another day. As a character who at times advocates for violent self-defense and at others a strategy of accommodation in the interest of survival, Dana forces the reader to grapple with the complexity of strategies of resistance while never forgetting that the real culprit is the slaveholding class and the dehumanizing daily reality it enforces.

As Rufus becomes more brutal, Dana begins to question the efficacy of her resistance. She also reevaluates the resistance of other slaves on the plantation, particularly Sarah. Sarah is one of the few slaves who enjoy the same level of freedom as Dana—earning them the ire and resentment of other slaves. Dana's changing reaction to Sarah reveals much about her political development on the plantation, while also pointing to Butler's critique of the "militant" movements of the sixties and seventies, which had no place for a Sarah in their midst. She notes,

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

I looked down on her myself for a while. Moral superiority. Here was someone less courageous than I was. That comforted me somehow. (Butler 1988, 145)

Butler recasts the house slave of Malcolm X's analogy here as a victim—a woman wracked by loss and fear who nonetheless survives. In evoking the “contempt” of the “militant nineteen sixties” this passage is perhaps Butler's most direct rebuttal to both Malcolm X and her 1968 classmate, and the most frequently cited example from the novel of Butler's response to the Black Power Movement (See Miletic, Rushdy, Wood and Yaszek). While Dana's initial condescension toward Sarah mirrors Butler's 1968 classmate, Dana is hardly a militant Black nationalist and her reframing of Sarah's role on the plantation says as much about her own dilemma as it does about the resistance of her ancestors. Only a few pages later, Dana's moral superiority evaporates when Alice tells her that she sounds like Sarah. Despite her modern tools and knowledge, Dana learns, she is no more free than Sarah. In a telling incident, Sam, a field slave, questions Dana about her relationship with Rufus to which Dana responds that this relationship allows her to provide help to other slaves. The dialogue continues:

“Some folks say....”

“Hold on.” I was suddenly angry. “I don't want to hear what ‘some folks’ say. ‘Some folks’ let Fowler drive them into the fields every day and work them like mules.’

“*Let* him....?”

“Let him! They do it to keep the skin on their backs and breath in their bodies. Well, they're not the only ones who have to do things they don't like to stay alive and whole. Now you tell me why that should be so hard for ‘some folks’ to understand?”(238)

In this passage, the roles are reversed. It is the slave who questions the 1970s narrator for her failure to resist the slaveowner. The rebel grandchild becomes that which her generation would revile—and when accused turns the tables on the “field slave” of Malcolm X's parable accusing him of *letting* himself be oppressed. The absurdity of this logic and the chasm between Dana and Sam is made all too apparent when Sam is sold away from the plantation soon thereafter having stoked Rufus's

jealousy by talking to Dana. Dana learns that her strategy of appeasing Rufus to help other slaves is bankrupt. In an act that presages Alice's suicide, Dana slits her wrists returning to her present for the first time through her own agency on the historically symbolic Juneteenth. For both Alice and Dana, violence against the self becomes a rebellion of last resort after other means of resistance have failed.

If there is any possibility of redemption in the novel, it comes from characters such as Nigel and Carrie who walk the fine line between resistance and survival while maintaining a close connection to the slave community as a whole. Dana takes great risks in teaching Nigel and Carrie to read, leading to a beating so violent it sends her back to 1976. Despite Dana's failures, she creates lasting relationships with Nigel and Carrie, who resist slave codes by learning to read while simultaneously "passing" as acquiescent slaves—at least enough to ensure their own survival. Nigel and Carrie in many ways become the moral center of the novel. Their acceptance of Dana goes a long way toward providing her with moral legitimacy on the Weylin plantation. At one point, when Dana faces strong criticism from other slaves, Carrie rubs her face in a gesture toward Dana that Nigel interprets, saying: "She means it doesn't come off, Dana. . . . The black. She means the devil with people who say you're anything but what you are" (Butler 1988, 224). The silent Carrie reminds the reader that oppression is never a choice. Carrie implicitly rejects Malcolm X's dichotomy: in the antebellum South, both house slave and field slave are victims to the same bigotry, oppression, and violence despite different manifestations.

### **By Any Means Necessary**

Situating *Kindred* within political debates post-1968 makes the tension between survival and resistance at the heart of the novel palpable. Over the course of the 1970s, as the threat of infiltration and repression led to growing distrust and heightened political rifts within the Black Power movement, these tensions only grew. The growing distrust that Dana experiences on the

Weylin plantation evokes the disintegration and splits within militant groups like the BPP in their later years. Dana's simultaneous assertion of her right to self-defense and belief in her ability to influence Rufus shows the difficulty of either strategy. Read from this perspective, the novel's ending is an incisive commentary on the necessity and limitations of self-defense as a strategy for change.

As Dana becomes conscious of her inability to influence Rufus, the cost of survival becomes all the more fraught. In a conversation with her husband during one of her returns to the present, she says of Rufus,

“He has to leave me enough control over my own life to make living look better to me than killing and dying.”

“If your black ancestors had felt that way, you wouldn't be here,” said Kevin.

“I told you when all this started that I didn't have their endurance. I still don't. Some of them will go on struggling to survive, no matter what. I'm not like that.” (Butler 1988, 246)

In this passage, Dana recasts ancestors who “endur[e]” and “survive” as heroes. While Dana encourages Alice to do whatever it takes to survive—and thus ensure her own survival—she states unequivocally that she will not do the same. For Dana, self-preservation means more than just surviving. In a final act of resistance, Alice commits suicide to free herself from Rufus's domination. Once Alice is dead, Rufus is no longer willing to honor Dana's limits. This is the final blow for Dana, who realizes, “A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her”(Butler 1988, 260). As Rufus tries to rape Dana, she kills him, thus asserting her own authority over history and returning

herself to the present—scarred and missing an arm. In the end, violent resistance is the means by which both Alice and Dana assert their subjectivity and free themselves from Rufus’s yoke.

To cover up for Dana, Nigel, a house slave, sets the house on fire, acting in solidarity with Dana, thus negating Malcolm X’s depiction of the house slave whose willingness to risk his life to save the master’s burning house proves his compromised status. (X 1994, 10) The burning house itself does not liberate the slaves, for whom Rufus’s demise and the ruination of the Weylin plantation would lead most to be sold. Thus, while Dana is clear that she acted in “Self-defense,” she also fears “the cost... Nigel’s children, Sarah, all the others...” (Butler 1988, 264). The question for Butler is not whether Dana has the *right* to act in self-defense—a right Butler absolutely grants her protagonist—but whether, in saving herself, Dana saves the others or condemns them to even greater suffering. Dana and Kevin are never able to uncover the effects of her action on the slave community of the Weylin plantation. If *Kindred* rejects pacifism as the only morally acceptable means of resistance, Butler leaves the question of the “cost” of violent resistance unresolved, engaging with the questions of her day while refusing to stand in judgment or provide the last word. There are no answers, only a graveyard and the names of the survivors in Dana’s family Bible.

### **Loving vs. Antebellum Maryland: *Kindred* and the Politics of Interracial Solidarity**

As Dana comes to terms with the power structures that determine her relationship with Rufus in the antebellum past, her relationship with her husband Kevin is also complicated. Here too, Butler engages with debates within the Black Power movement about the possibility of interracial coalition-building and solidarity with white activists. Explaining why she gave her protagonist a white husband, Butler remarks, “I gave her that husband to complicate her life”(Kenan 1991, 497)—as if, being drawn back in time to save an antebellum slave-owning ancestor were not complicated enough. Writing in the decade after *Loving vs. Virginia* established the right to interracial marriages in

1967, Butler uses Dana and Kevin’s relationship to explore interracial love in a world which has yet to accept it—a reality highlighted by the rejection both characters experience from their families as a result of their marriage. This is far from uncomplicated for Butler as the Weylin plantation confronts Dana with the power structures upon which her family’s reticence is based.

The approach to these questions was far from monolithic among Black Power advocates and formed a key source of disagreement between SNCC and the BPP, particularly during the short-lived merger between the two groups (Bloom and Martin, Jr. 2013; Murch 2010). In SNCC, the experience of Carmichael and other activists led to distrust of white activists — and the New left more generally— culminating in the expulsion of white activists in 1967. In contrast, key leaders of the BPP, including Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, argued for interracial coalitions and saw the New Left and progressive whites as strategic allies. The Free Huey campaign in particular had broad support and an “unprecedented degree of unity” (Murch 2010, 160). This solidarity was perceived as a threat by the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover cynically attempted to manipulate racial and sexual anxieties to sabotage the Panthers’ United Front Against Fascism conference by commissioning a series of cartoons that invoked images of interracial sex between male BPP members and white female members of New Left groups (161). While these were never used, they demonstrate COINTELPRO’s willingness to stoke racist fears to undermine interracial solidarity on the Left—and the continued use of white women’s bodies to do so.

*Kindred* demands an intersectional analysis to understand the particular way in which sexuality, gender and race have historically been used to justify racist violence and repression. As “complicated” as Dana’s relationship with Kevin is in the past and present of *Kindred*, it would be impossible should the genders be reversed in antebellum Maryland. The sexual violence integral to antebellum plantation life in which white slave-owners could rape Black women with impunity, while invoking the cult of white womanhood to justify violence against Black men, precludes such a

gender reversal—as that reversal would inevitably culminate in the protagonist’s death. Dana faces a steep learning curve in the rules of survival in the antebellum South, but the affective relationship she develops with Rufus would be impossible if she were a man. That rape is worse than death for Dana reminds us of the gendered nature of violence under slavery, complicating ideas of survival. Butler notes that she initially began writing the novel with a male protagonist modeled after her 1968 classmate who inspired the novel, but she “couldn’t realistically keep him alive.... He wouldn’t even have the time to learn the rules of submission.”(Kenan 1991, 51). Butler’s comment about the “rules of submission” in the antebellum South resonates with the experience of Black Power militants who were challenging such rules in the early 1970s, as COINTELPRO ratcheted up attacks on activists, particularly male leaders of the BPP. The FBI and Chicago Police Department’s murder of Fred Hampton was the most notorious example of state-sanctioned violence deployed against the group, but far from an isolated occurrence. While women of the BPP were also targeted, their leadership kept the organization running as an increasing number of men in leadership were killed, incarcerated or forced into exile (Spencer 2016, 88–113; E. Brown 1993). Writing in this context, Butler’s move away from her initial impetus to send a militant Black Power male protagonist in favor of a Black woman says as much about the history of the Black Power movement in California post-1968 as it does about the antebellum South.

The legal significance of *Loving vs. Virginia* is highlighted in one of Dana’s early exchanges with Rufus. When Kevin returns to the past with Dana, she feels compelled to tell Rufus the truth of her marriage to Kevin to make Rufus see her as his equal not his slave. When he replies, “But it’s against the law,” she declares, “But it isn’t where we come from” (Butler 1988, 61). While in California anti-miscegenation laws had been held unconstitutional since 1948, the *Loving* case in 1967 made such laws unconstitutional on a federal level—fairly recent history at the time of *Kindred*’s writing. *Loving* thus highlights the gap between Dana’s and Rufus’s worlds. Nonetheless, Dana and

Kevin find little more acceptance in 1976 than they do in the 1800s. They are both surprised by their families' lack of support and the hostility they face from Black and white communities. One of Dana's coworkers tells her "with typical slave-market candor that he and I were 'the weirdest-looking couple' she had ever seen"(57) and another makes lewd comments infused with race and class bigotry, taunting them with, "You gonna write some poor-nography together!" (54). These comments at the workplace Dana calls the "slave market" are a reminder of the virulent racism that threatens interracial relationships and solidarity even as the 1970s saw the rhetoric of colorblindness emerge as a dominant ideology (Foster 2007, 144). Kevin is surprised at his sister Carol's "clichéd bigotry" (111). Carol and her husband live in La Canada—a suburb of Pasadena whose name ironically evokes Canada's history as a destination for runaway slaves, while embodying the ignominious white affluent suburbs created by white flight.<sup>11</sup> Dana remarks, "My mother's car broke down in La Canada once. . . . Three people called the police on her . . . Suspicious character. Five-three, she was. About a hundred pounds. Real dangerous" (111). The white liberal elite's professed antiracism comes into conflict with the racist stereotypes and fears fostered by their seclusion—a phenomenon further stressed by Dana's caveat that this occurred in 1966: at the height of the Black Power movement, one year before *Loving*, and on the heels of the Watts rebellion. "Things may have improved by now," she adds, although there is little in the narrative to sustain such a hope (111).

Dana's journeys to antebellum Maryland compel her to look at her own relationship through a new lens. On one of her early returns from the past, as she battles the patroller until pain and fear of death catapult her into the present, she momentarily confuses Kevin with the patroller, highlighting his physical resemblance to her oppressors in the past. This disturbs Kevin as well as Dana. When he asks her if he really looked like him, Dana does not answer. Her silence speaks volumes. Throughout the novel there is anxiety around Kevin's role in both past and present. He

becomes a foil for Rufus and is frequently confused with the novel's white male oppressors, even as he seeks to distinguish himself by his actions.

At the very beginning of the novel, the police question Kevin, assuming that he is in fact the perpetrator of Dana's wounds. In another scene, Dana returns home severely injured, without Kevin, and needing help. Dana reaches out to a cousin—notably the only woman Butler introduces in Dana's present—who assumes Kevin has abused her. "I never thought you'd be fool enough to let a man beat you," (Butler 1988, 116) her cousin says, highlighting both continuity with the past as well as the immense temporal gap between Dana's present and the plantation. Dana's comment that "I never thought I would either," whispered after her cousin's departure is ironic, underscoring her unease with her relationship with Rufus, even as her silence allows her cousin to believe Kevin is her abuser. This scene reinforces Dana's guilt for not standing up to Rufus in defense of Alice—or in defense of herself—until much later. Unable to stand up to Rufus, Dana is also unable to defend Kevin without having to tell a (hi)story that is "stranger than fiction" and unbelievable to her contemporaries.

Dana's relationship with Kevin becomes more complicated when he returns to the Weylin plantation with her. While Kevin's whiteness provides him with an advantage in physically surviving the atrocities of slavery, Dana is concerned about the psychological, social, and moral toll, saying: "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" (Butler 1988, 78–79). Dana again opts for silence, choosing not "to talk to him about" the dangers the antebellum South poses to him and their relationship. Her silence betrays a fear that Kevin is not immune from the racism of the antebellum South, and could be either irrevocably compromised. This anxiety grows when he is trapped in the past for a lengthy period of time without her. When she finally reunites with him, she observes a scar on his forehead, but is more concerned about psychic scars, asking: "But what had it

made of him? What might he be willing to do now that he would not have done before? (185). A marked change is indeed observable as Kevin becomes less naïve and more melancholy. Nonetheless, at least some of Dana's fears prove to be unfounded. When she probes Kevin to discover whether he had succumbed or resisted, he informs her that he left the Weylin plantation to participate in the Underground Railroad and promote the abolitionist cause. Dana's relief is palpable but once again silent: she "smile[s] and [says] nothing." And yet, a few sentences later, she consoles him by saying, "I know. It's enough that you did what you did" (193). While Dana's worst fears are dispelled, her comments gesture toward the limitations of his actions, making the reader question what is "enough." As a foil for Rufus, Kevin allows Butler to introduce the notion of choice in the racially polarized and overdetermined antebellum South. In doing so, Butler posits a philosophy in which acts of resistance determine on which side of history one falls. In the context of debates between SNCC and the BPP, this history posits the possibility of interracial solidarity—even as it exposes the historical obstacles to it. If Butler leaves open this possibility of genuine solidarity, the scars that mark Kevin and Dana's relationship and the graveyard of broken bodies they leave behind complicate this prospect. In all of these relationships, history invades the personal and leaves no one whole.

### **The Trauma of History**

While *Kindred* evokes the political debates of the "militant nineteen sixties," Butler's engagement with the politics of the period is mediated by the political and temporal distance of the decade separating the novel's inspiration and its publication. Indeed, the novel saw many incarnations under different titles between 1968 and 1979 as Butler struggle to give ideas narrative form. Butler's earliest desire to send the student who inspired the novel into the past ran up against the limits of believability as she was unable to imagine a narrative in which he could survive in the

antebellum past. This was in part because of his male gender as discussed above, but also because imagining the protagonist as a 1968 student was more complicated a decade later. An early draft of the novel under the title *To Keep thee in all Thy Ways* sets the story in the political moment that inspired it, beginning on April 4, 1968 as Dana learns of King's assassination on a bus on her way home from school (Durkin 2016). This precipitates Dana's return to the antebellum South. Later drafts remove this explicit reference to 1968.<sup>13</sup> Moving the novel's present from the height of the Black Power movement to the nation's bicentennial provides an ironic commentary on the national mythology of the United States, while also locating its political center after the demise of the Black Power movement, amidst increasing political backlash. Shifting away from the immediacy of the political questions of 1968, allows Butler to engage in a more expansive meditation on history. The change in protagonist, from sixties militant to seventies struggling writer and precarious worker raises new questions about the cost of survival inspired by the political context of 1970s America, and Butler's experience of these years. For Butler, the 1970s "were defined by desperation and disappointment: bad jobs, money crisis, the unemployment office she would later describe as a 'second home.'" (Canavan 2016, 36). Published one year before the election of Ronald Reagan—whose racism and opposition to radicals, particularly Black Power militants, were cornerstones of his political campaign—*Kindred* is a meditation on Butler's "sixties feelings" viewed through the lens of the seventies. The political and temporal distance attenuates Butler's critique of 1960s Black Power militants, and infuses the narrative with a sense of trauma and loss.

As the novel moves from Dana's first trip back in time on her birthday in June 1976 to July 4, 1976—Dana's final battle with Rufus and the figurative birthday of the nation—it moves from personal to national history.<sup>13</sup> For Dana, the personal is inherently political and historical. By setting the story's present in 1976, Butler situates her narrative within a broader historical narrative of the nation. On a collective level, theorists such as Mitchell and Long argue that works such as *Kindred*,

present slavery as a national trauma from which we have yet to recover. While this is undoubtedly true, *Kindred* is also imbued with a new national trauma: the crushing of social movements of the 1960s and 70s, particularly the violent repression of the Black Panthers through COINTELPRO brought to national attention in 1971. Butler kept newspapers reporting on state repression and police violence, including *The Black Panther* before it was national news.<sup>14</sup> Just as *Kindred* invokes continuity between resistance past and present, it reminds us of the continuities between the violence of the plantation and that of the state in responding to the Black Power movement. For Butler, to understand the present, one must understand that history is littered with bodies and ruins, scarred by a legacy of violence, oppression, and unimaginable brutality—a reality all the more palpable in the late 1970s in the aftermath of COINTELPRO.

History in *Kindred* is traumatic. As Cathy Caruth argues, “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it’s precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (1996, 4). This is conveyed metaphorically in *Kindred* through the vehicle of time travel. Dana’s first trip to the past is viewed in spatial rather than temporal terms. It is only on her second trip that she discovers that she is traveling through time as well as space. Time and space become less distinct throughout the novel, as Dana begins to feel that the past is more “real” and more of a “home” to her than the present. That Dana confuses Kevin in the present with Rufus or the white patroller is symptomatic of the slippage between past and present, which allows the trauma of history to be constantly relived as present. Dana is trapped in a pattern of trauma until she “literally kills her past” (Long 2002, 470). Each time she saves Rufus, she also keeps alive the world he represents. She has no control over the past—it controls her, refusing to recede into the world of memory and making the present ephemeral and unstable. Only on the last trip, when she is pulled back in time not by

Rufus but by Alice's death, is the pattern interrupted. It is only by killing Rufus, that she can return to the present for good—but not without the scar, the physical memory of trauma.

Despite Dana's search for words to record her experience, the trauma of history is primarily written on the body. This reflects Butler's commitment to writing a narrative that goes beyond knowing the facts of her 1968 classmate's history but makes her reader "feel it in the gut." Nonetheless, as a writer, Dana continuously seeks textual evidence to corroborate her experiences. After her final return to the present, Dana and Kevin embark on one more journey to Maryland searching for records of those she left behind. The failure to archive and record histories of slavery leaves them unable to learn how their stories ended. As Yaszek concludes: "*Trapped there, the violation seems to continue in a reverberating present that belies the supposed linearity of time and the possibilities of endings*" (1326, emphasis in original). In a discussion with Kevin, Dana tries to accept the impossibility of knowing the history she has left behind:

You've looked," he said. "And you've found no records. You'll probably never know."

I touched the scar Tom Weylin's boot had left on my face, touched my empty sleeve. "I know," I repeated. "Why did I even want to come here? You'd think I would have had enough of the past." (Butler 1988, 264).

With all else destroyed, the sole evidence is given through absence: her missing left arm, which is both the physical mark and absence of the "proof" she seeks. Dana's "I know" as she touches the empty sleeve is an assertion of the authenticity of her experiences as a witness to a history too awful to record. That the answers she seeks do not exist in the official record of the Historical Society, which itself is a "converted early mansion," makes clear that "History" with a capital "H" is the repository of the wealthy and powerful. The owners of mansions might leave records or "history"; their slaves do not.

Because she is a writer, Dana's arm is also symbolic as a writing instrument. Its loss represents her inability to assert textual control over history. At the beginning of the novel, Kevin, is a successful writer, while Dana has published a few stories only, creating an unequal power relationship. After his return from the antebellum South, Kevin too becomes unable to write. A writer of nonfiction, Kevin's writer's block reflects larger questions about truth and the ability of words to convey the horror of his experiences—thus his page remains blank. Dana too struggles to tell the story of her historical journey. She explains, "Once, I...tried to write about what had happened, made six attempts, before I gave up and threw them all away" (116). Dana's six attempts at writing reflect her six trips back in time as she struggles to translate the personal and historical into narrative form. Only once it is over can Dana begin to write her own narrative. While we are never told that she writes her story, we can imagine that the first-person novel represents Dana's narrative, albeit contested, fragmented and unresolved as she searches for evidence that eludes her, even as her missing arm provides the embodied feeling of that history. *Kindred* thus acts as testimony in more than one regard. As a narrative of Dana's experience of America's slave past, it recuperates a history that had been silenced. As a narrative of the late 1960s, it gives expression to Butler's "1960s feelings" and the political questions brought to national attention by the Black Power movement and its demise. The novel's uneasy resolution acts as a eulogy for the militancy of an era—as Butler, like Dana, continues to seek answers that elude the text.

If there is hope in the novel, it comes not through any one political strategy available to the adults of the Weylin plantation, but through a spirit of resistance that imbues the future with greater possibilities. Despite the horror of their origins, Alice's children are symbols of a different future, the impermanence of slavery and hope for liberation. "In the Bible," Alice says, "people might be slaves for a while, but they didn't have to stay slaves" (Butler 1988, 234). Whatever the limitations of the "freedom" of Dana's generation, this promise of future liberation sustains the narrative. In this

sense, *Kindred* echoes the revision of historical narratives in the 1960s by recovering a history of resistance from below—but Butler also emphasizes the obstacles that limited such acts of resistance, refusing to endorse her 1968 classmate’s idea of ancestors holding future generations back. Instead, Butler finds resistance in moments that seem to preclude it—while simultaneously showing that resistance may not always be heroic. Ultimately, for Butler, the success of resistance is apparent precisely in the future generations whose existence depends on the survival of their ancestors through a history of struggle: “an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight.” (Marx 1848).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> In Rushdy’s reading, SDS’s “youthful idealism,” SNCC’s “seamless ideological unity” and Maulana Karenga’s *Kwaidia* value system are all seen as symptoms of a common commitment to purity (2001, 100–101) despite the vast political differences within these movements. While Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999) provides a more thorough exploration of the politics of the Black Power movement, in *Remembering Generations* Rushdy’s reading of *Kindred* focuses primarily on Butler’s response to this emphasis on purity in social movements and cultural nationalism.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Miletic, Wood and Yaszek who emphasize Butler’s engagement with feminism and the interlocking nature of the oppression of Black women, I draw from and respond to the work of Angelyn Mitchell and Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu who focus on the feminist impulse in *Kindred*, with an emphasis on the narrative’s liberatory bent; as well as Lisa A. Long and Christine Levecq work on the political implications of Dana’s conflicted relationships.

<sup>4</sup> Many future members of the BPP were members of the Afro-American Association, which began in 1961 at Oakland City College (renamed Merritt in 1964) and fought for Black Studies. Merritt established its first Black Studies course in 1964 whose roster included Bobby Seale, co-founder of the BPP. Efforts to expand the program included demands to change hiring practices and expand Black Studies across the UC system (Murch 2010). That Butler’s Black literature course was taught by a visiting professor from California State at Los Angeles highlights the state-wide impact of these campaigns.

<sup>5</sup> Gerry Cavanan (2016) cites a letter in Butler’s archives from a reader asking if her work “is trying to consciously make a feminist or racial statement.” Butler’s annotation on the letter provides a striking retort: “No. Story”(28). Butler objected to the attribution of political content to Black writers solely because of their race. Nonetheless, Butler explicitly cites political motivations for writing *Kindred*, *Wild Seed* and the Xenogenesis trilogy, the latter inspired by Ronald Reagan, “the only thing,” Butler explains, “he inspired in me that I actually approve of”(quoted in Cavanan 2016, 109).

<sup>6</sup> Archival research provides further evidence that Butler was deeply engaged with the politics of the period. The assassinations of 1968 recur frequently in her writing and she kept research on Black Nationalism, including notes from a speech by Karenga at the Pasadena Afro-Relations Club, of which Butler was a part. In addition, one of her few published stories from this period, “Childfinder” features a Black woman protagonist in Pasadena who is “away from the organization,” trying to organize her own “black-only” separatist group of children with “psionic” abilities (Butler (1970) 2014).

<sup>7</sup> As Benjamin Robertson argues, Butler does not test the conventional grandfather paradox which argues that a person cannot travel back in time and kill his or her grandfather as s/he would never be born (2010, 379). *Kindred* reverses the paradox in ways that are illogical by the laws of time travel, but politically generative.

<sup>8</sup> There is a tendency among critics to accept Dana's understanding of her historic duty. Robertson argues that, "What looks to Alice like betrayal is rather Dana's inability to do anything but participate in the United States and its past" and goes so far as to argue that rape "is for Butler a positive, if brutal, means of interacting with the past, one that we should not dare to liquidate"(2010, 374, 379). While Miletic provides a more complex reading of Dana's historic role, he argues that, "Dana has to witness and, in Alice's case, facilitate the abuse and mistreatment of black women and their children in order to preserve her existence"(2016, 272). Here and elsewhere, Dana's actions are alternately read as historically necessary, or oppositional and liberatory, eliding more difficult questions about political strategy.

<sup>9</sup> Beyond Malcolm X's "Message to the Grassroots," the period saw, as Rushdy argues, "a change in the historiography of slavery," (1999, 3) as historical and fictional representations of slavery were means of intervening in contemporary political debates.

<sup>10</sup> In her notes for the novel, Butler expresses hesitancy about using the n-word at all in the novel. Its repetition here is thus worth examining (See Butler 1976).

<sup>11</sup> La Cañada is a city northwest of Pasadena whose name means canyon in Spanish, but Butler's use of the name in this context without the tilde lends itself to a symbolic as well as a literal reading.

<sup>12</sup> Butler wrote many drafts of *Kindred* under the titles *Canaan*, *Guardian* and *To Keep Thee in all Thine Ways*. The full manuscripts are housed in the Octavia E. Butler Papers at the Huntington Library including drafts of *Canaan* (OEB 274-275) and *Kindred* (OEB 1183-1234).

<sup>13</sup> See Donadey (2008) on the significance of dates in *Kindred*.

<sup>14</sup> For example, she kept an issue of *The Black Panther* from 1970 with articles on the brutalization of BPP activists by the police and state repression, including images of Bobby Hutton and Fred Hampton (See Butler 1969-70).

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